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Scenes from the Global South: Women's Bodies as Waste in Bolaño's *2666*

Alfred J. López

This essay reads the landscape of Roberto Bolaño's fictional Santa Teresa through a new materialist lens. In the fourth section of Bolaño's epic novel 2666*, "The Part about the Crimes," the bodies of 112 women, victims of a series of unsolved murders, accumulate as part of a postglobal dystopic narrative of material and existential waste. Critics have especially noted the text's clinical narration of events, which effectively reduces the victims' bodies to interchangeable parts of a larger assemblage that also includes the factories (*maquiladoras*) where the women work, the northern capital that funds them, the police force that repeatedly fails to solve the murders, and the trash heaps and landfills where many of the bodies appear. It is, however, the women's inert, mutilated bodies that animate Bolaño's novel. Dehumanized by the text, the bodies' materiality paradoxically gives human heft to an otherwise mechanistic account of undifferentiated carnage.*

Keywords: new materialism, global South, Roberto Bolaño, *2666*, Jane Bennett, Rosi Braidotti, femicide, nomadic subject, assemblage, surplus labor

> … clearly the reassembled history became something else, a scribble in the margin, a clever footnote, a laugh slow to fade that leaped from an andesite rock to a rhyolite and then a tufa, and from that collection of prehistoric rocks there arose a kind of quicksilver, the American mirror, said the voice, *the sad American mirror of wealth and poverty and constant useless metamorphosis*, the mirror that sails and whose sails are pain.
>
> —Roberto Bolaño, *2666*

The present article continues an inquiry from previous work that explores the efficacy of new materialist philosophy as a lens for reading human existence—more precisely, subaltern human agency—in the current global neoliberal moment.[1] It also explores possibilities for the reading of new materialist scholarship in an explicitly global

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1 Epigraph: see Roberto Bolaño, *2666*, trans. Natasha Wimmer ([2004]; New York, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2008), 206, emphasis added. See also Alfred J. López, "Contesting the Material Turn; or, The Persistence of Agency," *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 5.3 (2018), 371–86.

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south context. The epigraph offers a useful point of departure in that it positions human struggle and agency ("wealth and poverty") in the larger context of not only material "metamorphosis" but also an encompassing natural history that runs in the course of a single sentence from "prehistoric rocks" to the relative "quicksilver" that mirrors our American moment. Like the landmark novel that contains it, the sentence reveals agency as materiality and consciousness, a dialectic both fleeting and timeless in its relentless self-transformation.

This article does not really center on Roberto Bolaño's magnificent novel *2666*, or even the section of it that constitutes arguably the centrifugal core from which everything else in the novel radiates. Nor is it only or even necessarily a neoliberal critique of the political and economic order that inscribes, underwrites, really, the many murders that the novel portrays. There has been no shortage of such scholarship over the past decade and a half—essays that deploy *2666*, and especially its defining femicide, as the basis for a range of critiques of neoliberal globalization in the global south.[2] I am more narrowly interested in pursuing a possible intersection where a new materialist reading of waste and the disposability of marginalized, abject humanity in the global south might converge.

This article proposes to read the landscape of Bolaño's fictional Santa Teresa (based on the real Ciudad Juárez, Mexico) through a new-materialist language of cartographies, figurations, and most importantly for our purpose, assemblages. In the fourth section of *2666*, entitled "The Part about the Crimes," the bodies of 112 women, victims of a seemingly unending series of unsolved murders, accumulate as part of a postglobal dystopic narrative of material and existential waste.[3] Critics have universally noted the text's clinical, even forensic narration of events.[4] This aseptic, disengaged narrative voice

2 For a partial list, see for example, Laura Barberán Reinares, "Globalized Philomels: State Patriarchy, Transnational Capital, and the Femicides on the US-Mexican Border in Bolaño's *2666*," *South Atlantic Review* 75.4 (2010), 51–72; Cathy Fourez, "Entre transfiguración y transgression: el scenario especial de Santa Teresa en la novela de Roberto Bolaño *2666*," *Debate Feminista* 17.33 (2006): 21–45; Alice Laurel Driver, "Más o menos muerto: Bare Life in Roberto Bolaño's *2666*," *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 23.1 (2014): 51–64; Mikkel Krause Frantzen, "The Forensic Fiction of Roberto Bolaño's *2666*," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 58.4 (2016), 437–48; Jessica Livingston, "Murder in Juárez: Gender, Sexual Violence, and the Global Assembly Line," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies* 25.1 (2004): 59–76; Shaj Mathew, "Ciudad Juárez in Roberto Bolaño's *2666:* Mexico's Violent Cradle of Modernity," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 57.4 (2016): 402–16; Mercedes Olivera, "Violencia Femicida: Violence against Women and Mexico's Structural Crisis," trans. Victoria J. Furio, *Latin American Perspectives* 33.2 (March 2006), 104–14; Sol Peláez, "Counting Violence: Roberto Bolaño and *2666*," *Chasquí: revista de literatura latinoamericana* 43.2 (2014), 30–47; and Camelia Raghinaru, "Biopolitics in Roberto Bolaño's *2666*, 'The Part about the Crimes,' " *Altre Modernitá* 15 (2016): 146–62. The most trenchant of these critiques, however, has arguably been Grant Farred's "The Impossible Closing: Death, Neoliberalism, and the Postcolonial in Bolaño's *2666*," which I had the pleasure of curating for a 2010 Special Issue of *Modern Fiction Studies*.

3 The figure is far from definitive, as Part 4's narrator establishes early on: "From then on, the killings of women began to be counted. But it's likely there had been other deaths before" (353). This is consistent with the real-life femicide of Ciudad Juárez; depending on who is counting and how, some estimates put the number of victims since 1993 at nearly 500. One researcher avers that due to "the justice system's deficiencies … no one is even sure of the number of murders in Mexico generally." See Olivera, "Violencia Femicida," 112.

4 Laura Barberán Reinares, for example, notes the narrative's "impassive repetition of the horror," its "aseptic, disengaged language" depicting "countless corpses that keep appearing showing signs of torture and sexual violence throughout"; Cathy Fourez likewise references the narrative's "repetitive style" ["índole repetititiva"] that would suddenly ["de manera repentina"] transform the novel's "everyday violence into nightmare" ["violencia cotidiana hacia la pesadilla"]. See respectively Reinares, "Globalized Philomels,"

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effectively reduces the victims' bodies to interchangeable parts of a larger assemblage that also includes the factories (maquiladoras) where the women work, the global northern capital that funds them, the police force that repeatedly fails (when it even attempts) to solve the murders, and—notably for our purposes—the trash heaps and landfills where many of the bodies turn up.

Despite—or perhaps because of—the narrative's seeming disinterest in endowing its many murder victims with anything resembling agency or conative being, it is paradoxically the women's inert, mutilated bodies that animate "The Part about the Crimes"—the dangerous and indispensable supplement that arguably drives the entire novel. Effectively dehumanized by the text, the victims' bodies nevertheless persist as a manifestation of, in Jane Bennett's terms, "vibrant matter" whose materiality paradoxically gives human heft to an otherwise mechanistic account of undifferentiated carnage. But the fictionalized Mexican city that Bolaño has called "our curse and our mirror" (and who is the "our" in that statement?) especially stands as itself an effluence of metastasized capital and environmental cataclysm from the global north—both symptom and indictment of (North) America. Again, as in my epigraph: "The sad American mirror of wealth and poverty and constant, useless metamorphosis, the mirror that sails and whose sails are pain."[5] It is through the reanimated, simultaneously abject and vibrant matter constituted by 112 raped, murdered, mutilated bodies that we can best read the southbound confluence of the neoliberal world order in Santa Teresa's maquiladoras, where even before their grotesque murders the women are already interchangeable machinic cogs set to "Badly paid and exploitative work, with ridiculous hours and no union protection, but work, after all, which is a blessing for so many women from Oaxaca or Zacatecas."[6] The deeply ironic context in which this quotation appears lays bare precisely the triumphalist neoliberal logic that the Santa Teresa femicide nimbly dismantles, both collectively and in the numbing repetition of every single dead and discarded female body. But of course, that is not all, nor is it enough.

Taking a cue from Rosi Braidotti's call for "higher degrees of accuracy in accounting for both the external factors and the internal complexity of nomadic subjectivity," a task that requires the critic "to innovate on the very tools of analysis," I will try to deploy differently two well-worn critical tropes from different eras or dispensations of materialist thought.[7] The first is a reconfiguration of surplus labor (Marx's "industrial reserve army")[8] in terms of intranational flows triggered by the imperatives and prohibitions of neoliberal global capital, for example, the decimation of local economies in the global south and the corresponding mass migrations from rural areas to the cities. These flows of expendable workers, who are not technically refugees but are consumed and managed in a similar fashion, represent a cataclysm most remarkable for its very banality, for how unnoticedly it merges into both the lived experience of disposable persons and their

52, 56–57 and Fourez, "Entre transfiguración y transgression," 35. See also Driver, "Más o menos muerto," 57–59.

5 Bolaño, *2666*, 206.

6 Bolaño, *2666*, 568.

7 Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, 2nd ed. (New York, Columbia University Press, 2011), 4 and 7, respectively.

8 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes, vol. 1 ([1867]; reprint, New York: Penguin, 2004), 798.

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invisibility to those who enjoy the unremunerated fruits of their labor. It is Marx's reserve army of labor repurposed as what Mike Davis calls a globalized "surplus humanity" managed and mobilized via the coercion of the neoliberal machine.[9]

Here Marx's theories of surplus population may prove useful for considering the vast displacement of people, whether internationally as refugees or as intranational economic migrants, under the regulatory coercions of global capital. Such migrations, as Marx aptly demonstrated in the context of nineteenth-century English industrialism, are indispensable to the accumulation of capital. As regards international worker flows (whether as legal or undocumented migrants), the resulting categorization and classification of workers of course serves to regulate and control labor supplies for economies of the global north. But intranationally—as we shall see in the events of both *2666* and the real-life Ciudad Juárez—it also works, as Kanisha Chowdhury explains, "to keep a certain number of the surplus population in their native lands to fulfill the needs of transnational capital."[10] Likewise, Marx emphasizes the creation of a surplus labor force that is also inherently mobile, but whose migrations remain subject to the needs of capital:

> Capital can only create surplus labour by setting necessary labour in motion… . It is its tendency, therefore, to create as much labour as possible; just as it is equally its tendency to reduce labour to a minimum. It is therefore equally a tendency of capital to increase the laboring population, as well as constantly posit a part of it as surplus population.[11]

Thus a key function of international trade agreements such as NAFTA is to both enable and delimit the flow of surplus populations: both to facilitate the availability of easily exportable workers for the global north and retain a surplus (and thus cheaper, less organized and less empowered) migrant labor pool in the global south.

Read in this globalized context, we can see how the 1990s mass migration of young rural Mexicans—and disproportionately women—to so-called Export Processing Zones (EPZs) such as Cuidad Juárez (and its fictional döppleganger Santa Teresa) in search of work proffers a neoliberal iteration of Marx's industrial reserve army. This intranational migration is compelled by the acute deterioration of once-stable local rural economies and the vast displacement of labor to urban settings, in this case maquiladoras along the US/Mexico border. In their larger context, such worker flows exemplify what Chowdhury calls "the global chain of exploitation that leads to migration in the first place," whether internationally or, as in this case, within state borders.[12] In either case, the accumulation of capital both creates and further grows from ever-larger labor surpluses—Marx's industrial reserve army as paradoxically both cause and effect of Marx's law of capital accumulation.[13] This mass displacement of humanity under the heading of neoliberal "progress" thus emerges as a devil's bargain that exposes the

9 Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (London, Verso, 2006), 199.

10 Kanisha Chowdhury, "(En)countering the Refugee: Capital, Óscar Martínez's *The Beast,* and the 'Problem' of the Surplus Population," *Postcolonial Text* 12.3/4 (2017): 2.

11 Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus ([1858/1939]; reprint, New York, Vintage, 1973), 399.

12 Chowdhury, "(En)countering the Refugee," 5.

13 Marx, *Capital*, 798.

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dubious "blessing" of "work, after all" in the dystopic world of *2666*.[14] Marx's analysis of nineteenth-century industrial England, which experienced massive displacement of rural populations to the cities, turns out to be especially prescient for grasping the dispossession of agricultural cultures and lands in the global south and corresponding accumulation of wealth in ever-fewer hands:

> The misery of the agricultural population forms the pedestal for the gigantic shirt- factories, whose armies of workers are, for the most part, scattered over the country. Here we again encounter the system of "domestic industry" already described, which possesses its own systematic means of rendering workers "redundant" in the form of underpayment and overwork.[15]

Here as elsewhere in *Capital,* Marx's description of nineteenth-century England, particularly its portrayal of the redundancy and diminution of labor-as-value, proves just as appropriate a portrayal of late twentieth-century maquiladoras.

Alternately or concurrently with a Marxian analytic of surplus value, we may turn to treaties, policies, and other such documents to help sketch what Braidotti might call a cartography of Santa Teresa. Like its fictional counterpart, Ciudad Juárez is a border town that the onset of NAFTA transformed into a sprawling industrial city. Since the treaty's implementation in January 1994, dozens of large assembly plants (about 80 percent of which are US owned) have attracted hundreds of thousands of migrants—as of 2006, about half of Juarez's 1.5 million inhabitants—from surrounding villages and towns in search of work. The sudden influx overwhelmed the city, which had neither the infrastructure nor resources to absorb it. Thus the proliferation of Juarez's so-called *colonias* are basically slums:

> They sprawl into the Chihauhan desert as far as I can see, mile upon mile of squatter shacks, the better ones adobe or block brick, the others jury-rigged structures of plywood, sheet metal and crating lumber, roofs held down by truck tires, yards fenced with discarded pallets and filled with broken-down cars and every imaginable kind of junk. None of the streets are paved or lighted, the wind blows dust everywhere, feral dogs rummage in drifts of trash, and running water, where there is any, consists of a standpipe in the ground with a plastic bucket beside it. The workers in the city's crowded factories live here, and as we enter one slum, Anapra, convoys of buses are arriving to drop off the day shift and pick up the night shift: Scores of buses, the names of the factories they service—Delphi Corporation, Siemens, RCA—displayed in their front windows. Hundreds of people get off and on, some fairly well dressed, others in clothes that look to have been filched from a Salvation Army dumpster. Everyone appears worn-out and dispirited. A feeling of hopelessness lingers in the air with the stench of raw sewage and bus fumes. The squalor here is as bad as anything I've seen in Africa or southeast Asia.[16]

14 Bolaño, *2666*, 568.
15 Marx, *Capital*, 863.
16 See Philip Caputo, "Juárez: City of Death," *VQR Online* 83.3 (2007).

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By 2004, more than one-fourth of the 1.2 million maquiladora jobs—almost all of them classified as temporary or contingent labor—were in Ciudad Juárez, approximately 80 percent of them filled by migrant workers from surrounding rural and small-town areas.[17] More than 55 percent of maquiladora workers are women; nearly half of them (39.1 percent) are between fifteen and twenty-four years old (the average age is twenty-two).[18] Pro-industry organizations such as the Asociación de Maquiladoras (AMAC) tout the region's "progress" and full employment, one manager grandiosely boasting that the maquiladoras are "again transforming the world by bringing progress to all people, especially women."[19] But wages are significantly lower than across the river in El Paso; job security and unions are nonexistent; and women workers are generally treated as the disposable bodies they are.

The murdered women in fact represent the most disposable part—the literal waste product—of a legal and economic world order that draws workers in, consumes them, and discards their abject bodies as part of a naturalized, self-regenerating life cycle. They constitute the waste of what Camelia Raghinaru correctly calls "a juridical and economic order that revolves on exploitation as central to the working of transnational capitalism"—or in other words: a great big assemblage of laws, land, capital, materials, and (docile) bodies.[20] It is not enough to simply pin the blame on "neoliberalism" or "multinational capital" or "misogyny" and leave it at that, although each of these gauzily defined entities plays its own role in the larger network of assemblages; evil in *2666* is less a single antagonist than a vast, perhaps incalculable network of intertextual contexts. This vast web of banality and evil can be indifferent to the parade of murders and mutilations precisely because the women themselves are both interchangeable and disposable, simultaneously central to the juridical and economic order and irrelevant to its daily functioning.[21]

In the remainder of this article, I will limit my close reading of "The Part about the Crimes" to two examples that begin to sketch the larger cartographies, both fictional and not, that anchor the rest of *2666*. The first example is femicide 6 of 112, the first body to appear in a landscape encompassing both a maquiladora and a garbage dump:

> The next month, in May, a dead woman was found in a dump between Colonia Las Flores and the General Sepúlveda industrial park. In the complex stood the buildings of four maquiladoras where household appliances were assembled. The electric towers that supplied power to the maquiladoras were new and painted silver. Next to them, amid some low hills, were the roofs of shacks that had been built a little before the arrival of the maquiladoras, stretching all the way to the train tracks and across, along the edge of

17 See Livingston, "Murder in Juárez," 59–60, 64.

18 By the early 2000s, at least half of Juárez's population flows come from three Mexican states: the city's own state of Chihuahua (26 percent), Durango (15 percent), and Coahuila (9 percent). This source does not account for busloads of workers brought in from more distant states—Chiapas, Veracruz, Oaxaca—by the companies themselves to work in the maquiladoras. See Julia Monárrez Fragoso, "Serial Sexual Femicide in Ciudad Juárez: 1993–2001," *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 28 (2002): 156. 278-295

19 See Livingston, "Murder in Juárez," 62.

20 See Raghinaru, "Biopolitics in Roberto Bolaño's *2666*, 'The Part about the Crimes,' " 146.

21 The women's paradoxical status as both indispensable and disposable, marginalized and foundational to the system's very structure, is reminiscent of Derrida's supplemént in his famous essay "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." See Derrida, Jacques, *Writing and Difference* (1967), trans. Alan Bass (1967; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 278–94.

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> Colonia La Presiada. In the plaza there were six trees, one at each corner and two in the middle, so dusty they looked yellow. At one end of the plaza was the stop for the buses that brought workers from different neighborhoods of Santa Teresa. Then it was a long walk along dirt roads to the gates where the guards checked the workers' passes, after which they were allowed into their various workplaces. Only one of the maquiladoras had a cafeteria. At the others the workers ate next to their machines or in small groups in a corner, talking and laughing until the siren sounded that signaled the end of lunch. Most were women. In the dump where the dead woman was found, the trash of the slum dwellers piled up along with the waste of the maquiladoras.[22]

The second half of this lengthy description does repeatedly reference the dead woman's body—sixteen times, in fact—first under the gaze of a policeman and three company executives, then during an autopsy. The narrative language remains declarative, forensic throughout, down to the assistant's observation that the victim had been raped "Vaginally and anally… . And she was five months pregnant."[23] For present purposes I will focus on the quoted passage, which stages the larger *mise en scène* in which we encounter the body.

In the initial description of the scene, we encounter "the dead woman" as only a component part of a whole—a larger assemblage in which a number of living humans, and a dead one, happen to find themselves. A certain kind of new-materialist reading would in this context seek to decenter or otherwise de-privilege the human footprint in relation to the material world and its contents, to read human existents in a monic relationship with the world of things that acts upon them in order to reveal the conative operation of, well, things—what Jane Bennett has famously christened "thing-power."[24] In the spirit of Jane Bennett's famous tableau in chapter 1 of *Vibrant Matter*, then, let us say that *in May 1993, in a dump between a slum and an industrial park in front of the Colonia Las Flores in the border town of Santa Teresa, there was:*

> one dead woman
> four maquiladoras
> electric towers that supplied power to the maquiladoras
> *many, many shacks*
> one plaza with six trees, yellowed from dust
> one bus stop
> *an unspecified number of dirt roads*
> some checkpoints, each with guards
> *an unspecified number of workers*, mostly women
> various workplaces
> one cafeteria
> one siren
> *piles of unspecified trash, from both the slum and the maquiladoras*[25]

22 Bolaño, *2666*, 358.
23 Bolaño, *2666*, 359.
24 See Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), xvi–xvii, 1–38.
25 Because this this not a quotation from Bennett's text but a parody of it, the italics are obviously mine.

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The first problem in building a reading of this scene is that I face a much more crowded and complex contingent tableau than Bennett did on that sunny (and I shall note in passing, rather more pleasant) June morning "in front of Sam's Bagels in Baltimore."[26] Some elements in this assemblage receive more narrative play than others—maquiladoras get four separate mentions, for example, the dead woman only two—but the cumulative effect is of a single, large machinic system run on the labor and energy of a seemingly vast but uncounted number of women's bodies.

Within the portrayed machinic system—one that in a new materialist reading is animated by its own agentic thrust—we can place the aforementioned items along a debris-to-thing spectrum between, as Bennett puts it, "on the one hand, stuff to ignore, except as it betokens human activity … and, on the other hand, stuff that commanded attention in its own right, as existents in excess of their association with human meanings, habits, or projects."[27] But here is where we must depart from Bennett's "thing-power" analytic, for the thing-like items in our tableau—the one dead woman and many more living workers—must constitute something greater than "existents in excess of their association with human meanings, habits, or projects." Or do they? Can the humans themselves, in a new materialist analysis, claim any closer bond to "human activity" than, say, the bus stop, or the dirt roads or cafeteria—or the piles of trash? Could we not, in this example, actually identify the dead woman more closely with the trash dump—that is, locate it toward the "debris" end of our spectrum? And if so, doesn't that nudge her living counterparts that much closer to "debris" status themselves—that is, to disposability?

Here is a hint toward answering the previous questions: In the quoted passage the "dead woman" functionally bookends the excerpt. After the first reference, the narrative provides a lengthy, detailed explanation of the landscape, the many human actants who populate it, their daily lives and habits, and so on. So, you would be forgiven for having entirely forgotten the dead body that opens the paragraph by the time it reappears exactly two hundred words later. One could in fact argue that the nameless dead woman is the *least* significant element in the entire assemblage: to the killer a discarded, single-use commodity, to the rest of the machine no longer a useful "thing" and thus merely "debris." In short: waste. The body's appearance in an actual dump thus emerges as, in Rosi Braidotti's terms, not a metaphor but a figuration per her definition in *Nomadic Subjects*: "A figuration is a living map, a transformative account of the self; it's no metaphor."[28]

Of course, a figuration is ultimately a metaphor, as is a map (never mind a "living" one) and any narrative "account of the self." (To paraphrase the old joke about turtles, it's metaphors all the way down.) But let us not on that basis so easily dismiss Braidotti's statement as to miss her larger point that it is precisely the humanity of the embodied subject that is under siege here. The emergence of nomadic subjects such as the migrant contingent workers-turned-abject bodies in *2666* demonstrates what Braidotti calls "the decline of unitary subjects and the destabilization of the space-time continuum of the

26 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 4.

27 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*.

28 See Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodied Subjects and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 10.

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traditional vision of the subject."[29] In short, Marx's worker-as-surplus-labor recurs under neoliberalism as the disposable bodies of women in dumpsters, leftovers of the 24/7/365 cycle of capital and labor and production and death. The nameless dead woman in the quoted passage is neither its animating spirit nor its supplement, but simply its remains. Its waste. As will be, one assumes, the eventually lifeless bodies of all the other nameless women at the maquiladoras, in Santa Teresa, in all the subaltern world.

And yet, it—they—signify. The women of *2666*, living and dead, do much more than share the stage with the inanimate objects that surround them (and that, in the case of the many illegal dumps in and around Santa Teresa, threaten to engulf them). The dead bodies' every appearance—and the clinical, forensic way in which the narrative denies them all vestiges of personality, agency, *humanity*—ought to, is arguably calculated to, disturb if not enrage us. That affective response—that more or less spontaneous outrage—exemplifies what I take to be an enduring belief (we'll stick with that word for now) in the value of every human life, that no human life should be lived as these are lived, and certainly none should end as this one has. That we are all of us to some degree complicit with the fate of all the living and dead women of the fictional Santa Teresa and the real-life Ciudad Juárez is another matter, which I will take up shortly.

Second example, which is again more about the landscape—in this case, the dump—than the victim:

> Emilia Mena Mena died in June. Her body was found in the illegal dump near Calle Yucatecos, on the way to the Hermanos Corinto brick factory. The medical examiner's report stated that she had been raped, stabbed, and burned, without specifying whether the stab wounds or the burns had been the cause of death, and without specifying whether Emilia Mena Mena was already dead when the burns were inflicted. Fires were constantly being reported in the dump where she was found, most of them set on purpose, others flaring up by chance, so there was some possibility the body had been charred by a random blaze, not set alight by the murderer. The dump didn't have a formal name, because it wasn't supposed to be there, but it had an informal name: it was called El Chile. During the day there wasn't a soul to be seen in El Chile or the surrounding fields soon to be swallowed up by the dump. At night *those who had nothing or less than nothing* ventured out. In Mexico City they call them *teporochos*, but a *teporocho* is a survivor, a cynic and a humorist, compared to the human beings who swarmed alone or in pairs around El Chile. There weren't many of them. *They spoke a slang that was hard to understand.* The police conducted a roundup the night after the body of Emilia Mena Mena was found and all they brought in was three children hunting for cardboard in the trash. The night residents of El Chile were few. Their life expectancy was short. They died after seven months, at most, of picking through the dump. Their feeding habits and their sex lives were a mystery. *It was likely they had forgotten how to eat or fuck.* Or that food and sex were beyond their reach by then, *unattainable, indescribable, beyond action and expression.* All, without exception, were sick. To strip the clothes from a body in El Chile was to skin it. The population was stable: never fewer than three, never more than twenty.[30]

29 Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects.*
30 Bolaño, *2666*, 372–73, emphasis added.

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Here the identification between the animate and inanimate worlds, the living and the dead, is more fraught than in the previous example because instead of the women workers—an army of beleaguered but very much living flesh—we get the living-dead of El Chile, whom the text portrays with an anthropologist's distance. They are certainly subaltern lives even from the perspective of the working women in the previous example; note the description of the "residents" as "those who had nothing or less than nothing," creatures beyond language ("a slang that was hard to understand") and thus desire ("they had forgotten how to eat or fuck … beyond action and expression")—in short, beyond redemption *as human.* Thus emerges, here and when El Chile reappears later in the novel, *2666*'s clearest glimpse into Agamben's *homo sacer*, a life expunged from the socius, one simultaneously outside and beyond the law.[31] The immediate proximity of surplus labor *as implicitly surplus humanity* is what links our two examples; their sequence as part of a much longer litany that itself reveals the cycle of production and death that lures willing (docile) bodies to join it, consumes those bodies, then discharges them into an abject state as waste product. The successful elimination and marginalization of the machine's waste—making sure that it never eats where it shits, to coin a phrase—is both crucial to its continued operation and, one hopes, ultimately unsustainable. Because what the machine feeds on—what it literally requires in order to perpetuate itself—is an ever-larger influx of docile, working bodies that will merge with it in order to manufacture the constant stream of automotive parts, household appliances, air conditioners, and so forth that the markets of the global north in turn require to feed *it.* For another way to read Bolaño's Santa Teresa is as itself an ever-expanding, all-consuming assemblage of bodies and factories and dumps and roads and bridges that eventually crosses the border and arrives at our front door, a machinic assemblage that becomes fully legible only when seen from its end point, which is, well, all of us in the global north.

(In the real-life Ciudad Juarez, by the way, maquiladora managers—all men, of course—actually calculate the productive life of a maquiladora worker to be two to three years; any woman who lasts that long on the job is usually fired because by then the year-round seventy-plus-hour work-weeks have taken their toll on her body, sapping the dexterity necessary for assembly-line jobs. The goal is thus to keep each worker as long as possible *up to the three-year limit*, in order to monetize as fully as possible the time invested in their training, but no longer.[32] It is planned obsolescence as applied to human bodies, a model whose cruelty and efficiency falls somewhere on the spectrum between nineteenth-century plantation slaves [average life expectancy seven to nine years] and concentration-camp workers [depending on the victim, a few weeks to a few months].)

Regarding the question of the readers' complicity with the events of "The Part about the Crimes," to which I hinted earlier, I conclude by noting that this part of Bolaño's novel includes only two North Americans, who appear adjacently to my two chosen examples. In the first instance, an unnamed American factory executive cursorily examines the dead woman's body before the ambulance takes it away. He appears only in that scene, as a sort of prop depicting the calculating nature of the executives and the

31 See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (1995; Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press).

32 See Melissa Wright, *Disposable Women and Other Myths of Global Capitalism* (New York: Routledge, 2006) 57.

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recurrence of dead women as, for them, a regular occurrence; he views the body, his Mexican associate bribes the policeman to dispose of the body, and that is that.[33]

But the second North American engages more deeply with the machine, in a manner more thoughtful but ultimately just as compromised. US detective Albert Kessler (based on the work of real-life criminologist Robert K. Ressler in Ciudad Juárez), in Santa Teresa to help solve the murders and end the femicide, asks his police escort one night to take him to El Chile:

> [Then] they turned down a wider street, just as desolate, where even the brush was covered with a thick layer of dust, as if an atomic bomb had dropped nearby and no one had noticed, except the victims, thought Kessler, but they didn't count because they'd lost their minds or were dead, even though they still walked and talked, *their eyes and stares straight out of a Western*, *the stares of Indians or bad guys*, of course, in other words lunatics, *people living in another dimension*, their gazes no longer able to touch us, we're aware of them but they don't touch us, they don't adhere to our skin, they shoot straight through us, thought Kessler as he moved to roll down the window. No, don't open it, said one of the inspectors. Why not? The smell, *it smells like death*. It stinks. Ten minutes later they reached the dump.[34]

Here we revisit El Chile and its zombie denizens from the perspective not of the detached narrator but of an engaged, embodied character seemingly unable to relate what he witnesses to previous experiences of human subjects, even fictional ones ("straight out of a Western, the stares of Indians or bad guys"). Kessler struggles to recognize El Chile's nearby inhabitants as fellow human subjects, but never stops trying to do so ("people living in another dimension" are after all still "people," still "they"). It is his Mexican counterparts who stop him from further interactions with the living-dead, from even opening the window ("it smells like death"). As both this and our previous encounter with El Chile makes clear, these are bodies no longer capable of work; they are too exhausted or damaged to be of any further use to the larger machinic assemblage that has relegated them to this dump, a machine that has excluded and eliminated them as waste products of the global city. But Kessler, unlike his companions, struggles to identify with them, with their gaze. As a detective and guest of the state, and part of a group of investigators, here is Kessler as a perhaps unwitting instrument of Agamben's law as a State of Exception, the point at which it becomes most obvious that the force-of-law is there to buttress and support the economic order precisely at the expense of the docile bodies whose labor enables it to function. The law eats its own, which it interpellates as not its own but the negligible bare life of untold numbers of abject bodies. As a sort of stand-in for *2666*'s global north reader, Kessler—unlike the unnamed US executive—does express a sort of sympathy for disposable bodies, living and dead, that he encounters. But he cannot halt the machine of which he is a component, nor recognize his own participation in its central fiction, in Agamben's terms the *Arcana imperii.*[35]

33 Bolaño, *2666*, 358–59.

34 Bolaño 602–03, emphasis added.

35 The term *arcana impèrii* most literally translates to "secrets of power" or "principles of power" or "of the state." Agamben's use of the term stems from two second-century works of Tacitus: *Histories* (I, 4) and the *Annals* (II, 36).

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Kessler is actually less impacted by El Chile than by the neighborhoods that surround it: "Walking through the streets in broad daylight, he told the press, is frightening."[36] Again notably, the police officers present at Kessler's press conference "hid smiles. They thought Kessler … sounded like a gringo. A good gringo, of course, because bad gringos sounded different, spoke differently."[37] Kessler goes on to declare that for women to walk these streets at night is "dangerous" and "reckless," and ingenuously asks why the streets are not lighted. Through it all, the mayor squirms and the officers smile. Why? What do the Mexican cops know that Kessler the well-meaning "good gringo" does not, cannot?

By this point in the narrative we, readers of the larger novel positioned both inside *and* outside the machine (although as we shall see, that "outside" is illusory), should be able to see what Kessler doesn't: that in fact the women working the night-shift at the maquiladoras *must* walk to work, that they have migrated to these neighborhoods that Kessler finds "frightening" precisely *in order to* be close enough to the maquiladoras to walk to work.

In the end, Kessler is easily distracted; to him, Santa Teresa is just another gig, after all, and after a while "he turned to other matters," including more shots of *bacanora* ("Christ it was good").[38] Our parting clue to Kessler's blind spot lies, however, not in his final appearance but his first appearance twenty-six pages earlier. A retired homicide investigator now on the lecture circuit (the text provides a partial list including nine US states, Paris, London, Rome, Russia, and Poland), we first meet Kessler breakfasting at home casually surrounded by the usual bourgeois conveniences: the radio (playing classical music), a microwave, and outside "the tidy sidewalks, the late-model cars … the poolside barbecues," neighbors who "worked hard for a living and tried to do no harm, although on this past point one never did know for sure."[39] As a professional investigator, even a famous one, someone trained to see through facades and identify inconsistencies, he does not uncritically inhabit his own environment; his profession aside, we might read him as a postmodern iteration of Conrad's Marlow, an Enlightenment subject just distanced enough from bourgeois vapidity to be suspicious of it, in it, but not *of* it. He maintains a clinical distance even from his wife of more than thirty years, accepting her companionship even as part of "the same little reality that served to anchor reality, seemed to fade around the edges, as if the passage of time had a porous effect on things, and blurred and made more insubstantial what was itself already, by its very nature, insubstantial and satisfactory and real."[40] Or so Kessler would see himself and his reality.

So, then, what is it about Santa Teresa that so unsettles Kessler, hardened criminologist and world-traveler? Did something in El Chile, in the colonias, snap Kessler's reality back into sharper focus, albeit momentarily?

More importantly for our purposes: Once he has caught a partial glimpse of the death-machine that is Santa Teresa, how is it that Kessler is able to simply turn "to other

36 Bolaño, *2666*, 605.
37 Bolaño, *2666*, 605–06.
38 Bolaño, *2666*, 606.
39 Bolaño, *2666*, 581.
40 Bolaño, *2666*, 582.

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matters"—to do his work, buy his wife a souvenir, and return home to his microwave and barbecue and tidy sidewalks? In the narrative logic of *2666*, one either knows (as the smiling cops and squirming mayor know), or one does not. There is no epiphany, no lesson to be learned, no Sartrean "à moins" ("tout es perdu, à moins que …").[41] Except, perhaps, we readers of *2666* can learn to fill-in-the-blank, or rather to read the filling-in of that blank in the assemblic machinic chain that arguably begins with NAFTA and winds through a border town-turned-city, its shiny new factories, the banks that lent the money to pay for them, the buses and roads that enabled the migration of hundreds of thousands of women to work in them, the benighted slums that expose those women to ever-present rape and torture and death and leaves the survivors to wander the burning dumps of El Chile and many, many other locations like it, the laws and law-enforcement agencies that refuse to solve or prevent the femicide, but most of all the shiny factories that make our air conditioners and our cars and our microwaves for the lowest possible price. In short: to learn to read in the pages of *2666* the world that we have wrought.

41 "All is lost, unless …"

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