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Abstract
Chilean writer Roberto Bolaño owes much of his current literary celebrity to the posthumous publication of his magnum opus, 2666. The novel comprises five parts, which ultimately coalesce to create a harrowing portrait of violence against women in a Mexican border town. As this grisly scene unfolds, Bolaño implicates the novel's characters—and, more broadly, the reader—in a crime equally disturbing: inaction, indifference, and thus complicity. However, Bolaño offers artistic solutions to the bleakness of the modern condition: reading and writing. In creating this utterly sui generis novel—and violating established literary norms in the process—Bolaño thus enacts the very solution that he offers to the problems of modernity, a time in which "poetry is the one thing that isn't contaminated."

Keywords
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Comments
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Ciudad Juárez: Mexico’s Violent Cradle of Modernity in Roberto Bolaño’s 2666

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Really, what I want to do is impossible, for any listing of an endless series is doomed to be infinitesimal.

— Jorge Luis Borges, “The Aleph”

Awful, isn't it? So anonymous...The say 115 killed and it doesn't mean a thing to us. Yet each one is a man, and we don't even know who he is. We don't know if he loves his wife, if he has kids, if he prefers movies or plays. We don't know anything. All they say is 115 killed.

— Jean-Luc Godard, Pierrot le fou
Roberto Bolaño wrote ten books in the last decade of his life. Roberto Bolaño was imprisoned during the Pinochet coup in Chile, only to be freed by a former classmate-turned-prison guard. Roberto Bolaño did heroin. Whether or not any of the preceding (and widely circulating) rumors is true is irrelevant: to sort fact from fiction in the Bolañian universe is not merely impossible but also to miss the point. Part marketing tactic and part exercise in self-image cultivation, “Bolaño, Inc.”—as Horacio Castellanos Moya has termed the posthumous re-branding of Bolaño from simple family man to literary rogue—almost depends as much on the myths that Bolaño and his publishers perpetuated about him as his actual corpus (Moya). The apocrypha that surrounds Bolaño now, just over a decade after his death, is certainly a major reason for his popularity with readers of world literature in English, though his mythopoeic status obviously owes to more than a compelling backstory. The first of his novels to be translated, By Night in Chile and Distant Star, slowly established Bolaño’s reputation among an English-language audience, in addition to a seemingly endless number of short stories—and a lengthy profile—published in The New Yorker. Natasha Wimmer’s 2008 English translation of Bolaño’s magnum opus, 2666, however, kicked Bolaño fever into a higher gear. Breathless critics—including the typically staid likes of James Wood and Adam Kirsch—championed him as a successor to the entire Latin American Boom generation in their reviews of this unwieldy novel, heaping on the Chilean the kind of effusive praise that would contribute to the unprecedented celerity of his canonization and incorporation into university syllabi. To speak in the terms of the literary sociology advanced by Pascale Casanova’s World Republic of Letters, 2666, above all of Bolaño’s work, consecrated his literary capital and placed this somewhat peripheral writer squarely in the literary center.
At first glance, *2666* seems like an unusual candidate for a bestseller. It is a difficult book, an epic that clocks in at nearly 900 pages and comprises five essentially separate narratives, perhaps best described within its own pages: a “great, imperfect, torrential work…that blaze[s] paths into the unknown” (*2666* 227). This novel—hailed by many as the first great literary work of the 21st century—begins with The Part about the Critics, a story of a coterie of European academics obsessed with a little-known German writer, Benno von Archimboldi, but seemingly more interested in the incestuous affairs that develop amongst themselves. Book two, The Part about Amalfitano, is a portrait of the quotidian hardships facing a professor and his daughter living in the fictional town of Santa Teresa, while The Part about Fate next details an American journalist’s unexpected detour into the demimonde of this city, where he becomes fascinated by the spate of femicides—targeted killings of women—that have been taking place for years. The Part about the Crimes, *2666*’s fourth section, narrates in antiseptic prose a litany of paragraph-long medical examiner’s reports that explain the gruesome manner of death of hundreds of previously missing women in Santa Teresa. Finally, The Part about Archimboldi closes a few plot ends while leaving many more tantalizingly open, as the reader learns the backstory behind Archimboldi, who was a German soldier complicit in the crimes of the Third Reich.

Bolaño’s idea for this five-part structure of the novel appears in his personal notebooks, in which one observes a rather cryptic—and for that reason, rather apposite—diagram; with lines like blood vessels (representing the book’s five sections) sprouting out of a small, circular saucer, the picture, more organism than diagram, recalls a sort of life form that defies easy classification—not unlike the novel itself (Bolaño, *Hidden Center*). As a key, Bolaño scribbled two things alongside the diagram: “centro” (center), pointing to its physical center, and “centro
“oculto” (hidden center), directed a little below (Bolaño, Hidden Center). The literal center is likely the fictional city of Santa Teresa, the pseudo-real referent to Mexico’s Ciudad Juárez, the vast hell on which the novel’s disparate sections ultimately converge. Critics have found the novel’s “hidden center” more difficult to discern, however. Ignacio Echevarría, Bolaño’s literary executor, has suggested that the hidden center refers to the mysterious date that gives the novel its name: 2666 (2666 895-896). There are no references to this year within the text of 2666, or Bolaño’s entire oeuvre, for that matter—that is, except for one line in his 1999 novel Amulet. In the scene in which the date is mentioned, Amulet’s narrator Auxilio Lacouture—the self-described “mother of Mexican poetry”—describes the disquieting experience of walking through an unsavory part of town as follows:

Then we walked down the Avenida Guerrero; they weren’t stepping so lightly anymore, and I wasn’t feeling too enthusiastic either. Guerrero, at that time of night, is more like a cemetery than an avenue, not a cemetery in 1974 or in 1968, or in 1975, but a cemetery in the year 2666, a forgotten eyelid of a corpse or an unborn child, bathed in the dispassionate fluids of an eye that tried so hard to forget one particular thing that it ended up forgetting everything else (Amulet 86).

It is telling that the only mention of the year 2666 in Bolaño’s corpus takes place in a setting that recalls a cemetery, and, by extension, death. In particular, the excerpt above from Amulet gestures to Bolaño’s general preoccupation with the nature of horror, evil, and death in a society that is uniquely modern. Consider the epigraph of 2666, which comes from Charles Baudelaire’s The Flowers of Evil: “an oasis of horror in a desert of boredom.” In 2666, the oasis of horror is most definitely Santa Teresa, which, like its real-life analogue in Ciudad Juárez, is literally situated in the Sonoran Desert of boredom. In a conversation with Wimmer, Bolaño expatiated on the epigraph’s significance for the novel, linking it with the problems of modernity that his characters encounter. Baudelaire’s fragment represented for Bolaño the most “lucid diagnosis for the illness of modern man…To escape boredom, to escape deadlock, all we have at
hand, though not so close at hand, because even here an effort is required, is horror, or in other words, evil” (Wimmer). Likewise, Baudelaire imputed the rise of modern evil in France to the coeval emergence of boredom. Pericles Lewis, citing the first poem of The Flowers of Evil, writes that in 19th-century Parisian modernity, “Our evil arises not so much from the enticements of Satan as from the most typical of modern vices, boredom: ‘[Boredom] in his hookah-dreams, / Produces hangmen and real tears together, / How well you know this fastidious monster, reader, / —Hypocrite reader, you—my double! my brother!’” (Lewis).

In light of the epigraph, we can argue that Bolaño posits violence as the only recourse to modernity’s challenges (boredom being just one), and in 2666, he adduces the case of Ciudad Juárez (via Santa Teresa) as the paradigmatic example of a city afflicted by modern violence. Once a picture of globalization’s successes in the 1970s, Ciudad Juárez over the past few decades has become a global Wild West—home to American and Chinese owners of maquiladoras (factories) and the poor Mexican women who work in them, scores of whom have been brutally raped and murdered in the past two decades in a city where crime is so commonplace, so terrifyingly banal, that Bolaño likens it to the 20th-century’s worst crimes against humanity. Bolaño’s invocation of Baudelaire in the epigraph is especially appropriate as well, for just as The Flowers of Evil railed against the impersonal violence of 19th-century French modernity, so does 2666 against 20th-century modernity and the inexorable rise of 21st-century global capitalism. A maximalist project that is truly worldly and historical in scope, “2666 aims to be nothing less than a massive epic of modernity, ranging from Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia to yuppie London and the cruel Sonoran desert,” writes Jon Powers in NPR (Powers).

This epic of modernity saw the rise of violence both literal and structural, and this violence was often gendered. Indeed, most readers of 2666 enter the novel with at least some
knowledge of the violence against women that it covers so exhaustively in its fourth section, The Part about the Crimes. From 1993 to 2007, some 400 women have been raped and murdered in Ciudad Juárez, and these murders have never really been solved or explained; mutilated corpses continue to be found in the Sonora Desert to this day (Arriola). Worse, this violence against women takes place with virtual impunity, given the structural violence committed by local and federal institutions, including the government and police. “Women are losers in the antistate,” writes Jean Franco in Cruel Modernity, her perspicacious study of contemporary Latin American cultural production (Franco 241). “What Bolaño has recorded is the end of the human as such and the ferocity of misogyny that underwrites it” (Franco 241).

For Bolaño, this maelstrom of literal and figurative violence engulfing Ciudad Juárez was emblematic of economic issues endemic to 20th- and 21st-century modernity as well. Bolaño saw Ciudad Juárez as a microcosm of Mexico—and a harbinger of things to come in a globalized world operating under the principles of neoliberalism, an ideology that he deftly excoriates throughout 2666 without once mentioning it. “The apocalyptic revelation of [2666’s] title is that Auxilio’s cemetery the likely future of a modernity where all the utopian possibilities of historical moments past have been forgotten and capitalism continues unchallenged to suck the life from living labor,” the critic Sharae Deckard argues (Deckard 13). On this point, Ciudad Juárez, according to Rita Laura Segato,

demonstrates the direct relation that exists between capital and death, between accumulation and unregulated concentration and the sacrifice of poor, mestiza women, devoured where the monetary and symbolic economies, the control of resources and the power of death are articulated (Segato, qtd. in Franco 222).

Such dire economic conditions have lead to a tragic neoliberal norm around the world in cities as diverse as Rio de Janeiro and Bombay: the creation of two cities, one official/legal, the other unofficial/illegal, within one. It goes without saying that the average denizen of Ciudad Juárez,
lacking real job opportunities, is far more likely to partake in the economy of the latter. This fact only increases the economic allure of joining of cartels like the Zetas and the Sinaloa, which have penetrated every layer of government in Mexico, and, in many cases, control the police.

In an interview with his biographer Mónica Maristain in *Playboy*, Bolaño called Ciudad Juárez “our curse and our mirror, the unquiet mirror of our frustrations and our vile interpretation of freedom and of our desires” (*Between Parenthesis* 366). Too much freedom, Bolaño argues, leads to the total societal breakdown that he so painstakingly—and painfully—chronicles in *2666*. Indeed, this novel’s five parts, taken together, dramatize the systemic failure of virtually every institution in Ciudad Juárez and allow Bolaño to meditate on universal questions about humanity, namely, the relationship between modernity and violence. Is violence a necessary byproduct of modernity? Is the rest of the modern world susceptible to a simultaneous social, legal, and economic breakdown akin to that of Ciudad Juárez? Is the disaster of Ciudad Juárez just a continuation of 20th-century modernity’s ethical collapses, such as the Holocaust, and are we bound to see more of these death zones in the future? In an echo of *The Flowers of Evil’s* critique of French modernity, *2666* forcefully documents how violence necessarily attends the rise of Mexican modernity in the 20th and 21st century.

Bolaño explores this idea of violence through five spheres where Mexican modernity takes on distinctive dimensions: economic and political structures, narratology, ocularcentrism, exile, and literary form. First, we will examine the unseen connection between structural and literal violence, stemming from ill-conceived, ruthless international trade policies, such as NAFTA. An application of reader-response theory will then demonstrate how Bolaño implicates readers in the crimes he so coolly narrates, accusing them of inaction, indifference, and thus complicity. A discussion of the violence of ocularcentrism in modernity—the symbolic violence
of the image—will follow, before we scrutinize the effects of exile on Bolaño, and how the violence of displacement can actually be a positive force for literary production. Finally, we will examine the literary violence that Bolaño has committed in creating this five-part novel as a part of a broader effort to alter the trajectory of Latin American and world literary space.

**The Part about Structural Violence**

“And how are they killed?” asked Fate.
“Nobody’s sure. They disappear. They vanish into thin air, here one minute, gone the next. And after a while their bodies turn up in the desert” (2666 287).

No one knows exactly how the fallen women of Ciudad Juárez disappear. Although the police arrested a suspect in the murders in 1999, corpses continued to appear in the desert long after his arrest and death, the consensus being that this man, an Egyptian-American, was merely a convenient scapegoat. The reality, as the exchange from 2666 that opens this section indicates, is that the women of Ciudad Júarez are not murdered by an individual but rather a system, a grand, collective failure of institutions including the police, the government, and international trade policy. In 2666’s Part about Fate, Fate reflects on Chucho Flores’ analogy comparing the murders to a “strike”; this characterization captures the vast matrix of violence, international commerce, drug trafficking, and corruption responsible for the creating the situation in Ciudad Juárez:

“The fucking killings are like a strike, amigo, a brutal fucking strike.” The comparison of the killings to a strike was odd. But Fate nodded his head and didn’t say anything…“[In Santa Teresa,] we have everything. Factories, maquiladoras, one of the lowest unemployment rates in Mexico, a cocaine cartel, a constant flow of workers from other cities, Central American immigrants, an urban infrastructure that can’t support the level of demographic growth. We have plenty of money and poverty, we have imagination and bureaucracy, we have violence and the desire to work in peace” (2666 286).
These contradictions at the heart of Santa Teresa encapsulate some of the structural causes at the heart of this violence. This section will examine the reasons for the surge in violence in Ciudad Juárez that are captured in the novel, and how this insidious network of factors underscores Bolaño’s argument that violence must attend the rise of modernity and globalization.

The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the product of neoliberal economic philosophy, is perhaps the most important—and most pernicious—variable in this matrix, as the violence it enacts is far harder to detect than that of, say, drug-dealing. As we observe in 2666 and many other forms of contemporary Latin American cultural production (such as the films Traffic and Amores Perros and the work of literary nonfiction, La guerra de los Zetas), neoliberalism and NAFTA—these emblems of free trade between the United States, Mexico, Canada—have only decreased the quality of life for many people in economic semi-peripheries like Mexico, especially the working class of Ciudad Juárez. Briefly, neoliberalism, the dominant economic ideology du jour, prizes individual freedom over government interference, regulation, and labor unions. “The assumption that individual freedoms are guaranteed by freedom of the market and of trade is a cardinal feature of neoliberal thinking,” writes David Harvey in his Brief History of Neoliberalism (Harvey). Despite the rise in income inequality that often follows the implementation of neoliberal principles, this philosophy somewhat dubiously holds that economic benefits will “trickle down” to the poor. Indeed, writes Harvey, “the process of neoliberalism has, however, entailed much ‘creative destruction’, not only of prior institutional frameworks and powers…but also of divisions of labor, social relations…ways of life” (Harvey 3).

Such destruction is manifest in Ciudad Juárez. For example, consider Chucho Flores’ previous comments: “The fucking killings are like a strike, amigo, a brutal fucking strike” (2666
287). This seemingly bizarre simile, in which the assassinations of women are compared to a labor strike, now makes more sense, for it connects violence with neoliberal economic policy. Labor unions and strikes are anathema to neoliberal thought: in asserting the rights of the collective, they represent the opposite of government deregulation and individual freedom. Thus, Flores’ comment that the killings in Santa Teresa are like a strike indicates that the killings can be interpreted as a salvo against neoliberalism and globalization.

This “strike” is unable to solve many problems in the short term, however. The failure of neoliberalism in Mexico has provided the impetus for many to join gangs or cartels, which offer far greater opportunities for people to make a living. According to the journalist Charles Bowden, author of the book *Murder City: Ciudad Juárez and the Global Economy’s New Killing Fields*,

> What is happening in Juárez and increasingly throughout México is the breakdown of a system. There are no jobs, the young face blank futures, the poor are crushed by sinking fortunes. The state has always violated human rights, and now, in the general mayhem, this fact becomes more and more obvious…Killing is not deviance, it is a logical career decision for thousands floundering in a failing economy and a failing state (Bowden 74).

After all, virtually everyone in Ciudad Juárez working in foreign-owned factories has seen a massive fall in wages after the implementation of these free trade accords (Bowden). The need to make ends meet has prompted most parents to send their children to work in maquiladoras instead of school, depriving the children of the human capital necessary to transcend their parents’ present economic reality; in effect, neoliberalism has condemned generations to do manual labor for a pittance, creating a cycle as vicious as it is ubiquitous in Mexico (Bowden). People working in *maquiladoras* realize that there is little future for them there; as a result, some resort to the underground economy, the unofficial city in which the buying and selling of drugs from cartels—and the violence that often accompanies these acts—is the norm (Bowden).
In *Murder City*, Bowden also emphasizes the structural violence of the state, which has failed to create viable employment for a population for whom it makes more economic sense to kill than look for respectable work. Further, he links violence with the buying and selling of drugs in Ciudad Juárez. It is a well-known fact that a tacit agreement between the police and Mexican drug cartels exists to give the latter group protection in exchange for bribes (Bowden). The police often simply turn a blind eye to many of the crimes and femicides in Ciudad Juárez, meaning that the majority of cases go on unsolved. The impunity and astonishing openness with which drug cartel operate in parts of Mexico such as Ciudad Juárez thus legitimizes the violence they commit. This is at least the general interpretation of academics and journalists working on the region. For example, Alma Guillermoprieto, writing in the pages of *The New Yorker*, says we’re facing a case of active collusion by the police forces of Chihuahua, at least in covering up the crimes. And perhaps the least horrible explanation would be that it’s a case of active indifference by the authorities to the plight of women, and to the plight of poor women, specifically. The strongest thing that people have felt they could say to me is that the police have been guilty of aggressive neglect. Let’s put it this way: their actions, or their failure to take action, is inexplicable, in very many cases. It’s also true that activists who have sought to help victims’ families locate their daughters or to bring the crimes to an end have suffered death threats or serious harassment by government officials at every level (Guillermoprieto).

In a city where human life is not worth much and the government is more interested in obfuscating crimes than solving them, there are serious systemic problems at large that we can also trace back to the state. In particular, Mbembe’s “Necropolitics” can help explicate the state’s complicity in the deaths of so many women in Ciudad Juárez. Working from Michel Foucault’s notion of biopower, Mbembe avers that “the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die” (Mbembe 11). The women of Ciudad Juárez and Santa Teresa certainly lack this right to dictate whether they will live or die; therefore, they lack sovereignty. If you are a woman in Ciudad Juárez of a
certain type—young, skinny, poor, and dark-skinned, like the vast majority of the 400 or so who have been murdered so far—you are essentially a member of the living dead, according to Mbembe’s necropolitical interpretation. We have established the complicity of various institutions in the killings, including and especially the government and the police; as such, we can argue that these femicides—the word employed to denominate sexual homicides motivated by rage against women—are effectively systemic attempts by the government to eliminate or erase Mexican women who are young, poor, and dark-skinned.

Dartmouth professor Andrew McCann has added another valuable theoretical interpretation of the situation in Ciudad Juárez. In a review of 2666, McCann connects the temporary nature of Mexican women’s work in the maquiladoras with their maltreatment; the Mexican woman, subject to this structural violence, has become fungible in this system:

This situation generates, and is legitimised by, what [Melissa] Wright calls the myth of disposability in which ‘the Mexican woman personifies waste-in-the-making, as the material of her body gains shape through discourses that explain how she is untrainable, unskilled, and always a temporary worker.’ Where the disposability of the female worker is taken for granted by industry and government, the actual murder, rape and mutilation of women seems to literalise a logic integral to the industrial practices of the border zone (McCann).

By this perverse logic, the system of global capitalism and neoliberalism almost justifies the killings of these women by virtue of their capacity for replacement in the workplace. Thus structural violence corresponds to actual violence against women in a process that renders invisible Mexican women whose lives simply fail to register under the capitalist system in which they live.

The Part about Narratology
If *2666* has any sort of thematic center in addition to its literal one in Santa Teresa/Ciudad Juárez, it is found in The Part about the Crimes. In this section, the reader is inundated—no, assaulted—with a 400-page, quasi-journalistic barrage of death notices of Santa Teresa’s lost women. This section is effectively a guilt-inducing device: as the never-ending descriptions of these (increasingly bleak) murders blur together, the temptation to start skipping pages becomes extremely real. This provokes an uncomfortable question in the reader: does flipping pages also mean that one has turned a blind eye to the murders, like everyone else? The narrative structure of this section thus brilliantly enacts a dilemma in the reader that mirrors the public’s real-life relationship to the violence in Ciudad Juárez. In effect, by writing this gruesome litany, Bolaño implicates the reader and accuses him of apathy, inaction—and thus complicity—in these crimes. We will invoke the theory of reader-response theory to understand how Bolaño performs this feat.

To open this discussion of reader-response theory and its links to *2666*, we will first recapitulate the main ideas behind this school of thought, the greatest exponent of which was Stanley Fish. Fish’s work emphasizes the role of the reader in forming meaning, arguing in fact that the text only acquires meaning upon being read by the reader. After reading *2666*, it is clear that Bolaño subscribed to this notion that privileges the role of the active reader in forming meaning. His earlier novel, *The Woes of the True Policeman*, for example, offers us the following metafictional formulation: “the policeman is the reader, who tries in vain to decipher this wretched novel” (Ródenas). For Bolaño, the act of reading entails deciphering a host of clues in order to obtain some hint of meaning. To read Bolaño is to read actively; in *2666*, the narrator openly says as much: “…And just as the book began with a jab to the jaw… the active reader—the reader as envisioned by Cortázar—could begin his reading with a kick to the author’s
testicles viewing him from the start as a straw man…” (2666 224). In these lines, the novel not only accepts the validity of Fish’s reception theory, but also demands that the reader embrace this approach to reading. Indeed, Bolaño subordinates the role of the author to that of the (ideal) reader, who can give the former a swift kick in the pants, or, in other words, create meaning out of the text for himself, without any help. Other critics have arrived at similar conclusions.

Valerie Miles, editor of *Granta en español* and curator of a recent exhibition of Bolaño’s archive in Barcelona, agrees with this reader-response approach to Bolaño:

> Like Melville’s *Moby Dick*, the metaphors and themes are untethered in the end, unanchored by a single authorial interpretation. The signs and signifiers are occult, mysterious, secret because they belong individually, and each reader brings a different experience to the interpretive act (Miles 139).

That Bolaño endorses this active, reader-response approach to his work underscores the responsibility he is placing in the hands of the reader. If one is actively searching for meaning in *2666*, one can’t help but feel implicated in the string of violence engulfing Santa Teresa. Bolaño employs this strategy to involve the reader in the network of violence and oblige him to pay attention to these crimes in which everyone—perhaps even the reader—is complicit in some manner.

Bolaño achieves this feat through his narration of The Part about the Crimes. This section, it bears repeating, is almost 400 pages of paragraph-long death notices—all written devoid of any feeling precisely to inspire feeling (namely, horror) in the reader, and perhaps spur him to action. I will provide two examples from this catalogue of deaths to demonstrate the effect of reading one after another, although it must be said that the effect is cumulative and cannot be captured after reading just a two-thirds of one page, which I reproduce as follows:

> A week after the discovery of the corpse of the thirteen-year-old girl on the outskirts of El Obelisco, the body of a girl of about sixteen was found by the Cananea highway. The dead girl was a little under five foot four and slightly built, and she had long black hair.
She had been stabbed only once, in the abdomen, a stab so deep that the blade had literally pierced her through. But her death, according to the medical examiner, was caused by strangulation and a fracture of the hyoid bone. From the place where the body was found there was a view of a succession of low hills and scattered white and yellow houses with low roofs, and a few industrial sheds where the maquiladoras stored their reserve parts, and paths off the highway that melted away like dreams, without rhyme or reason. The victim, according to the police, was probably a hitchhiker who had been raped on her way to Santa Teresa. All attempts to identify her were in vain and the case was closed.

…As March came to an end, the last two victims were found on the same day. The first was Beverly Beltrán Hoyos. She was sixteen and worked at a maquiladora in General Sepúlveda industrial park. She had disappeared three days before the discovery of the body. Her mother, Isabel Hoyos, had gone to a police station downtown and after she waited for five hours she was attended and her report was processed, signed, and passed onto the next stage, albeit grudgingly. Beverly, unlike the previous March victims, had brown hair. Otherwise, there were some similarities: slight build, five foot four, long hair. She was found by some children on a stretch of open ground to the west of General Sepúlveda industrial park, in a place that was hard to reach by car. The body exhibited multiple stab wounds to the chest and abdominal area. Beverly had been vaginally and anally raped and then dressed by her killers, since her clothes, the same ones she’d been wearing when she disappeared, were entirely free of rips or holes or bullet scorch marks. The case was handled by Inspector Lino Rivera, who initiated and exhausted his inquiries by questioning her coworkers and trying to find a nonexistent boyfriend. No one combed the crime scene, nor did anyone make casts of the numerous tracks around the site (2666503-504).

The narration of these murders, as one can glimpse in the two paragraphs above, is cold, objective, and reportorial. Even as the narrator recounts the infuriating ineptitude of the police bureaucracy, he never compromises his objectivity. This faithfulness to the presentation of “fact” and withholding of judgment is perhaps even more damning than any openly scathing critique could ever be. Writes Kirsch in Slate,

What makes Bolaño’s narration of these crimes so characteristic, and transforms it from pulpy true-crime writing to something like fiction, is, paradoxically, his total refusal to imagine his way into the murders. He does not take advantage of the novelist’s privilege of going anywhere—into the mind of the victim as she suffers or of the killer as he kills. On the contrary, the eeriness of Bolaño's account lies in its complete exteriority, the deadened affect of its relentless cataloging of deaths (Kirsch).
The brusqueness with which the narration moves from death after death—its eerie matter-of-factness—unsettles the reader. After reading just a few pages of this section and realizing that the entire section is written in this style, the reader may want to skip a few pages, or perhaps even the rest of the chapter. One cannot really blame the reader for wanting to evade the uncomfortable discussions that this section demands of him, given that the majority of these death notices also include details about rampant sexual violence; the phrase “anally and vaginally raped” recurs with startling frequency. Bolaño’s effort in recounting these murders and placing them squarely in the reader’s consciousness has a twinned effect, for the narration of this section simultaneously foregrounds these ignored women’s identities and effaces them. On one hand, Bolaño is giving voice to the hundreds of murdered women in this section—reclaiming them via art—but on the other, this very effort to document these forgotten women undermines itself: after reading about the manners of death of so many of these women, their identities blur together and become the heap of unrecognized cadavers indistinguishable from one another described in the text. This accumulation of so many deaths and the spare, hard prose in which they are written performs in a mimetic sense the general public’s (apathetic) view of these women’s interchangeability.

From a reader-response perspective, this wildly ambitious chapter is a challenge to the reader: do you have the courage to read—and finish—this chapter, asks Bolaño. If not, it is possible to feel implicated—and complicit—in the crippling indifference to the plight of women and the wave of gender violence that has besieged Ciudad Juárez. Bolaño takes aim at many different targets in 2666 who he feels are in some way responsible for the violence in Mexican modernity, and in The Part about the Crimes he focuses this critical gaze sternly on his readers.
The Part about Ocularcentrism

“There are many kinds of eyes. Even the sphinx has eyes: and as a result there are various truths, and as a result there is no truth.”
— Nietzsche, The Will to Power

In addition to 2666’s commentary on the structural violence taking place in Ciudad Juárez, and performance of narratological violence, the novel also interrogates how modern modes of representation enact symbolic violence by destabilizing the meaning of truth. In particular, Bolaño discusses the consequences of living in a modern society in which truth is overwhelmingly deployed via the image; this ocularcentric paradigm, for Bolaño, complicates the revelation of truth, for it privileges appearance over reality, simulacra over the real. The situation is not totally bleak, however, for Bolaño encodes artistic solutions to the problems of violence and representation in a modernity dominated by images: reading and writing. In other words, we can still seek succor in the linguistic apprehension of truth.

First, we will briefly explain the concept of ocularcentrism in a modern context. Martin Heidegger first expounded on the rise of the image as the dominant form of representation in modernity in Introduction to Metaphysics and his essay, “The Age of the World Picture.” For Heidegger, the visual representation of experience is necessary for modernity, to the extent that modern experience is not truly experienced—is not truly modern—if it is not imaged. He writes,

Beings as a whole are now taken in such a way that a being is first and only in being insofar as it is set in place by representing-producing humanity. The being of beings is sought and found in the representedness of beings [emphasis mine]. Where, however, beings are not interpreted this way, the world, too, cannot come into picture—there can be no world picture. That beings acquire being in and through representedness makes the age in which this occurs a new age, distinct from its predecessors….The world picture does not change from an earlier medieval to a modern one; rather, that the world becomes picture at all is what distinguishes the essence of modernity [emphasis mine] (“Age” 68).

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1 It would behoove us to note that the first real ocularcentric civilization was that of the ancient Greeks; this paper is mostly interested in the effect of the prevalence of images in modernity, however.
Like Borges’ map that overtakes the territory, the representation of the world has supplanted the actual world in modernity; beings are only understood as beings-represented. In our modern visual paradigm, simulacra have thus prevailed over the real, and this is an act of symbolic violence against truth. Avers Heidegger: “appearing is now the emergence of the copy. And since the copy never equals the prototype, what appears is mere appearance, actually an illusion, a deficiency” (Heidegger qtd. in Levin 196). The primacy of the image in modernity, and the attendant elevation of façade over real substance, has pernicious effects. In the introduction to Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision, David Michael Levin makes the salient link between the rising tide of ocularcentrism and its more insidious consequences, saying, “whereas, at the beginning, this hegemony [of vision] brought forth glorious visions as well as visions of violence, it has, in modernity, turned increasingly nihilistic. For a tendency of dangerous character, which in [Heidegger’s] ‘Letter on Humanism’ he calls the malice of rage, has become increasingly dominant in ocularcentrism” (Levin 5).

The theorist Jean Baudrillard has expressed similar apprehension about the rise of the image in his writings on hyperreality. In “The Violence of the Image,” for example, he inveighs against the dissociation of meaning from what is real and what is imaginary in a modern society “where language is more important than what it signifies. The image too is more important than what it speaks of. That we forget usually, again and again and that is a source of the violence done to the image” (“Violence”). Baudrillard thus examines another form of violence here: the violence of being inured to (in this case, symbolic) violence: “today we are all iconoclasts, but in an opposite way: we kill the images by an overdose of meaning” (“Violence”). When the signifier acquires more meaning than the signified, when representation of the act supersedes the act, society does violence to the real in its worship of the virtual.
In Bolaño’s world, this symbolic violence done to the nature of truth and reality in modernity can lead to literal violence. He first develops the link between image and violence as early as the short story, “Mauricio (The Eye) Silva.” Consider its first line: “Mauricio Silva, also known as ‘The Eye,’ always tried to avoid violence, even at the risk of being called a coward, but violence, real violence, is unavoidable, at least for those of us who were born in Latin America during the fifties and were about twenty years old at the time of Salvador Allende’s death” (“Mauricio” 106). This story relates The Eye’s peregrinations in India, where, on photography assignment, he encounters an ancient, though illicit, religious tradition. This tradition involves a ritual that requires the castration of a young boy, who will subsequently become the incarnation of a god in whose name the sacrifice is held. Significantly, in this society it is the image of god that condemns the boy to this fate: “A poster of the god hung on a wall. For a while The Eye looked at the god and at first he felt fear, but then he felt something like rage, or perhaps hate.” (“Mauricio” 116). The image of god castrates the boy in two senses: in an illiterate culture, the image of god on a poster is a convenient way to maintain this sacrificial religious tradition and keep it in the mind of the villagers; in a more figurative sense, however, it is the image of god, as in the simulacrum of god, can lead us astray and foment acts of violence such as the castration witnessed by The Eye, who perhaps symbolizes the moral gaze of god. At the same time, the story argues that when we talk about violence there is no clear distinction between good and evil, guilty and innocent. The Eye has a colored past of his own. And, more damningly, he is a photographer who uses what Susan Sontag has called a “predatory weapon” (a camera) to capture images that form the modern visual paradigm against which Bolaño so strenuously rails (Sontag). That The Eye is a photographer serves to underline his complicity in the creation of modern simulacra.
This critique of ocularcentrism in Bolaño extends to 2666 as well. It is especially pronounced in one of the book’s side plots involving a character known as the Penitent. He suffers from a peculiar sickness relevant to our discussion of image and violence: sacrophobia, which is defined as “fear and hatred of sacred objects” (2666 474). Although the Penitent has killed people in churches, “the Penitent didn’t desecrate churches with the premeditated intent to kill. The deaths were accidental. The Penitent just wanted to vent his rage on the images of the saints” (2666 474). In the case of the Penitent, religiously inflected images have literally moved him to vandalize and kill, thus demonstrating the direct relationship between the symbolic violence of the image and actual violence. Another character musing on the Penitent’s crimes states that all Mexicans share the Penitent’s aversion to images, perhaps due to their complicated association with the church: “I would say that all Mexicans are essentially sacrophobes” (2666 477). This statement generalizes an individual’s violent reaction to and abhorrence of the image, making it applicable to Mexican society, or Mexican modernity, at large.

The literal link between images and violence in 2666 now established, Bolaño then uses the image to call attention to the duality between the falseness of its façade and the hidden truth of what it actually represents. This problem recalls another Baudrillardian text, “The Precession of Simulacra,” in which he affirms that

> to simulate is not simply to feign: “Someone who feigns an illness can simply go to bed and pretend he is ill. Someone who simulates an illness produces in himself some of the symptoms” (Littre). Thus, feigning or dissimulating leaves the reality principle intact: the difference is always clear, it is only masked, whereas simulation threatens the difference between “true” and “false,” between “real” and “imaginary.” Since the simulator produces “true” symptoms, is he or she ill or not? (“Precession” 3).

In the apocalyptic, ocularcentric modernity that Bolaño limns in 2666, the Baudrillardian distinction between what is real and what is simulated, the image and what is represents, is totally effaced, and this seems one possible explanation of the crisis in Santa Teresa/Ciudad
Juárez. As a result of this symbolic violence, nothing is what it seems, and there is chaos and a loss of faith in society. People fear even opening their eyes; an exchange of dialogue later in the section underscores this point: “What do you think optophobia is, the director said. Opto, opto, something to do with the eyes, my God, fear of eyes? Even worse: fear of opening the eyes. In a figurative sense, that’s an answer to what you just said about gynophobia [fear of women]” (2666 479). Why do people not want to open their eyes? What are they afraid of? The creeping, abstract horror that afflicts Santa Teresa. We find justification for this interpretation in the definition of optophobia, a phenomenon that suggests that the novel’s characters, institutions it describes, and readers are afraid of confronting the truth and prefer to turn a blind eye to problems caused by a universe in which simulacra reign supreme.

Although images distort reality and effect symbolic violence, 2666 offers a solution in the linguistic apprehension of truth: in other words, words. Consider what the narrator of The Part about The Crimes says, “You have to listen to women. You should never ignore a woman’s fears…No one pays attention to these killings, but the secret of the world is hidden in them” (2666 348). Who is the only person paying attention to these killings? The narrator, Arturo Belano, who clearly represents Bolaño. How does Bolaño record and comment on these killings? Through literature. This metafictional commentary offers the novel that we are reading as an example of the power of words in a society dominated by images. (This novel’s sheer girth cannot be discounted in this sense). Everyone else has forgotten the violence—quite memorably, and tragically, Belano recalls that while Professor Morini (from the Part About the Critics) expressed interest in Santa Teresa for a moment, “an hour later he’d already forgotten the matter completely”—with the notable exception of the narrator/author of 2666 (2666 64). In The Part about Amalfitano, Bolaño further affirms the supremacy of linguistic truth, declaring that now,
“Poetry is the one thing that isn't contaminated, the one thing that isn’t part of the game. I don't know if you follow me, Professor. Only poetry—and let me be clear, only some of it—is good for you, only poetry isn't shit” (2666 288). Poetry—and, by extension—literature, is the last pure thing in modernity (“the game”). Despite the dangerous power of image and simulacra, literature, for Bolaño, and direct us to a more authentic truth.

Bolaño offers further proof of this belief using a riddle in The Part About Fate. The character Óscar Amalfitano tells the story of a drunk and a magic disk. The drunk is drawn on one side of a magic disk, the other side of which is the image of a jail cell; when you spin the disk it looks like he is laughing behind bars (2666 442). Why does the imprisoned drunk laugh?

“The little old drunk is laughing because he thinks he’s free, but he’s really in prison,” said Óscar Amalfitano, “that’s what makes it funny, but in fact the prison is drawn on the other side of the disk, which means one could also say that the little old drunk is laughing because we think he’s in prison, not realizing that the prison is on one side and the little old drunk is on the other, and that’s reality, no matter how much we spin the disk and it looks to us as if the little old drunk is behind bars. In fact, we could even guess what the little old drunk is laughing at: he’s laughing at our credulity, you might even say at our eyes [emphasis mine] (2666 335).

Who is in jail? Who is free? This enigma underscores the fragility of truth in our visual paradigm. In particular, this passage underlines the instability of meaning formed by our eyes: vision contains simulacra, pretensions to reality that can easily corrupt what we think of as truth. Our eyes often deceive us, to the extent that even little old drunks can mock our credulity. In this cruel modernity, the only certainty for Bolaño exists in words, thought, intellection. The paradigmatic example of this belief is, of course, the novel 2666 itself.

**The Part about Exile**

At levels both literal and figurative, the violence of exile courses through Bolaño’s oeuvre and personal biography. This is to be expected: modernity troubles the relationship
between modern experience and modern expression, and so it is natural that exile and displacement—increasingly characteristic of modern experience—have become common themes in modern literature. In this section, we will detail how exile operates in Bolaño and demonstrate how the violence of displacement can actually yield positive results, namely, via writing. The work of Edward Said in particular, an intellectual for whom exile conduced to exceptional creativity, will support our analysis.

It is unsurprising that Bolaño’s writing has often meditated on exile, given the peripatetic trajectory of his own life. Briefly: he was born in Chile in 1953 and moved to Mexico City in 1968, where he dropped out of high school and worked as a journalist until 1973, when he stopped in Chile to aid Salvador Allende’s Socialist cause—an effort that would, by some accounts, land him briefly in jail—before returning to Mexico, with a brief interlude in El Salvador, and subsequently decamping in 1977 for the region in which he would settle until his death in 2003: Costa Brava, Spain. Bolaño lived an itinerant life, never lingering in one country long enough to identify with it: “He’s not really from any one place, but is a sort of international, post-nationalist writer,” says his translator Natasha Wimmer (Rohter). “The more or less explicit presence of the theme of literal or psychological exile,” adds Chiara Bolognese, a prominent Bolaño scholar, “shows, possibly, the desire to overcome the trauma that the distancing from his homeland entailed” (Bolognese 64). Indeed, “much of the exile’s life is taken up with compensating for disorienting loss by creating a new world to rule,” writes Edward Said in Reflections on Exile. “The exile’s new world, logically enough, is unnatural and its unreality resembles fiction.” Exile thus lends itself to the creation of writers and intellectuals such as Bolaño, for whom critical distance is a sine qua non: in the movement “towards the

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2 Bolognese’s book is only available in Spanish; what appears above is my translation. The original Spanish is as follows: “La presencia, más o menos explícita, del tema del destierro real o psicológico muestra, posiblemente, el deseo de superar el trauma que supuso para Bolaño el alejamiento de la tierra de origen.”
margins...[one] can see things that are usually lost on minds that have never travelled beyond the conventional and comfortable” (Representations). Writing and literature, then, becomes the homeland for the homeless writer: “In his text,” writes Adorno, “the writer sets up house...For a man who no longer has a homeland, writing becomes a place to live” (Adorno qtd. in Said).

A genre written by vagabonds, the novel, for Lukács, thus became an expression of “transcendental homelessness.” Bolaño, like so many littérateurs before him, understood that that which made him peripheral, marginal, and exiled could also enable him to write literature.

According to Bolognese,

Bolaño belongs to the group of writers who see exile as a positive condition, being “intellectuals hailing from the so-called marginal or peripheral zones” of the planet, who are exiled or simply emigrate to these capitals, but not to “imitate” themselves as they did in the past, but to project a voice from a domain that they consider most propitious (Bolognese 65).³

Bolaño affirms this interpretation in his collection of essays, Between Parenthesis. “Books are the only homeland of the true writer, books that may sit on shelves or in the memory” (Between Parenthesis 43). And from this homeland—his books—he was able to produce original work himself.

Bolaño’s fiction, poetry, and nonfiction do indeed dwell on displacement to such an extent that demands examination of his exilic past. In one of the first poems he wrote, “The Romantic Dogs,” the speaker—clearly Bolaño—writes, “I’d lost a country / but won a dream / and if I had that dream / the rest didn’t matter” (“Perros”). It is only when Bolaño discovers literature and poetry—the “dream” he had won—that he is able to forget the pain of displacement from the country he had lost. Likewise, the protagonist of his 1996 novel Distant

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³ Bolognese’s book is only available in Spanish; what appears above is my translation. The original Spanish is as follows: “Bolaño pertenece a ese grupo de escritores que ven en el exilio una condición positiva, siendo ‘intelectuales provenientes de las llamadas zonas periféricas o marginales’ del planeta, [que] se exilian o simplemente emigran a estas capitales, pero no para ‘mimetizarse’ como hacían en el pasado, sino para proyectar una voz propia desde un ámbito que consideran más propicio.”
Star—who readily admits that his “melancholy folklore of exile” is “made up of stories that, as often as not, are fabrications or pale copies of what really happened”—obsessively attempts to reconstruct the destinies of his (and Bolaño’s) lost generation, that is, those who fled Chile after the Pinochet coup d’état in 1973. And in 2000, Bolaño gave an entire speech devoted to the subject of exile, declaring, “Literature and exile, I think, are two sides of the same coin, our fate placed in the hands of chance” (Between Parenthesis 41).

In 2666, we encounter exile on various levels. In a literal sense, many characters, owing to the nature of their jobs or their financial or social circumstances, are constantly uprooted: the journalist, Fate, who travels back and forth from Detroit to Ciudad Juárez; the academics who find themselves at conferences around the world while sleuthing for Archimboldi’s whereabouts; the character Amalfitano, who is originally from Chile but currently teaches in Mexico. Even worse for Amalfitano, the violence in Santa Teresa has also forced him to send his own daughter into exile in Spain. The European professors and Amalfitano openly discuss this issue of modern exile within The Part about Amalfitano:

“Exile must be a terrible thing,” said Norton sympathetically.
“Actually,” said Amalfitano, “now I see it as a natural movement, something that, in its way, helps to abolish fate, or what is generally thought of as fate.”
“But exile,” said Pelletier, “is full of inconveniences of skips and breaks that essentially keep recurring and interfere with anything you try to do that’s important.”
“That’s just what I mean by abolishing fate,” said Amalfitano (2666 117).

Amalfitano thus understands exile as a constitutive feature of modernity: “a natural movement” that is part of life and here to stay in the 20th- and 21st-century. The “inconveniences of skips and breaks that keep recurring and interfere with anything you try to do that’s important” perfectly embody the violence of exile—the restlessness of modern life, in which people, perpetually in transit, inhabit interstitial spaces instead of permanent homes. Fortunately, as Edward Said and other thinkers have demonstrated, exile is a creative state in every sense of the word: it forces
writers and intellectuals like Bolaño to compensate for their homelessness by creating fictional worlds in which to live.

The Part about Literary Violence

The five parts of 2666 do not exactly cohere; they have a whiff of thematic and symbolic similarity, and a shared geographical center, but that’s about it: they begin on different continents and feature almost entirely different casts of characters and plots. There are rumors that Bolaño had apparently wanted the parts of 2666 to be published as individual novels, though his thinking at the time was likely colored by considerations more economic than literary: knowing that he would die soon, the publication of five books—as opposed to one giant volume—would provide more for the family he would be leaving behind (2666 896). His literary executor, Echevarría, posthumously organized 2666 in the shape that readers know it today and justified his decision to do so, saying, “the sheer size of 2666 is inseparable from the original conception of all its parts, as well as from the spirit of risk that drives it and its rash totalizing zeal…Although the five parts that make up 2666 can be read independently…they also serve a common end” (2666 895-896).

Regardless of whether or not Bolaño intended the novel to be one book or five, its published incarnation as a single novel deserves more scrutiny. To lump five separate narratives together is an act of literary violence; a literary-sociological look at the literary traditions and market for world literature in which Bolaño operated may shed light on the reasons why Bolaño wrote 2666 in the manner that he did.

In both size and scope, 2666 recalls Joyce’s project in Ulysses, that is, his attempt to capture and satirize everything: every genre, every plot, every story. Likewise, 2666 intertextually activates an equally formidable number of texts, all while taking on different
genres in each section: The Part about the Critics sends up the campus novel; the Part about Fate, minimalism; the Part about the Crimes, journalism; and the Part about Archimбольdi, the bildungsroman (Deresiewicz). This novel thus takes the form of a palimpsest; each section of 2666 is arguably a parody of an established literary genre. Why does Bolaño do this? A lifelong devotee, Bolaño surely had read Borges’ short story, “The Congress,” which dismisses the attempts of Joyce and Mallarmé to represent everything—form, genre, plot—in their massive tomes, as well as “The Aleph,” which underlines the infeasibility of such an attempt: “Really, what I want to do is impossible, for any listing of an endless series is doomed to be infinitesimal” (Borges). To discover the reasons for which Bolaño forayed into such literary territory against the wishes of his literary idol, we must return to literary sociology and history.

In the late 20th-century, when Bolaño was actively writing, Latin American fiction was synonymous with the magic realism of the Boom: Gabriel García Márquez, Mario Vargas Llosa, and their subsequent imitators. For Bolaño, to untether Latin American writing from a style that he considered cliché at best and overwrought at worst—“magic realism stinks,” he famously said—and return it to the earlier sophistication of Borges, was thus of utmost importance. His only recourse, then, existed in the creation of a work so utterly sui generis that it would radically sever any ties to his immediate continental precursors, or purveyors of “world literature.” The project of 2666 thus extends beyond its actual commentary on Ciudad Juárez, modernity, and global capitalism, for it also endeavors to carve out a new space for the development of Latin American fiction. Such a massive attempt at writing a modernist epic was necessary for the Latin American or world novel to advance and take on new forms.

Bolaño’s need to innovate also stemmed from his belief that most contemporary Latin American fiction pandered to the expectations of a Western or global audience. The novels that
drew Bolaño’s ire would play up their magic realism, dictator plots, or the oppression of women for the benefit and self-congratulation of their Western readership—not unlike many modern-day memoirs from the Middle East that offer self-Orientalizing portraits for the Western audiences to which they are directly marketed (Deckard). The difference is that Latin American literature wields greater power in what Casanova has termed “world literary space.” Indeed, while Latin America may be an economic periphery, its fiction, thanks to the likes of the Boom generation, has developed the region into a literary center. Non-European literatures have historically been condemned to be considered political or allegorical, according to Casanova—perhaps nodding to Frederic Jameson’s controversial thesis in “Third World Literature in the Age of Multinational Capitalism”—until they become so prominent as to become universal and worthy of purely literary evaluation (Casanova). Thanks to the likes of García Márquez, the Latin American Boom demonstrated how a regional literature could emancipate itself from political readings and gain an international status incommensurate with its (comparatively minor) political or economic significance. The extreme popularity of the Boom writers, however, meant that these tropes of the dictator novel and magical realism reverberated widely in the market for world literature. Damaging to the health and development of Latin American literature, magical realism has been conflated with an entire continent’s literary production, compelling writers at the vanguard to take action. This situation thus made the publication of 2666 necessary: a work that would explode conventional literary modes and styles and update the Latin American novel in light of its new literary standing and historical position. As Deckard writes,

If The Savage Detectives represents Bolaño’s reformulation of testimonio into a post-Boom form, the “collective testimonio,” 2666 can be understood as an equally insurgent attempt to reformulate the realist “world novel” in order to overcome the reification of earlier modes of realism and to register the changed historical situation of Latin America in the era of millennial capital, when as Natasha Wimmer eloquently puts it, “capitalism,
the World Bank, and the international drug trade replaced caudillos, death squads, and political persecution as the new faces of evil” (Deckard 1).

Bolaño’s dismissiveness towards magical realism as a mere marketing tactic becomes a touch ironic upon realizing that the infrarealism movement he founded in his youth—a sort of punk reaction to the generation of Octavio Paz—has similarly been appropriated to sell his own books (Moya). That said, it is clear that his undertaking of a Ulysses-esque project owed to both personal ambition and concern over the direction of Latin American literature; furthermore, while it will likely spawn its own share of imitators, this novel has opened up a new, self-reflective space in which world literature can both grow and critique itself.

In his seminal essay “Nathaniel Hawthorne,” which Bolaño doubtless read, Borges writes, “The fact is that every writer creates his own precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future” (Borges). This line echoes the intent of T.S. Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” which reminds us of the simultaneous order in which all literature—past, present, and future—traffics. While Bolaño ignored Borges’ jeremiad against big, totalizing novels, he did create his own precursors in eschewing the magic realism that he stood to historically inherit and arguably inaugurated something totally new by fusing familiar genres together. And although Bolaño rejected his immediate literary heirs, it is still possible to say that he heeded Eliot’s imperative to recover “the pastness of the past”—2666 contains a host of allusions to authors hailing from completely different literary traditions and epochs—though it is a selective past with which Bolaño deliberately chooses to engage, for reasons pertaining to the direction he wanted Latin American and world literature to take. In self-consciously engaging with the likes of Joyce in writing this hefty novel, Bolaño effectively styled himself as the 21st-century tribune of literary modernism.
The Part about a Conclusion

This paper, like 2666, allows the reader to follow different itineraries. Just as one can read the five parts of the novel separately, one can read the five sections of this paper separately. Each, while contributing to our understanding of the mosaic of violence of Mexican and global modernity, stands alone. The order of the sections is more or less irrelevant: I have begun with a discussion of structural violence, narratology, ocularcentrism, exile, and literary violence, but I could have just as easily started with narratology, and then moved to ocularcentrism, exile, and then literary and structural violence. This mirrors the arbitrariness with which 2666 darts from continent to continent and introduces entirely new characters in most sections. The reason for this is mimetic: the abruptness with which both 2666 and this paper move from topic to topic—without transition—performs yet another act of violence: that of form. In a novel that is (ever-so-delicately) held together by its discord, madness, oppositions, and antinomies, Bolaño disorients the reader with these rapid, violent cuts between sections that, on the surface, have little in common with each other; in discussing the novel through different theoretical lenses that are independent of one another, I have sought to replicate such an effect.

In this paper’s sections, I explain five nodes of violence that attend the rise of 20th- and 21st-century Mexican modernity in Bolaño’s 2666: economic and political structures, narratology, ocularcentrism, exile, and literary form. 2666 captures the complex matrix of structural violence taking place in Ciudad Juárez in the way that only art can, subtly linking the rise of global capital and neoliberalism with the violence against women that it relentlessly chronicles. Further, Bolaño stages an act of narrative violence in The Part about Crimes and implicates the reader in them. The section on ocularcentrism explains the visual paradigm unique to modernity and how this can lead to the dangerous separation of signifier and signified. I then
read Bolaño’s exile as a salutary act of violence—a boon to his literary production—before explaining in the section on literary form how the structure of 2666 enabled Bolaño to situate himself as the heir to modernism, as opposed to magic realism.

One question has still eluded us, however: What is the so-called “hidden center” of 2666? Does it actually exist? Can novels contain more than one center? And is it even possible for us to locate it? Literary fiction, by virtue of the qualities that distinguish it from genre fiction, complicates the search for the center, as Orhan Pamuk points out in The Naïve and Sentimental Novelist, his lectures on the novel: “The challenge of defining the center of a literary novel should remind us that the literary novel is an entity whose meaning is difficult to articulate or to reduce to anything else—just like the meaning of life” (Pamuk 163). Pamuk continues this meditation on the search for the novelistic center, which quickly acquires an existential valence for the reader:

The modern secular individual, despite recognizing deep down the futility of his effort, cannot help reflecting on the meaning of life as he tries to locate the center of the novel he is reading—for in seeking this center, he is seeking the center of his own life and that of the world. If we are reading a literary novel, a work whose center is not obvious, one of our main motivations is the need to reflect on that center and determine how close it is to our own view of existence (Pamuk 163).

It may be that the center of 2666 changes from reader to reader, that there is in fact no fixed center, that this was yet another Bolañian ruse. What is unambiguous, however, from this excerpt from Pamuk’s lecture—and what seems to hold true for Bolaño as well—is that the search for the literary center is inextricably tied to the search for the self. Is the center of the novel thus hidden within you? If so, your approximation of the novel’s center says as much about you as it does the novel.
Works Cited


