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**Risks, Challenges and Ethics of Representing Femicide:
A Comparative Analysis of Sergio González Rodríguez's *Huesos en el desierto* and
Roberto Bolaño's *2666*. [1]**

Abstract

In the past decade, several important fiction and nonfiction works have been produced about femicide in Juárez, Mexico. This article focuses on the relationship between two authors and their narratives, one non-fiction and one fiction. In Mexico, the first non-fiction work produced on femicide was *Huesos en el desierto* (2002) by Sergio González Rodríguez, a journalist from Mexico City. Chilean novelist Roberto Bolaño, who had never been to Juárez, but was working on the behemoth novel *2666* (2004) that revolved around femicides, contacted González Rodríguez via email to get more information about the killings in Juárez. The two books have striking similarities, and via interviews with González Rodríguez (Bolaño died in 2003), I explore the relationship between the writers and their work, focusing on how Bolaño's novel fed off of González Rodríguez's experiences and research and on how what Judith Butler defines as "precarious lives" are represented in the narratives. González Rodríguez writes *Huesos en el desierto* to create a historically accurate document that gives testament to the lives of femicide victims. Bolaño, on the other hand, recreates the situation in which we, as humans, get desensitized to violence and cannot continue to function; we cannot continue to read, hear about, or see images of senseless violence. We shut down.

Keywords: Juárez, Mexico, femicide, Bolaño, violence

Introduction

The word “flesh” implies vulnerability and carnality, two essential narratives surrounding the issue of femicide in Juárez. [2] In the introduction to *Gender Violence at the U.S.-Mexico Border: Media Representation and Public Response* (2010), Héctor Domínguez and Ignacio Corona assert that victims of femicide are, “[d]oubly victimized by criminals and the system of impunity on the one hand and by available systems of representation of violence on the other.” The authors discuss how the victims are revictimized by the media. In many cases, either the women were exhibited as naked, destroyed bodies or they were described as prostitutes. [3] In her article “Memoria y anonimato: representaciones discursivas de las muertas de Juárez” (2006) Núria Villanova captures the paradox of the relationship between bodily vulnerability, death, and memory. She explains that,

These women are, without a doubt, victims excluded from a society in which their memory becomes inscribed only after their death. That memory, in a paradoxical way, is generated by their death since the victims and the perpetrators, like two inseparable pieces of a sinister game, become part of the memory of violence and death in Juárez.” (145-46)

Villanova highlights the fact that most of the victims of femicide are first recognized or remembered by the media and society as dead bodies. Although victims’ families have personal memories and photographs, the citizens of Juárez and international audiences see their dead bodies in newspapers or on TV and, with little or no information provided by police, are asked to read the messages written on those bodies—to judge them by their style of clothing, their painted fingernails, or the position of their bodies.

This article analyzes depictions of femicide in *Huesos en el desierto* (2002) by Sergio González Rodríguez, and the posthumously published novel *2666* (2004) by Roberto Bolaño. [4] I explore the relationship between González Rodríguez and Bolaño and how it influenced *2666*. González Rodríguez writes *Huesos en el desierto* to create a historically accurate document that gives testament to the lives of femicide victims. Bolaño, on the other hand, recreates the situation in which we, as humans, get desensitized to violence and cannot continue to function; we cannot continue to read, hear about, or see images of senseless violence. We shut down. His tactics are the opposite of those of González Rodríguez. Bolaño seeks to show us how easily we forget or look away from violence. He creates a situation in which one can see how difficult it is to maintain memory, to not look away, to continue to read of dead bodies and to feel that one person can make a difference in the face of such violence. González Rodríguez and Bolaño, though their techniques are different, raise similar questions about whose lives are seen as grievable. They show how “[i]t is not just that a death is poorly marked, but that it is unremarkable” (Butler 35).

They describe how victims of femicide have been treated as anonymous piles of flesh in public discourse.

Bolaño, who had never been to Juárez, relied on evidence and forensic reports provided by González Rodríguez to complete the 300 page chapter “The Part about the Crimes,” which recounts a seemingly endless number of femicides (108 in total). As González Rodríguez confirmed during our interview:

No, he was never in Ciudad Juarez. He left Mexico, if I am not mistaken, in 1974, and never returned to Mexico. He did not want to return to Mexico, our mutual friend Antonio Saborit commented. Roberto Bolaño spoke with Saborit in Chile when he was last home. They met at a literary event, and Bolaño commented to Saborit that he would not go back to Mexico. (Personal Interview)

In Bolaño and González Rodríguez’s narratives, violence against women is made real in graphic and/or explicit descriptions of rape, strangulation, suffocation, and other forms of torture. In his 2003 article “El femicidio y la conversión de Ciudad Juárez en territorio de la impunidad” Carlos Monsiváis argues that the “role of the media has been the main factor: they situate the crimes in the context of yellow journalism and not, as they should, on the front page of the paper. This behavior serves to highlight the guilt of the victims, and, because they are dead, they cannot defend themselves” (15). However, some literary production, like *Huesos en el desierto*, has worked against this trend and tried to humanize victims rather than to sensationalize the stories of their deaths.

Graphic, violent descriptions and images of femicide, although they may be represented as an effort to preserve the memory of the dead or to promote justice, contribute to the exploitation and objectification of the female body and reify the idea of the spectral, ghostly condition in which women in Juárez are depicted, hovering somewhere between life and death. Works that contribute to the exploitation of the female body rely on gender stereotypes that reduce women to sexualized bodies and do not move beyond the realm of the flesh. González Rodríguez seeks to connect the bodies of victims with memories of their lives. In yet another representational strategy, Bolaño’s femicide victims are decidedly spectral and anonymous, allowing him to explore the depths and meaning of horror.

It is important to examine the ethical implications of the aesthetic choices surrounding representations of graphic violence. Perhaps some balance can be achieved between descriptions and images of dead bodies and the lives the victims lived. This balance, or as Butler describes it “framing of images,” puts the focus on the humanity of the Other. As she explains, “The derealization of loss—the insensitivity to human suffering and death—becomes the mechanism through which dehumanization is accomplished. This derealization takes place neither inside nor

outside the image, but through the very framing by which the image is contained” (148). To ensure that an image or description of a dead body does not convert it into a *thing*, some framework or reference is necessary. An emphasis on the fetishized body of a woman who has suffered extreme violence, if that representation does not include her life story, can convert the victim into a ghost. In this spectral state the Other becomes a victimized body and joins a long list of anonymous or misidentified female bodies. The two works included in this analysis wrestle in different ways with the issue of violence written on the female body, and how most effectively to represent the victims’ lives and deaths.

Butler asks, “Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? And, finally, *What makes a grievable life?*” (20). Butler poses these questions in light of the events of 9/11, and wonders if mourning can cross borders and overcome nationalism or if it will simply translate into anger and violence. Her thoughts are especially pertinent in the context of Juárez, a city in which violence has been translated into ever more extreme forms of violence. [5] Even though femicide was first identified in the area in 1993, it took years for the issue to cross borders and come to the attention of an international audience.

In the context of the border—which includes agreements like NAFTA that provide more protections for companies and goods than for people—the poverty of many femicide victims marks them as less than human and less than grievable. As Herlinghaus argues in *Violence Without Guilt*, “contemporary cultural conflicts over the borderlands can be understood, to an important degree, as rhetorical conflicts consisting of a struggle over the figurative potentials displayed by speech acts and bodies, and entangled with numerous practices of movement and exchange” (62). The struggle over speech acts and bodies is nowhere more evident than in Juárez, a city in which the dead bodies of women often disappear, reappear, are anonymous, are misidentified, or are put on public display. González Rodríguez and Bolaño have taken risks to represent the victims of femicide given that nationalist discourse in Mexico and the U.S. for many years refused to recognize these crimes against women.

The authors of most works of cultural production who have sought to document crimes against femicide victims faced decisions regarding the ethics of representation and how to depict the violated body. What are the risks, challenges, and ethics of representing violence? Current memory debates often address the issue of whether horror can be represented without being reproduced. An analysis of representations of femicide brings to the forefront the complicated issue of fascination with the dead female body. In relation to that body, Butler asks a pertinent question: “Is there something to be learned about the geopolitical distribution of corporeal vulnerability from our own brief and devastating exposure to this condition?” (29). The distribution

of corporeal vulnerability in Juárez points to the relationship between economic and physical violence, given that the victims have been primarily of lower socio-economic status. [6] The works analyzed here provide ample evidence that the political discourse surrounding victims of femicide has been overtly sexual. In contrast, the deaths of men have involved very little discussion of their sexuality. [7]

1. Linguistic Violence

An analysis of the linguistic territory of this issue shows that what is at stake is not only physical violence, but also the violence of derealization in the realm of language—linguistic violence. If the term *homicide* suffices to describe all murders, then key elements of the crimes have not been named. Of note is the fact that only one of the works being analyzed employs the term(s) *femicide/feminicide/feminicidio* to describe the rape and/or murder of women. González Rodríguez labels them “femicide[s]” or “homicides against women,” (11; 275), and Bolaño calls them “the murder of women” (444). González Rodríguez has been the most active in acknowledging and discussing the differences between homicide and femicide:

But men are not killed for being men. Women are killed for being women, and they are victims of masculine violence because they are women. It is a crime of hate against the female gender. We cannot ignore this. These are crimes of power. Yes, men are killed like flies, but they are not killed for being men. Women are. (Personal Interview)

The Inter-American Court for Human Rights recognized the legal use of the term *feminicide*, and on July 26, 2011 it was codified as a legal term in one of the 32 states of Mexico. The use of the term *feminicide* has experienced several years of evolution in which *homicide/femicide/feminicide* were used interchangeably or in different contexts by different groups. For example, politicians and the police in Juárez have generally used the term *homicide* to discuss the murders, whereas the mothers of victims and other activists use *femicide* or *feminicide*. As Fregoso and Bejarano point out, “Women’s rights advocates, researchers, and feminist legal scholars are using the terms *femicide* and *feminicide* to refer to this phenomenon” (3). Yet the evolution and growing power of the term *feminicide* is not present in 2666.

The absence of this term could be due to several different factors, including the chronological evolution of the term and the academic and activist circles in which the word is generally used. As noted in my book *More or Less Dead: Femicide, Hautning, and the Ethics of Representation in Mexico*, Cynthia Bejarano, a professor of Criminal Justice at New Mexico State University, stated that:

Everybody has a different interpretation of what the term means. I think the most important thing is to think about the term as it has evolved. People who haven't been immersed in the discourse of *femicide* or *feminicide* haven't understood the evolution of the term and how scholars and academicians or activists have come to use the term. Unless you're fully immersed in the issue, perhaps these individuals are coming at it from the periphery of either the movement or their involvement." (Driver 76)

While González Rodríguez uses the term *femicidio* to discuss the murders, I could find no reference to the term or in interviews with Bolaño or in his writing.

2. Femicide: A Shared Obsession

In Mexico, the first non-fiction work produced on feminicide was *Huesos en el desierto* (2002) by Sergio González Rodríguez, a journalist from Mexico City. [8] González Rodríguez began writing for the Mexico City newspaper *Reforma* in 1993, and in 1996 he traveled to Juárez to investigate the disappearance and murder of girls and women. [9] By the summer of 1999, his research began to show the involvement of policemen and politicians in the murders, and in June of that year he was kidnapped in Mexico City, beaten, and left on the side of the street. It was just after the kidnapping that the relationship between González Rodríguez and Bolaño began. González Rodríguez described how he got to know Bolaño:

I met Roberto Bolaño in Blanes [Spain] in 2002. I did not know him when he was in Mexico. I was a member of a rock band and a student. Our social circles converged in areas that he describes in the novel *Los detectives salvajes*: in the neighborhoods Roma, Condesa, the city center, and other parts of the city. All of these areas existed during that time as points of encounter for young musicians, artists, and writers. However, I did not know him then. I met him in the process of doing research for my book, *Huesos en el desierto*, and we communicated via email. This occurred in 1999 and 2000. (Personal Interview) [10]

González Rodríguez had already decided to use his extensive research for a non-fiction book, *Huesos en el desierto*, which would eventually be published by the editorial Anagrama in Spain. Thus, he and Bolaño nurtured a friendship based on a common obsession with the murders of women. [11] As writers, they both faced the ethical question of how to represent graphic violence. Bolaño, who had never visited Juárez, relied on González Rodríguez to answer questions about the exact details of the murders. [12] The friendship proved influential to Bolaño, and he included González Rodríguez as a character in his posthumously published novel *2666*. When discussing his inclusion in the novel González Rodríguez he explained:

Bolaño loved formalist elements and adapted them to his context. We must not forget that he was a great reader of French avant-garde novels and other elaborate narrative forms. *He introduces reality as a novel*. This is why Bolaño told me, 'I'm

going to steal Javier Marias' idea, and I'll include you as a character like he did in *Negra espalda del tiempo*. Indeed, he put me there with my name among various novelistic witnesses. (Personal Interview, emphasis mine)

The relationship between these two works proves pivotal because Bolaño's fiction feeds off the reality and statistics of femicide violence as researched and documented by González Rodríguez. In *Narcoepics* (2012) Herlinghaus writes that in "The Part About the Crimes" in *2666*, "if reality outplays 'fiction,' Bolaño makes perceive the invisible 'alliance' between fear, common desires for relief, and actual blindness. What can literary fiction, guided by a bet on sobriety and a rejection of psychological scenarios, achieve in that light?" (212). Herlinghaus goes on to argue that the distinction between nonfiction and fiction involves "structure, an order of meaning" (*ibid.*). While Bolaño clearly structures the chapter, it is also true that he relied on real forensic reports to provide many of the gruesome details about femicide victims. For me, the distinction hinges on femicide and Bolaño's representation of the violence. It appears that he copied, either partially or fully, forensics records from Juárez. Given that he describes 108 murders, often in a forensic format: date of birth, description of injuries, description of clothing, etc., this makes up a substantial part of the chapter. While he clearly structured the fiction around the murders, I would argue that the femicides themselves are taken partially or wholly from reality.

Femicide researcher and Juárez resident Julia Monárrez Fragoso, upon reading *2666*, noted the striking similarities between Bolaño's descriptions and the original list of femicide victims prepared by *Casa Amiga*, the first rape crisis center in Juárez founded by Esther Chávez Cano in 1991. Monárrez Fragoso has spent the last two decades researching femicide, and has worked with forensic reports and other official documents. She noted "the similarities between how Bolaño described the murder of a woman" and how they were described in forensic records and added, "it is not an original creation" (Driver 85). Monárrez Fragoso argued that Bolaño should have discussed his reliance on forensic records given that many of his descriptions were copied from those records. Although Herlinghaus argues that Bolaño's work is fiction, he recognizes that, "Santa Teresa becomes a novelistic space into which 'Ciudad Juárez' has metamorphosed, presenting a quasi-documentary account of every murdered woman from 1993-1997" (214). The question then is why Bolaño never openly discussed his research or how much he borrowed from forensic evidence to write his description of the murders.

In a 2004 interview included in *Para Roberto Bolaño*, Jorge Herralde, editor of Anagrama and long-time friend of Bolaño, also discussed Bolaño's fascination with the femicides, highlighting the similarities between his descriptions of the victims and a forensic report. Herralde explained,

the crimes of Ciudad Juárez (Santa Teresa in the novel) are, in effect, the bloody backdrop of the four novellas of *2666* and the specific subject of one of them, the

penultimate, *The Part About the Crimes*. A meticulous and aseptic description of the assassinated women, as if it were a forensic report. (71)

Bolaño challenges readers with an eerily accurate fictional account of events rooted in a violent reality.

Domínguez and Corona note the relationship between bodies and signs, arguing that the body becomes part of the discourse on femicide and produces “a collective endeavor of a literary discourse in which ‘fiction’ is crisscrossed by references to factual events” (5). 2666 is such a work, and, as González Rodríguez said of his communication with Bolaño, “I transcribed judicial records of some case relating to the murder of a woman. He wanted to know how the crimes were described in forensic language” (Email).

3. Bones in the Desert

The title *Huesos en el desierto* (Bones in the Desert) alludes to the bodies of victims of femicide found in the unforgiving landscape of Juárez in empty lots within the city as well as on the periphery. The geography of the city is complicit in, or at least representative of, the memory problem: “The geography that devours [the victims of femicide] is responsible for the feeling of uprootedness and abandonment. This feeling is created by [the lack of] collective memory in the land that has expelled them” (*Huesos* 87). As an influx of migrants looking for work continues to arrive in Juárez, they are greeted by silence on the subject of the killings. In a short poem included in the book the author writes, “Nothing is happening, she will say. Nothing, those who come to the city will repeat. / Nothing. / Like the silence of the desert. / Nothing. / Like the bones of the victims scattered in the night” (231). [13] The theme of the desert as a geography of forgetfulness is evident throughout the work. The author describes Lomas de Poleo, a tract of informal housing and dumps on the northwest edge of the city near the U.S. border where many bodies of femicide victims have been found, as “that fluid earth that repels memory” (26). However, for the author, the book’s title also has another meaning:

It seems to me that what has happened there with the victims of systematic murders is very illustrative. Women’s bodies were abandoned in the desert, and therefore they are bones in the desert. I am not only referring to the geographic process, the telluric process, or even the figure of the desert as a representation of the opposite of civilization. I am referring to the desert of institutions there. (Personal Interview)

González Rodríguez analyzes the power structures at work in Juárez and demonstrates how state institutions are responsible for allowing femicide to continue. He describes how a dysfunctional justice system contributes to the spectrality of femicide victims.

In the preface to the book, González Rodríguez discusses how authorities claim to have resolved 80% of the (then) 300 official feminicides. And yet, he objects “You can distinguish there the decisive effects of actions and omissions by the authorities: the impossibility of making them uphold the law or impose justice” (11). The authorities seem to believe that through speech acts they can manifest a semblance of justice, as if declaring a case resolved after forcing a confession through torture would amount to the same thing as applying the law. [14] For González Rodríguez, beyond the lack of institutional justice and the statistics on feminicide, there are two important points to make. He outlines, “Looking beyond the statistics, these crimes make evident two acts that are equally serious now and looking into the future: distraction or global amnesia before an extreme phenomenon of anarchy; the impulse to normalize brutality in contemporary societies” (12).

In the absence of investigation, victims of feminicide are often forced to be associated with objects—shoes, clothing, and lipstick—rather than with names. González Rodríguez discusses how this exchange contributes to the anonymity of both the body and the life of feminicide victims (153). He suggests that bodies become identified by symbols surrounding the circumstances of their death, symbols that ultimately fail to identify or make real the lost lives. The desert, abandoned roads, shoes—these have become the protagonists of feminicide, things that appear in photos alongside the bodies of unidentified women. Butler argues that “[i]t is important to claim that our bodies are in a sense *our own* and that we are entitled to claim rights of autonomy over our bodies” (25). However, this becomes infinitely more difficult in death, leading to questions about how unidentified bodies are treated. Do not these bodies, even without names, have human rights? Does death convert them into public property? The answer, it would seem, is that bodies, especially the bodies of the poor, become a part of public space, free to be displayed as the media wishes.

In terms of structure, González Rodríguez’s book is a vehicle for memory, for collecting facts, figures, and for telling the stories of victims in an attempt to lend some shape to the senseless narrative of feminicide. The book is divided into 18 short chapters followed by an epilogue, a list of the author’s sources, a list of important figures related to feminicide. It also includes a map of Juárez titled “Geographies of Danger” that shows where high concentrations of victims of feminicide have been found. González Rodríguez discusses the importance of memory and explains: “For me, more important than any stylistic or narrative choices was the fact that these events be recorded” (Personal Interview). His focus is on reconstructing bodies and putting them in context, finding out their names, the story of their lives, and how politicians and other institutional figures may enter into the equation. According to the author, “the only way that events do not

repeat themselves is if we retain memory of them. Memory is very important; it is the only thing that remains with us” (Personal Interview).

The chapter “An Unfinished Life” in *Huesos en el desierto* structurally mirrors “The Part About the Crimes” in *2666* in several aspects. Both chapters recount in exacting detail the murders of dozens of women. González Rodríguez records details about victims starting in the year 2002 and moving back in time to 1993. He provides the date of death, the name of the victim (when possible), and a description of the violence suffered. For example, the chapter begins as follows:

23/09/02, Erika Pérez, between 25 and 30 years old, brown hair, a blouse with a flower pattern, pants and panties below the knees, the strap of the purse around her neck, at the dirt path that crosses the streets Paseo del Río and Camino San Lorenzo. (257)

The number of entries that begin with the words “unidentified” reminds the reader how many bodies remain anonymous. In *2666*, Bolaño begins the chapter by describing feminicides from 1993 to 1997. Whereas González Rodríguez succinctly lists dates of death, names, and the cause of death, Bolaño couches stories within stories, showing the way in which gruesome deaths can get lost or buried among the layers of disparate information that make up media-driven societies. [15]

According to Cynthia Bejarano, feminicide makes evident that “there is a politics in killing, and there is a politics in death” (Driver 88). González Rodríguez captures one angle of the politics of death in *Huesos en el desierto* when he describes how state and federal authorities try to downplay the crimes or blame the victims. For example, González Rodríguez describes how, in 1995, the spokesman for the judicial police of the state of Chihuahua, Ernesto García, declared, “We would like to alert the community that women should not pass through unknown or dark areas of the city. They should be accompanied whenever possible and carry pepper spray to defend themselves” (15). This statement displays how the police, as state agents who are sworn to protect the population from violence, are warning women that they are responsible for their own safety.

Taking into account the initial statements by officials in Juárez, the truth to be learned is that a lone woman who traverses public spaces risks rape that will end in death. *Huesos en el desierto* provides a record of statements made by local and municipal authorities ranging from the governor to police chiefs, a record that demonstrates the belief that a female in public invites violence upon herself. By collecting and recording a range of public statements made on feminicide, the author shows how female sexuality can be used to dispossess both victims and potential victims of their personhood.

In the chapter “The Cotton Fields” the González Rodríguez tells the story of the discovery in 2001 of the bodies of eight women dumped in a cotton field in Juárez. He describes how “diverse civil organizations protested in front of the Prosecutor’s Office. They created a symbolic moment and demanded the scientific investigation of the homicides” (233). His focus on how the actions of local individuals and organizations demand justice in the face of impunity is an example of how individual citizens can and do influence local and national discourse.

The treatment of bodies in *Huesos en el desierto* and *2666* are similar in their efforts to record the graphic nature of the violence against women. However, González Rodríguez’s goal in writing the book is to leave testimony of the economic, political, and social forces that have contributed to the violence exercised against women, whereas Bolaño’s work explores more generally the metaphysics of horror and evil without articulating any stated goals related to fomenting social change in Juárez. González Rodríguez asserts that it was important to him to record information and sources related to femicide, “because in the future nobody will be able to say ‘This never happened’” (Personal Interview). The author acknowledged that he could have written the book in many different formats or even written it as a novel. However, “information, memory, the story of events, and the convergence of testimony were most urgent” (Personal Interview). The text depicts the tenuous relationship between memory and anonymity that plagues victims of femicide.

The chapter “Unending Deaths” illustrates the spectral nature of disappearing women in Juárez. Although photos of the faces of missing women and victims are plastered around the city, often the bodies of victims remain anonymous due to poor collection of evidence or the decomposed state of the body. Thus the names and faces of victims often become separated from their actual bodies in death. When discussing the flyers that display faces of missing girls and litter the streets and signposts of the city, González Rodríguez describes “a spectral montage of faces, dates, signs, and impossible stains” (143). The flyers represent disembodied faces, thus causing those women to take on a ghostly quality. Even when bodies are found, they are, as the author describes when he lists the dead, “unidentified” (257). Through these observations González Rodríguez captures the difficulty of memory and remembering in the presence of anonymity.

4. 2666 and the Aesthetics of Horror

2666 is not about memory, but about the lack thereof, about what happens when humanity is swallowed up by a black hole. The title of the novel is a seemingly mysterious number that is nowhere mentioned in the book. It is taken from Bolaño’s 1999 novel *Amuleto* which tells the story of Auxilio Lacouture, a Uruguayan living illegally in Mexico who gets trapped in a bathroom at the

Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México when the Mexican army takes over the campus in the days leading up to the 1968 Tlatelolco student massacre. While trapped, Auxilio sifts through her memories, and describes a time when she was following two people (one of them Belano, the alter ego of the author) through Mexico City. She says:

I followed them. I saw them walk slowly down Bucareli to Reforma and then I saw them cross Reforma without waiting for the green light, both of them with long hair blown by the wind because at that hour on Reforma the wind from the previous night still blows. Reforma Avenue transforms into a transparent tube, into lungs in the form of cuneiform where the imaginary exhalations of the city pass by. Later we began to walk down Guerrero Avenue; they walked more slowly than before, and I walked more quickly. Guerrero, at that hour, looked more than anything like a cemetery, but not a cemetery from 1986 or even a cemetery from 1975. Rather, it looked like a cemetery from 2666, a forgotten cemetery underneath a dead eyelid, the watery dispassionate eye that began wanting to forget something and ended up forgetting everything. (76-77, my translation)

The title sets the tone for a novel of apocalyptic horror in which Bolaño forces readers to examine issues they would rather forget. The epigraph of *2666*, a quotation of poet Charles Baudelaire, reads “An oasis of horror in the middle of a desert of boredom.” [16]

According to González Rodríguez, *2666* is not sensationalist and goes far beyond counting the dead. He explained, “On another level it is a metaphysical reflection about evil, but Bolaño is very clear in his criticism of the authorities and of the institutions in Santa Teresa” (Personal interview). This is difficult to discuss, because, for me, the work both is and is not sensational. On the one hand, Bolaño is consciously trying to be as sensational as possible to mimic the real violence in Juárez, but on the other, the work is so obsessed with sexual violence that I find it discomforting. In my interviews with Monárrez Fragoso and Bejarano, they also shared their discomfort with the novel. In fact, they were unable to finish the novel due to the unrelenting nature of the violence described.

When asked whether Bolaño had discussed his intentions in writing *2666*, González Rodríguez explained:

I think that he wanted to record that literature could somehow mend the world. It is something that is very clear in his novel. In his novels, we usually see that everything has to do with a political theme, and somehow his novel *2666* is also political in content. There will always be a figure of someone carrying out symbolic compensation, either as revenge or as symbolic displacement where a minimum of justice is restored for victims. This is an issue that Bolaño did not need to make explicit because it is obviously not a novella. It becomes a social novel. He is not a novelist who introduces ideological content in his novels. I have the impression that Roberto was going to continue the narrative. In fact, Bolaño’s editor Jaime Vallcorba, who was also a close friend of Roberto, told me that, as he understood it, [Bolaño] told him that the novel would continue. As I recall, Herralde was a bit more reserved about it. It is a detail that has to do with his idea of the book and of

literature. For him, it is a finished novel as such. But in the case of Vallcorba, yes, he told me that as far as he understood the project, Roberto had the intention of continuing it. (Personal Interview)

Were Bolaño alive, I would want to interview him, of course. But for now, all that remains are such secondhand accounts of the text, small literary arguments about whether it was a finished novel or an incomplete one.

In “The Part About the Crimes”, Elvira Campos, the head of the mental asylum in Santa Teresa, discusses misogyny, which she describes as “gynophobia, which is fear of women, and naturally afflicts only men. Very widespread in Mexico, although it manifests itself in different ways” (382). These elements of misogyny and many more make up the map of horror that Bolaño traces. In another scene, the narrator describes how, after taking prostitutes to the police station to question them, “[i]n the other cells policemen were raping the whores from La Rivera” (401). In yet another, a police office investigating the murder of a woman “first made inquiries among Santa Teresa’s high-class hookers to see whether anyone knew the dead woman, and then, when his questioning yielded scant results, among the cheap hookers [...] (390). In Bolaño’s novel, the police, at every turn, associate femicide with prostitution or the sexualized female body, a commentary on the way police have behaved in Juárez, which has been extensively documented.

For Bolaño, the message is in the flesh, and the criticisms toward the police and other institutions of justice stem from comments and actions those officials have made in reference to the dead bodies. Thus he purposely grounds the text in the anonymity of death, in the creation of ghosts. “The Part About the Crimes” opens and closes with an anonymous death, and as the bodies pile up, the police get distracted from femicide by a man who desecrates churches with his urine. How easily we turn away from murder, Bolaño seems to say.

In “The Part About the Crimes,” whole paragraphs are written as if they were a forensics report and include detailed descriptions of the violence perpetrated, of the posture of the body, and of the victims’ clothing. *Huesos en el desierto* describes in spectral terms but combats that spectrality by collecting the voices of family members of victims and moving beyond the narrative of the dead body. 2666, on the other hand, treats the dead bodies of victims of femicide as a way to explore the concept of horror. In *Pretérito imperfecto*, Leonor Arfuch and Gisela Catanzaro address the connection between art, memory, and the disappeared in the context of Argentina by posing the questions: “What can impress us, when day after day we see explosions, attacks, war, famine? What potential does artistic work have to awaken the body and soul?” (112). These questions are particularly relevant in discussing Bolaño’s formal and stylistic choices in describing femicide.

The unnamed narrator of a chapter of *2666* describes the body of a 10-year-old girl in the following manner: “The dead girl was ten years old, more or less. She was four foot three. She was wearing clear plastic sandals fastened with a metal buckle. She had brown hair, lighter where it fell over her forehead, as if it had been dyed. She’d been stabbed eight times, three times in the chest” (501). Another description details, “She had been vaginally and anally raped, probably more than once, since both orifices exhibited tears and abrasions, from which she had bled profusely” (354). Bolaño also describes fractured skulls, loss of brain matter, faces smashed beyond recognition, and the mutilation of breasts. Readers are faced with the question of how to combat such overwhelming violence. This graphic assault on the reader represents women as a mass of bodies, wounds being their main identifying characteristics. As Marcela Valdés writes, “reading ‘The Part About the Crimes’ feels like staring into the abyss. Strangling, shooting, stabbing, burning, rape, whipping, mutilation, bribery and treachery are all detailed in deadpan prose” (20).

The bodies in Bolaño’s narrative have been detached from history and often family, leaving only the messages written on their bodies for readers to decipher. Although memories of their lives don’t haunt readers, visions of their tortured bodies do. Descriptions of the corporeal propel the narrative, demonstrating how the victimized “Other” is a captive of descriptions of her body. According to Butler, “The derealization of the ‘Other’ means that it is neither dead nor alive, but interminably spectral” (33). In Bolaño’s fiction the victims of femicide are spectral figures, given the obsessive focus on the dead female body. However, the repetition of violence is also a case where form and function work together to reproduce a perceived reality—the indifference or inability of citizens to relate to such overwhelming violence. Bolaño exploits spectrality to get to the roots of horror, to the roots of a society that can witness the death of so many without ever really paying attention.

Donoso makes a connection between the last chapter, “The Part About Archiboldi,” which addresses the horrors of World War II, and “The Part About the Crimes,” the chapter about femicide. He explains, “The political element has to do with the repetition of descriptions of serialized characteristics of two distinct of crimes that are in principle different—femicide and genocide—the repetition generates both *indistinction* and *difference*” (132). Bolaño points to the nature of horror as a historical fact that repeats itself. At the end of the novel, when the mysterious Archiboldi finally reveals himself, he thinks “history, which is a simple whore, has no decisive moments but is a proliferation of instants, brief interludes that vie with one another in monstrosity” (794). Santa Teresa may be the current locus of horror, but it is not the only one.

“The Part About the Crimes” produces numbness associated with porno-misery, the idea of exploiting human misery for personal or financial gain. However, at the same time, forces the reader to recognize violence that has surpassed all known or imagined limits. This analysis examines whether descriptions of bodily violence such as rape, mutilation, burning, and/or beating suffered by femicide victims fulfill the need to document the truth, and examines at what point such representations cross the line into porno-misery. *Pornomiseria* or porno-misery is a term coined by Colombian filmmakers Carlos Mayolo and Luis Ospina in *Agarrando pueblo* (1977), a short fake documentary that satirizes a group of filmmakers desperately looking for poverty in order to profit from its representation. The directors used the term to denounce the “voyeuristic treatment of abjection” seen in 1970s Colombian films (Gómez and Vega-Hurtado 64). As film critic Christian León describes, “Pornomiseria plays with the voyeuristic impulse of the spectator, exploiting, for commercial means, the fascination with violence and obscene poverty that is a latent desire in both citizens and consumers” (77). In the face of overwhelming violence and the recreation of that violence in cultural production, the term *pornomiseria* brings together issues of violence and voyeurism, allowing for a discussion of how and why graphic descriptions of femicide can turn into just another facet of consumption. The term also represents a kind of cultural production that exploits the shock value of sensational violence and misery but provides none of the accompanying complexity or explanation needed to analyze an issue.

The term *pornomiseria* is most commonly used in debates about aesthetics of film, but I think its application to photography and literature is justified. Although it may be argued that graphic depictions of femicide and misery are necessary to provoke awareness, it is also true that the content can be exploited. Monárrez Fragozo makes a connection between the media and use of pornographic images when she argues that “The testimonies that are presented by the media are also part of a graphic, elaborate, pornographic description of the bodies of victims; thus, they degrade the families of the victims. These discourses take the terrible things that were done to murdered women and create a moral vacuum” (*Trama de una injusticia* 209). The prostitution of female bodies thus continues even after death, when images of corpses are bought and sold as part of a sensationalist news cycle.

The reason that images of bodies of femicide victims appear so frequently in the mass media and in works of cultural production is that they reflect our curiosity to see damaged bodies, to witness destruction in the most realistic way possible. The concept of *pornomiseria* also relates to the way the perpetrators of the crimes deal with the bodies of victims. The bodies aren’t dumped; they are arranged so as to present a necroart exhibit to the public. I believe that arrangement of bodies is not done to desensitize but to sensitize, to gain attention and recognition for the perpetrator of the crime. Victim’s families displace the power of the perpetrators and the images of arranged bodies

by constructing memorials at the sites where bodies have been found. However, the issue remains that the crime of feminicides is used to control women and to keep them out of public space. In this issue, in her article “(Re)Living Femicide through Social Control: the Regulation of Life and Bodies through Fear and (In)Formal Social Control” Cynthia Bejarano says,

What I suggest by ‘femicidal state rhetoric’ is how hegemonic state forces and state actors use the reality of femicide as a way of controlling, curtailing and convincing women and girls to alter their activities and to limit their movement across the City. This also impacts women and girls’ confidence, sense of security, and well-being. (71)

In academic and feminist circles, Charles Bowden, who has written extensively about Juárez and the U.S.-Mexico border, has been accused of porno-misery in his works of non-fiction such as *Juárez: The Laboratory of Our Future*. However, when I interviewed him in 2010, he said denied that his work was porno-misery and discussed his own definition of the term:

Porno-misery I find more useful. When the term is used, it means that you use it so much it deadens people. The assumption is that pornography is deadening. That’s why we have a distinction in language between eroticism and pornography. Erotic is supposed to stir people, whether you approve of it or not. Pornography is absolutely redundant imagery. Porno-misery exists when you produce enough of these images that people don’t react to them. It’s kind of like somebody in a bar having one too many drinks. There isn’t a rule. It’s a judgment. Beethoven’s 9th Symphony is about an hour and a half long. It’s far longer than his other symphonies, but it doesn’t deaden you. It’s the right length. Certainly, if you read the tabloids in Mexico you don’t think, “This is going to stir people to action.” I’m not defending the book, but people had a real reaction to it. I think it’s that they hadn’t seen anything like it. (Driver 55)

Although Bowden and Bolaño have been compared in terms of their exploitation of misery, I think that Bolaño’s case is different because he was actively mining porno-misery to prove a point about how we can become numb to violence. Literary critic Adam Kirsch defends Bolaño, arguing that he “succeeds in restoring to physical violence some of its genuine evil” (1). I disagree with Kirsch, and question this idea of restoration given the already publicized nature of the victimized female body in Juárez. As Butler points out, “The public sphere is constituted in part by what can appear, and the regulation of the sphere of appearance is one way to establish what will count as reality, and what will not” (xx). The line between restoration of genuine evil and exploitation of the female body is thin in Bolaño’s narrative. However, as journalist Lev Grossman argues,

the relentless gratuitousness of 2666 has its own logic and its own power, which builds into something overwhelming that hits you all the harder because you don’t see it coming. This is a dangerous book, and you can get lost in it. How can art, Bolaño is asking, a medium of form and meaning, reflect a world that is blessed with neither? (1)

“The Part About the Crimes” ends with a description of the last femicide victim of 1997. Despite the number of years, the investigations, the claims against the way the police have treated women, and protests and marches to bring attention to impunity, the description of how the police view the bodies of victims has not progressed.

The metaphor that Bolaño pursues to represent horror is a black hole, an ever-present part of the constellations that allows nothing, not even light, to escape. This vision of Juárez is problematic for Monárrez Fragoso because “There is something that bothers me. It is as if you were reading about a city in semidarkness, a city without ethics” (Driver 94). The black hole in the novel, the force that pulls in and routinely devours bodies, things, ideas—is the city itself, Santa Teresa. Echeverría, who compiled the first edition of *2666* as per the instructions left by Bolaño in his notes, reveals, “In one of his copious notes about *2666* Bolaño signals the existence of a ‘hidden center’ in the work that is hidden under what could be called the ‘physical center.’ There are reasons to believe that this physical center would be the city of Santa Teresa, the faithful representation of Juárez on the border of Mexico and the United States” (1123).

If the black hole is Santa Teresa, at its center is the date 2666, a date from which no one will seemingly escape. [17] In the last sentence of “The Part About the Crimes” the narrator describes, “Even on the poorest streets people could be heard laughing. Some of these streets were completely dark, like black holes, and the laughter that came from who knows where was the only sign, the only beacon that kept residents and strangers from getting lost” (633). The streets are like black holes, and the only sign that remains is laughter. Perhaps, in the end, Bolaño does offer hope, for the black hole has not swallowed up everything and has allowed, at least momentarily, that a guiding sign remain for humanity. Among the ghosts, the darkness, the bodies, the blood, the rape, the hate, the corruption, perhaps the sign will be discovered. However, what Bolaño makes clear is that black holes are a permanent part of the human constellation of life, and periodically, the blackness overwhelms us with war, murder, and hatred, but we generally do not recognize it because we are too distracted; because it is easier to look away and forget.

Endnotes

[*] All translations mine, except Roberto Bolaño: *2666* and *Between Parentheses*.

[1] I conducted research for this article during my 2012-13 Postdoctoral Fellowship at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) and published *More or Less Dead: Femicide, Haunting, and the Ethics of Representation in Mexico* with University of Arizona Press in March 2015.

[2] In the introduction to *Terrorizing Women: Femicide in the Américas*, editors Fregoso and Bejarano discuss the terms *femicide* and *feminicide*, and argue for the use of *feminicide*. They explain,

the concepts of femicide and feminicide are used interchangeably in the literature on gender-based violence and among the contributors to this volume. These are evolving concepts that, as noted in Bueno-Hansen's chapter, are 'still under construction.' However, we will make a case for *feminicide* and, in the process, contribute some analytic tools for thinking about the concept in historical, theoretical, and political terms. In arguing for the use of the term *feminicide* over *femicide*, we draw from a feminist analytical perspective that interrupts essentialist notions of female identity that equate gender and biological sex and looks instead to the gendered nature of practices and behaviors, along with the performance of gender norms. As feminist thinkers have long contended, gender is a socially constructed category in which the performance of gender norms (rather than a natural biological essence) is what gives meaning to categories of the 'feminine' and 'masculine.' Instead of a scenario in which gender and sex necessarily concur, the concept of femicide allows us to map the power dynamics and relations of gender, sexuality, race, and class underlying violence and, in so doing, shift the analytic focus to how gender norms, inequities, and power relationships increase women's vulnerabilities to violence . (3-4)

[3] For a more complete bibliography on academic articles and books analyzing femicide, refer to "La ciudad y el feminicidio en los textos académicos" (2010) by Juila E. Monárrez Frago, Raúl Flores Simental, and Diana Lizeth García Salinas.

[4] In 2007 Pablo Ley and Alex Rigola directed the first theater production of *2666* at Theater Lliure in Barcelona, Spain.

[5] The increasing violence is reflected in overall homicide and femicide statistics, in the type of violence perpetrated, and in the circumstances in which individuals have been murdered. For example, in 2010 Marisela Escobedo Ortiz, one of the most vocal activists against femicide, was murdered in front of the Government Palace in Chihuahua. Her body fell not far from a cross that had been placed in front of the Palace by the group Women in Black to remember victims of femicide. Police surrounded her at the time of her murder. To be murdered in broad daylight, on government property, surrounded by police begs the question: was the violence orchestrated or permitted by the police or other governmental entities?

[6] On the last page of *Huesos en el desierto* González Rodríguez includes a map titled "Geografía de peligro" which shows the relationship between poverty, femicide, and the physical geography of the city. The page that includes the map is not numbered; it appears directly after page 334.

[7] Cynthia Bejarano observes that, "If men are being killed and being tortured for a number of days, what we hear and what we're told is that men have been brutally tortured. There have been assertions that some men have been raped as well, although that's sort of beneath the surface. You aren't hearing very much about that" (Driver 167).

[8] In 2012 González Rodríguez published *The Femicide Machine*, a slim book that brought together many of his journalistic essays on femicide.

[9] In *Huesos en el desierto* González Rodríguez states, "I became interested in the homicides against women in Juárez in 1995. One morning in 1996, I left Mexico City for the northern border. There I found a trace of blood. Since then, I have continued [to investigate] it" (284).

[10] Journalist Marcela Valdés also describes the chronology of the relationship between the two writers: "The year that González Rodríguez was first attacked, Bolaño had been working on his demented tangle for

more than half a decade. Searching for information about Juárez, Bolaño e-mailed his friends in Mexico, asking more and more detailed questions about the murders. Finally, tired of these gruesome inquiries, his friends put him in touch with González Rodríguez, who, they said, knew more about the crimes than anyone in Mexico. Bolaño first e-mailed him around the time that González Rodríguez decided to write a nonfiction book about his investigation.” (3)

[11] Jorge Herralde, editor of Anagrama and long-time friend of Bolaño discussed the relationship between Bolaño and González Rodríguez a 2004 interview with *El Periódico* of Barcelona. He stated, “The subject of 2666 came up in every conversation in the past few years. He spoke to me, for example, of the numerous times he consulted via email Sergio González Rodríguez” (64).

[12] Bolaño, who was born in Chile, spent the years of his youth in Mexico. During his many years in Mexico he never visited Juárez. In 1977 he left Mexico for Paris and never returned, spending the last years of his life in Blanes, Spain.

[13] The author talks about the precariousness of the lives of all migrants, not just women. He expresses, “Any of the Northern Mexico border forms an ideal territory that promotes the radical anonymity of migrants. For a few of them, the ‘border’ means a new identity, but for the majority, it embodies the experience of transition from Mexico to the United States, the loss of native identity, and the search for a new one, one that is volatile and likely to involve risks. A police beating, fraud, theft, bribery, or death” (*Huesos en el desierto* 13).

[14] In the case of many suspects who have been arrested for femicide, there has been evidence of torture and forced confession. According to González Rodríguez, Sharif Sharif, the main suspect in multiple femicide cases, “was forced to make false testimony and declarations, a common practice in Mexico. He also had to sign false declarations and to identify witnesses that never reappeared. Torture, whether it is physical or psychological, has to be eradicated, but it is frequently used” (*Huesos en el desierto* 99).

[15] In “La apretada red oculta” Elvio E. Gandolfo describes Bolaño’s mania for writing stories and anecdotes within other stories as an essential characteristic of his work: “The even tone that unites everything is the bulimic plot that devours dozens and hundreds of thematic threads and anecdotes in each book” (117).

[16] The word oasis is referenced several times in 2666, one of the most pertinent being a conversation between Florita Almada, a woman with visions about the future and premonitions of what is happening to women in Santa Teresa and Reinaldo, a television host. Reinaldo explains that Florita, “She said that she had seen dead women and dead girls. A desert. An oasis” (545).

[17] Echeverría adds that, “As for the ‘hidden center’...wouldn’t it indicate precisely that date, 2666, that covers the entire novel?” (1123).

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