

Comparison, Allegory, and the Address of “Global” Realism (The Part about Bolaño)

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In addition to being a venerable problem of academic literary study, comparison is the lingua franca of corporatized Anglo-American reviewing culture: What precursor text will new novel *x* remind me of? New poet *y* sounds like which stylist I already have on my bookshelf? By definition, this rhetoric domesticates the new and the foreign by assuring the reader that what’s happening is a version of what’s already happened. In the case of Roberto Bolaño, whose work arrived abruptly enough in the Spanish-speaking world—his major books were all published in the last decade of his life—and even more so in the Anglosphere, where Bolaño only began publishing after his death in 2003, the temptation to compare has been irresistible. Probably unsurprisingly, given the suddenness with which he

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has become the most translated Spanish-language novelist since the Latin American Boom generation, the comparisons can be tone-deaf, as in the frequent invocations of Gabriel García Márquez, of whom Bolaño was deeply suspicious. Other comparisons, such as those to Haruki Murakami and David Foster Wallace, designate little beyond the fact that Bolaño wrote some long novels and worked in the late twentieth century. In the least helpful comparison of which I'm aware, *Esquire* likened the experience of reading Bolaño's *2666* (2004) to hearing "John Coltrane jamming with the Sex Pistols."¹ It goes without saying that the comment ignores the artistic and political contexts of Bolaño's work (and those of Coltrane and the Sex Pistols).

Easy as it is to point out such misprisions, doing so risks ignoring the intensity of Bolaño's own engagement with comparative thinking. In the debate currently being conducted in academia and the blogosphere over whether the US Bolaño vogue is the result of hype, colonialist paternalism, genuine appreciation, or some combination thereof, Bolaño's own canniness about the role of cross-cultural comparison in literary consecration often gets overlooked.² Indeed, Bolaño's interest in comparison is visible

1. On García Márquez, see Vince Passaro, "Lines in the Sand: A Literary Supernova's Powerful Novel of Life and Death on the Mexican Border," review of *2666*, by Roberto Bolaño, *O, The Oprah Magazine*, November 2008, accessed September 2013, www.oprah.com/omagazine/2666-by-Roberto-Bolano-Book-Review. On Murakami and Wallace, see Lorin Stein, "The Murakami Landscape; Your Inner Clown," *Paris Review*, April 1, 2011, accessed September 2013, www.theparisreview.org/blog/2011/04/01/the-murakami-landscape-your-inner-clown; and "The Afterlife of Roberto Bolaño," *Legacy.com*, April 28, 2011, accessed September 2013, www.legacy.com/ns/news-story.aspx?t=the-afterlife-of-roberto-bolano&id=333. On Coltrane and the Sex Pistols, see John H. Richardson, "The Last Words of Roberto Bolaño," *Esquire*, November 4, 2008, accessed September 2013, www.esquire.com/fiction/books/last-words-roberto-bolano-1108.

2. Sarah Pollack argues that Bolaño's "creative genius" is only one factor in the success of *The Savage Detectives*, along with his "compelling biography" and his novel's appeal to a nostalgic imaginary of Latin American revolutionary ambition and youthful insouciance. Pollack's critique is the inspiration for Horacio Castellanos Moya's "Sobre el mito Bolaño" (On the Bolaño myth), published in the Argentine daily *La Nación* in 2009. Alberto Medina claims that the compulsive readerliness of Bolaño's work indicates his "erasure" and "commodification" of the Latin American avant-gardes he eulogizes, while Mexican novelist Jorge Volpi argues that Bolaño's success is "the mirror[] of a necessary exoticism." Garth Risk Hallberg's "The Bolaño Myth and the Backlash Cycle" recaps the demurrals from the Bolaño myth, and demurs from them. See Sarah Pollack, "Latin America Translated (Again): Roberto Bolaño's *The Savage Detectives* in the United States," *Comparative Literature* 61, no. 3 (June 1, 2009): 355; Castellanos Moya, "Sobre el mito Bolaño," *La Nación*, September 19, 2009, accessed September 2013, www.lanacion.com.ar/1176451

from his first published piece of fiction, *Consejos de un discípulo de Morrison a un fanático de Joyce* (1984), coauthored with the Spanish novelist Antoni García Porta.³ The book's title (Advice from a Morrison disciple to a Joyce fan) so obligingly advertises the novel's self-positioning in the field of cultural production—somewhere between high modernist seriousness and rock romanticism—that it seems to write its own blurb ("like The Doors crashing your *Ulysses* study group"). But in this text and many that follow it in Bolaño's career, what is most interesting about the overt comparison is how quickly it ramifies to suggest others, problematically adjacent to this initial one: *Consejos* want us to compare literary and pop forms of consecration, but it also wants us to compare Latin American and European versions of canonicity; forms of state terror; the political and the aesthetic.⁴

As this series indicates, Bolaño's preoccupation with comparison is the first step in a totalizing aesthetic project, in which a discreet juxtaposition of two items sets off a chain reaction that takes in an ever-expanding field of data. The peculiarity of Bolaño's work is its ability simultaneously to suggest the presence of some massive and intricately constructed hermeneutic scaffolding and to make us dubious about its ultimate functioning: the recurrent provocation in his work to compare two distinct fields by dint of their spatial, imagistic, or semantic proximity is always accompanied by an insistence that no wholly satisfactory traffic can be established between them. This is not an exercise in asserting the incommensurateness of all domains of human action, on the one hand, or, on the other, a flattening of the entire geopolitical and cultural field into a totalized image, although it verges on both projects. It is, rather, the result of a sustained effort to think totality and to record the obstacles to doing so—and to render this effort as

-sobre-el-mito-bolano; Alberto Medina, "Arts of Homelessness: Roberto Bolaño or the Commodification of Exile," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 42, no. 3 (Fall 2009): 552; Jorge Volpi, "Latin America, a Hologram," *Three Percent*, November 9, 2009, accessed September 2013, www.rochester.edu/College/translation/threepercen/?id=2324; and Garth Risk Hallberg, "The Bolaño Myth and the Backlash Cycle," *The Millions*, November 16, 2009, accessed September 2013, www.themillions.com/2009/11/the-bolano-myth-and-the-backlash-cycle.html.

3. Roberto Bolaño and A. G. Porta, *Consejos de un discípulo de Morrison a un fanático de Joyce, seguido de Diario de Bar* (1984; repr., Barcelona: Acantilado, 2006).

4. I have profited here from Rebecca Walkowitz's account of a genre she calls "comparison literature," comprised of works that "operate at several scales at once" by "taking up comparison both structurally and thematically." See Rebecca Walkowitz, "Comparison Literature," in *Comparison: Theories, Approaches, Uses*, ed. Rita Felski and Susan Stanford Friedman (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 248, 244.

a problematic of literary form. Bolaño's formalizing impulse and his interest in increasingly expansive forms of comparison, we will see, are both tied to his career-long preoccupation with the twentieth century's supreme comparand of state crime, National Socialism. The seeming promotion of Nazism to mythical status in Bolaño's narrative universe, I'll argue, in fact serves the more urgent project of mapping a hemispheric history with US power at its center.

Bolaño's obsession with the Nazi genocide as the polestar of modern state crime has been clear at least since 1996, when he published *La literatura nazi en América* (trans. *Nazi Literature in the Americas*, 2008), a lovingly detailed dictionary of an imaginary, utterly plausible twentieth-century right-wing literature. The longevity of that obsession has become obvious with the appearance of the novel *El Tercer Reich* (*The Third Reich*), published in 2010 but written in 1989.⁵ It would be tempting to accuse Bolaño's Nazi fixation of a political and historical glibness that sheds no particular light on either German or Latin American state violence. That temptation is stronger when we notice that the charisma of the Nazi topos pushes Bolaño's work beyond comparison and toward a mode more closely resembling allegory. Comparison assumes that the items it assembles remain thinkable on some essentially equivalent conceptual field, an underlying Cartesianism that has been the source of several recent critiques of the political blindnesses of comparative method in the humanities.⁶ Allegory, while equally a technology of juxtaposition, departs from comparison's horizontal imaginary in favor of a vertical logic: segregating literal from metaphysical terms and insisting that the former side of the code is phenomenologically rich while only the latter is transcendently true. As Angus Fletcher writes in a recent article revisiting his classic 1964 study, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode*, allegory is severely hierarchizing; it cuts off phenomena from significance by erecting a "wall between the literal and

5. Bolaño's fascination with Nazism is hardly unusual in Latin American literature; a short list of works to treat the theme would include Jorge Luis Borges's "Deutsches Requiem" (1946), José Emilio Pacheco's *Morirás lejos* (1967; trans. *You Will Die in a Distant Land*, 1991), Ricardo Piglia's *Respiración artificial* (1980; trans. *Artificial Respiration*, 1994), Ignacio Padilla's *Amphytrion* (2000; trans. *Shadow without a Name*, 2004), and Jorge Volpi's *En busca de Klingsor* (1999; trans. *In Search of Klingsor*, 2007) and *Oscuro bosque oscuro* (2010; *Dark forest dark*). Bolaño's earliest work on the topic sits squarely in the center of this chronology (*The Third Reich* was written in the late 1980s; *Nazi Literature in the Americas* was published in 1996).

6. See, for example, Walter D. Mignolo, "Who Is Comparing What and Why?," in *Comparison*, 99–119.

the higher-order interpreted 'meanings,' the *significatio* of medieval exegesis." I will return to the suggestiveness of Fletcher's figure of the wall; for now, I want to note that when any particular historical datum is indexed to the Nazi genocide via what Fletcher calls allegory's overtly "authoritarian mode,"⁷ we are justified in suspecting that one term of this operation is being slighted: either the historical reality of Nazism is being diminished by a structure that sees it as (only) the rhetorical emblem of transcendental evil, or the historical reality of the cognate term is being diminished by a structure that sees it as (only) the afterglow or premonition of the "realer" evil of Nazi terror.

Such flirtation with Nazi allegoresis would appear to doom in advance any project, like Bolaño's, whose aims are avowedly realist.⁸ But what at first glance might seem a shortcut to imbuing his texts with global significance becomes something more interesting over the course of Bolaño's career: an injunction to collate ever-greater amounts of material and simultaneously to suggest that an overarching interpretive framework can order this proliferating data. That framework, I have already suggested, is US power, which comes in Bolaño's work increasingly to occupy the space rhetorically and formally cleared, as it were, by the Nazi signifier.⁹ Bolaño's ability to map with such clarity the shaping role of the United States on Latin American reality is a result of his progress from a project of comparison (in which all terms seem essentially fungible) to one of allegory (in which one set of terms anchors the others), and finally to an aesthetic that retains the proliferations of the first step and the interpretive freightedness of the second but transforms the meaning of each: in this final step, represented paradigmatically by *2666*, the economy of allegory, where only one-half of the code really matters, yields to a completist aesthetic, in which each term achieves equal weight without thereby succumbing to a merely additive

7. Angus J. S. Fletcher, "Allegory without Ideas," *boundary 2* 33, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 88.

8. "As to my writing, I don't know what to say. I suppose it's realist. I'd like to be a writer of the fantastic, like Philip K. Dick, although as time passes and I get older, Dick seems more and more realist to me." See the interview with Roberto Bolaño by Carmen Boullosa, "Reading Is Always More Important than Writing," trans. Margaret Carson, *Bomb* (Winter 2002); reprinted in *Roberto Bolaño: The Last Interview and Other Conversations* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2009), 58.

9. Héctor Hoyos's *Beyond Bolaño: The Global Latin American Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015) argues relatedly that Bolaño and other contemporary Latin American writers transform the "international, marginal phenomenon of neo-Nazism into a displaced figure of globalization" (26). See in particular Hoyos's searching discussion of *Nazi Literature in the Americas*, 36–53.

accumulation. This series of operations—the transformation of comparison into allegory, and the transformation of allegory into a new form of realist completism—is central to the geopolitical meaning of Bolaño’s work, a meaning that has gone largely unremarked in the North American skirmishes over the sources of his popularity here. Ultimately, just this opacity may be the most important feature of Bolaño’s work for an American readership, as his fascist preoccupation becomes a commentary on the United States’ historically conditioned inability to grasp its structuring position in the world it dominates. That Bolaño’s work does not in particular solicit an American readership only adds to the urgency of its oblique address to us.

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The outlines of Bolaño’s aesthetics of ramification, in which the narrated action prompts the reader to an ever-widening effort of comparison, are visible from his first novel. Its title is fully ironic—there is no counsel to be found in *Consejos*—and the references to the artists of its title comically gestural. The story concerns a crime spree undertaken in classically underdetermined noir style over the course of a Barcelona summer by the narrator, a Joyce-reading Spaniard named Ángel, and Ana, who hails from an unspecified part of South America. The book cites Joyce only indirectly: as with Molly and Leopold Bloom, sex for the principal pair has dried up, and Ana has other lovers; Ángel ends the novel in Paris, meditating à la Stephen Dedalus on literary greatness; and Ana has terminated a pregnancy, a detail that we could (trying hard) align with the Blooms’ loss of their son Rudy. But indications abound that these details are red herrings. The final pages find Ángel pondering not only James Joyce but also Joyce Carol Oates (“good”) and Joyce Cary (“very entertaining and also very bad”): this reading list organized by first names, one infers, is unlikely to result in literary greatness, bespeaking as it does the severity of Ángel’s alienation from the very notion of artistic tradition.¹⁰ In fact, Ángel spends much of his time in Paris contemplating a trip to lay a bouquet on the grave of the title’s other Jim (Morrison, interred in Père Lachaise). But Ángel throws his bouquet into the Seine, as if whatever rebellion the rock star represents seems futile even to imitate. In a pinch, one could make even this fact into a Joycean meditation by claiming that, precisely in marking our narrator’s distance from the Irish writer’s posture of aesthetic revolt, *Consejos* updates Joyce’s famous subject of modern paralysis.

10. Bolaño and Porta, *Consejos*, 156, 162; my translation.

But this would surely be working too hard; it seems clear that the comparison indicated by the novel's title is a rhetorical gesture, as interesting for its form as its content. We note, for example, that the title not only juxtaposes the pop-cultural and the hypercanonical but inverts the forms of consumption proper to each domain: the modernist master has "fans," while the rock-god has "disciples." It is, in other words, a meditation on literary celebrity in an age of mass entertainment, and an uncanny proleptic commentary on the novelist-as-rock-star topos that would become a central feature of Bolaño's North American reception two decades later, as well as of the critiques of that reception that shortly followed. As obviously, the title signals a further mental juxtaposition, this time geopolitical: that the names of these English-language culture heroes share space on the book's cover with those of two aspirant Spanish-language writers suggests not just a comparison between the literary and the popular but one between Spanish-language and Anglophone cultural power, a comparison that highlights the politics of translation underwriting international stature.¹¹

These comparisons, in turn, open on another, between Latin American and European fascisms. *Consejos* keeps reminding the reader both of Franco's recent death and of Ana's ominously unspecified South American origins, and in one of the book's oddest details, we hear repeatedly of an assault on a Barcelona bank called the Hispano Americano; the attackers are caught early in the action, but the bank's name echoes insistently through the text, with Ángel at one point imagining "the poor bastards who had attacked the Hispano Americano sleeping naked in miserable cells, their bodies covered in bruises."¹² The iconic prison image and the incantatory repetition of the bank's name prompt the (strictly speaking, nonsensical) thought: Are the Hispano Americano's attackers to be understood as Spanish America's victims? If we allow ourselves to perform the mental gymnastics required to arrive at this question—swapping name and referent, aggressor and aggressee—we might take the next step and wonder whether Ángel's preoccupation with this concurrent crime is somehow to be read as sympathy with its (wholly imaginary) politics. In that case, is Ana and Ángel's trail of blood—again, somehow—to be understood as a

11. Porta's 2006 prologue to the reissue of *Consejos* explains that the original title was *Flores para Morrison* (Flowers for Morrison), a play on Daniel Keyes's iconic sci-fi story and novel *Flowers for Algernon* (1959, 1966). The final title riffs on the poem "Consejos de un discípulo de Marx a un fanático de Heidegger" by Mario Santiago Papasquiaro, cofounder of *infrealismo* and the model for Ulises Lima in *The Savage Detectives*.

12. Bolaño and Porta, *Consejos*, 64; my translation.

distorted image of rightist state violence, or perhaps an equally distorted response to it? The novel never claims a political motivation for the couple's killings, but it repeatedly tempts us to ask whether their psychosis derives from a displaced political energy. If so, the displacement is as important as the politics, and it speaks to the futility both of exile and of literature—to the absurdity of fighting Augusto Pinochet by killing random citizens in Barcelona, or of fighting anything at all by becoming obsessed with James Joyce.¹³ You can't, the novel repeatedly suggests, get there from here. And yet to the extent that we feel this heavily atmospheric novel must mean *something*, that something seems to be located athwart that interpretive barrier. The text points readers toward a political referent that remains determinedly unarticulated; thus even in this earliest fiction does Bolaño's obsessive comparativism open on an allegorical worldview, in which phenomena and significance threaten to come permanently apart.

The barrier between diegetically elaborated fiction and indicated meaning—and the provocation to overcome it—are both heightened in *The Third Reich*. The novel's title only secondarily refers to the German political regime of that name; more proximately, it designates a World War II reenactment board game that obsesses the novel's narrator, a German named Udo Berger vacationing on the Costa Brava. But, as the flatness of the title suggests, the literal referent of "the Third Reich" remains insistently in play. Udo never registers how unsettling the game is to his girlfriend and to the other hotel guests, and he is genuinely surprised when someone asks him if he's a Nazi.¹⁴ When Frau Else, the beautiful older woman Udo is trying to seduce, asks him when he's returning to Germany, he responds, "You are Germany" (234)—and they both laugh at the melodrama of the reply but don't remark on the queasy-making effect of these words coming from someone who spends hours each night rethinking Nazi war strategy. Most unsettling is the moment when Udo records a wish that one of his gaming opponents knew something about German literature so that he could explain his affection for his favorite generals: "I would tell him that Manstein is comparable to Gunther Grass and that Rommel is comparable

13. Thus does Bolaño inaugurate a career-long demystification of what John Beverley terms Latin American intellectuals' "humanistic overvaluation of the literary." This clarity in no way prevents Bolaño from constructing a monumental literary edifice, but he does so firmly under the sign of irony. See John Beverley, *Against Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 9.

14. Roberto Bolaño, *The Third Reich*, trans. Natasha Wimmer (New York: FSG, 2011), 238–39; hereafter cited parenthetically.

to . . . Celan."¹⁵ As in *Consejos*, the invitation to compare is issued even as we perceive its—here, grotesque—inappropriateness: Udo's ellipses register without acknowledging the obscenity of comparing the Jewish poet and World War II labor camp internee to a Nazi general. That the general in question committed suicide after being implicated in a conspiracy to assassinate Hitler, as did Erwin Rommel, may explain Udo's thought process here, but it does nothing to mitigate the moral obtuseness of the comparative operation itself. While the black comedy of the moment is lost on Udo, for the reader this remains the novel's most overt satire of comparison's Cartesian worldview.

None of this makes Udo a Nazi, of course, but it does suggest how Bolaño's interest in building his fiction atop a series of uneasy comparisons pushes the comparative imagination toward allegory. Events seem to hover on some ontological borderline, as if at any moment the ludic quality of "the Third Reich" might suddenly be revoked, the game and the talk take on literal flesh. The omnipresent proximity of the political real comes most clearly into view as Udo becomes preoccupied with a beach drifter known only as El Quemado (i.e., the Burnt One), after the scars that cover much of his body. As with Ana in the earlier novel, Bolaño provides vague and unconfirmed hints that El Quemado is "South American." The novel ends with Udo suspecting that El Quemado has murdered another German tourist and is planning to do the same to him; but Udo has no sense of why this would be the case, and he never connects this possibility to his own German background or to El Quemado's history. In one sense, this is utterly reasonable: Udo is not yet thirty years old and so has no responsibility for his country's past; he has never been to South America and appears to know nothing about the Southern Cone dictatorships of which El Quemado may be a victim. And yet, irrational as it is, the connection becomes more pressing the longer the novel refuses to give it diegetic elaboration.

As we'll see, the narrative topos Bolaño employs in this novel to exacerbate the allegorical provocation—the unnervingly overlong vacation—will have a powerful afterlife in his fiction. In the case of *The Third Reich*, it is the prolongation of the summer idyll that makes the reader feel the increasingly pressing intimacy of neighboring ontological realms: the

15. I am here using my translation of the following lines: "[L]e diría que Manstein es comparable a Gunther Grass y que Rommel es comparable a . . . Celan" (Roberto Bolaño, *El Tercer Reich* [Barcelona: Anagrama, 2010], 283). The English version omits a line of the Spanish text, so that Grass and Rommel are not mentioned: "I'd tell him that Manstein is like . . . Celan" (216).

progress of the board game *The Third Reich* gets confused in Udo's journal with the last days of the historical Third Reich, and both in turn are entangled with one of the signal dates of recent Latin American history. The first of these effects is achieved relatively straightforwardly and in a manner that Udo must be aware of: the diegetically reliable dated entries in his diary start to alternate with headings corresponding at once to the progress of the game and to that of World War II: thus, "September 12" is followed by "Summer 1942," "September 14" by "Anzio. Fortress Europa. Omaha Beachhead. Summer 1942" (184, 187, 190, 200). The second, more ominous effect occurs at a level below Udo's consciousness but traumatically, unaccountably available to his somatic perception. Although he is scheduled to spend only ten late-summer days in Spain, Udo prolongs his stay, and the novel's most disquieting effect derives from watching his journal progress through the end of August and well into mid-September. The entry for September 11 contains the following extraordinary sentences:

In the sky a Cessna prop plane strove to trace letters that the strong wind erased before I could make out complete words. I was gripped then by a vast melancholy that seized my belly, my spine, my bottom ribs, until I doubled over under the sunshade!

I realized in a vague way, as if I were dreaming, that the morning of September 11 was unfolding over the hotel, at the height of the Cessna's ailerons, and that those of us who were beneath that morning, the retirees leaving the hotel, the waiters sitting on the terrace watching the little plane's maneuvers, Frau Else hard at work and El Quemado loafing on the beach, were in some way condemned to walk in darkness. (177)

When Udo asks a local about the meaning of the airplane and is told that September 11 is Catalonia Day, the information seems insufficient to explain the horror that has erupted into the narrative. For readers in Latin America, and many elsewhere, September 11 will be recognizable as the date in 1973 when Pinochet's CIA-backed coup removed the government of Salvador Allende, inaugurating the seventeen-year dictatorship that briefly imprisoned Bolaño and murdered many of his generation, as well as installing the market policies that made Chile, in David Harvey's words, "the first great experiment with neoliberal state formation" and thus the model for the economic regime that now dominates both American continents.¹⁶

16. David Harvey, *Spaces of Global Capitalism: A Theory of Uneven Geographical Development* (London: Verso, 2006), 12.

The reference has been almost wholly invisible to the novel's Anglophone reviewers, who have either wondered what is so upsetting about Catalonia Day or, inevitably, remarked on the irony of Bolaño's unwitting anticipation of al-Qaeda's attack on the United States.¹⁷

Bolaño, writing in 1989, could not, of course, have anticipated this latter resonance. But it would be a mistake to understand this historical irony as occurring at Bolaño's expense; it tells rather more strongly against readers who have missed the first, Chilean, term in this historical series—who have missed, that is, that Bolaño's September 11 was not an uncanny anticipation of American vulnerability but a concrete reference to American imperialism. The structure of Euro-American misapprehension of Latin American history played out by the novel's reviewers is already written into Bolaño's text: these lines are the climax of *The Third Reich*, but their meaning goes unnoticed even by the narrator who suffers that meaning as an intimate corporeal symptom. In this context, El Quemado's horrifically scarred body is an emblem not only of the Chilean coup but of the denial of its world-historical importance. That the United States' own September 11 has now upstaged its predecessor intensifies the irony of Bolaño's text but does not change the essential structure of that irony. Thus has *The Third Reich*, already in 1989 a compact critique of the global North's blindness to political sea changes occurring outside its immediate purview, matured into an even more potent parable of the American misapprehension of Bolaño's work.

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The formal innovation of Bolaño's magnum opus, *2666*, may be most visible in his reworking of the codes of hard-boiled crime fiction, his most constant generic template.¹⁸ In the interwar United States where it was incubated, hard-boiled fiction's narrative tangles proved particularly amenable to the diagnosis of structural—as opposed to individual—crime, a fact that critics have adduced to explain the genre's long dominance

17. "Alongside all the intended ironies are ones which the author couldn't have predicted at the time of writing—it's hard to screen out the associations which have attached themselves to the celebration of Catalonia Day on 11 September." Adam Mars-Jones, "The *Third Reich* by Roberto Bolaño," *Guardian*, January 13, 2012, accessed December 2012, www.guardian.co.uk/books/2012/jan/13/roberto-bolano-third-reich-review.

18. On Bolaño's relation to detective fiction, see Ezequiel de Rosso, "Una lectura conjetural: Roberto Bolaño y el relato policial," in *Roberto Bolaño: la escritura como tauromaquia*, ed. Celina Manzoni (Buenos Aires: Corregidor, 2006).

in Latin America over classic, ratiocinative (“English”) detective fiction.¹⁹ Those same critics have noted that the closural certainty hard-boiled fiction sacrifices at the level of plot is recouped in the person—and especially in the sensibility—of the crusading detective. As Bruno Bosteels puts it in a discussion of one of Latin America’s most sustained detective series (the ten novels by Paco Ignacio Taibo II featuring Mexico City–based private eye Héctor Belascoarán Shayne), the “conflict between the mental superiority of the lonely detective and the essential corruption of the official ruling apparatuses brings us back in the final instance to the old liberal, or anarchist-libertarian, dilemma of the individual against the state.”²⁰ This verdict has, of course, been true of the hard-boiled genre at least since Philip Marlowe let the Sternwood family off the hook in exchange for the opportunity to craft a few well-turned similes at their expense. The sentimentality of the hard-boiled detective, his attachment to an aestheticized sensibility as proof against his contamination by an all-pervasive corruption, has always been noir’s open secret.

Bolaño’s interest in the genre—visible in the femme-fatale plot of *Consejos*, the fractured crime-scene imagery of *Amberes* (2002, trans. *Antwerp*, 2010), the vigilante-justice finale of *Estrella distante* (1996, trans. *Distant Star*, 2004), the eponymous heroes of *Los detectives salvajes* (1998, trans. *The Savage Detectives*, 2007), and the murders in *2666*—has led some commentators to describe his work as given over to the same quixotic individualism. Thus, Jean Franco writes that “a romantic ideal of chivalry seems to be at work” in Bolaño, and she wonders “whether in this voluntaristic universe there is no alternative but to march heroically onwards towards nowhere.”²¹ But if we can understand hard-boiled fiction’s torque on classic detection as a depersonalization—substituting a systemic criminality (the collusion of state and industry) for an individual mastermind (i.e., “Moriarty”), Bolaño takes the process a step further by vaporizing the

19. See Amelia Simpson, *Detective Fiction from Latin America* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1990), and Persephone Braham, *Crimes against the State, Crimes against Persons: Detective Fiction in Cuba and Mexico* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 2004.

20. Bruno Bosteels, *Marx and Freud in Latin America: Politics, Psychoanalysis, and Religion in Times of Terror* (London: Verso, 2012), 267.

21. Jean Franco, “Questions for Bolaño,” *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 18, nos. 2–3 (December 2009): 210, 215. Franco’s *Cruel Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013) is more sympathetic, commending *2666*’s impersonal account of the Juárez murders over popular depictions like *Bordertown*, a 2006 film featuring Jennifer Lopez as a heroic reporter who “solves” some of the crimes (214–46).

detective himself. In *2666*, romantic individualism is entirely residual: containing the stories of a teeming number of people, the novel refuses the orienting perspectivalism of character. The heroic detective simply disappears in this novel; more precisely, his witnessing, investigative, emotive, and *collating* functions all migrate to the level of the book's form. This ceding of the characterological to the structural has consequences both for the ideology of the novel's form and for the meaning of its allegorical imagination.²²

22. Bolaño's debt to and depersonalization of the hard-boiled genre become evident in counterpoint to Taibo's sustained efforts at widening his fiction's field of geopolitical reference—a project these writers share (along with that of chronicling the fate of their generation of Latin American leftists). The Belascoarán novels enact a will-to-totality at the level of the individual case and of the series as a whole. The first installment, *Días de combate* (1976; *Days of combat*), is resolved by Belascoarán's hunch that a serial strangler is gaining access to diplomatic functions in Mexico City by squatting in "an embassy of a country that disappeared recently, that shut down its embassy, but that is still receiving invitations as a matter of course from other embassies." The possibilities—Somalia, Madagascar, Chile, Pakistan—are all of course politically resonant. Tracked down in the Somali embassy (closed in the wake of that nation's takeover by the socialist Supreme Revolutionary Council in 1970), the killer turns out to be a member of Mexico's business oligarchy. But the diplomatic detail lends an air of international urgency to this domestic story, as if this homegrown evil entails necessary international commitments (here, a willingness to take advantage of the real estate fallout from Mexico's lockstep with US foreign policy). In the second installment, 1977's *Cosa fácil* (trans. *An Easy Thing*, 2002), Belascoarán takes on three cases: hunting the murderer of an industrialist, protecting an actress's daughter from kidnapping, and, fantastically, locating the hideout of Emiliano Zapata, the Mexican revolutionary universally believed to have been assassinated in 1919. The cases palpably have no bearing on one another, and the book's offbeat humor derives from the scenes in which Belascoarán gazes perplexedly at the three photographs—of murderer, kidnappee, and revolutionary—taped above his desk, wondering at the nonfit between his small-scale gumshoe efforts in the service of Mexico City's rich and his revolutionary hopes for the nation. In these first two novels, then, Taibo widens the geopolitical resonance of his plots first via symbolic association and then via the pathos of misplaced scale. Meanwhile, the series as a whole pursues the will to global meaning at a diegetic level, as Taibo simply sends his detective in propria persona toward ever-widening geopolitical horizons. By the fourth novel, 1989's *No habrá final feliz* (trans. *No Happy Ending*, 2003), Belascoarán is on the trail of a veteran of Los Halcones, the US-trained elite army group that massacred 120 students in Mexico City in 1971; for the next installment (also 1989), *Regreso a la misma ciudad y bajo la lluvia* (trans. *Return to the Same City*, 2007), he is hunting a Cuban American, CIA-trained mercenary engaged in funneling money to the Nicaraguan contras. This progression makes clear that Taibo's pursuit of narrative totality means, quite simply, an increased emplotment of the United States, its agents, and its territory. It also means a necessary vitiation of individual agency: by the seventh installment, *Sueños de frontera* (1990; trans. *Frontera Dreams*, 2002), in which Belascoarán chases an old flame to Tijuana and Mexicali as she

2666 demands that we take an interpretive distance from the category of the individual. The novel is indeed “character driven” (to employ the parlance of creative writing programs), but only in the sense that character here drives beyond itself: Bolaño’s individuals relentlessly direct our attention to the structures in which they are enclosed. If Bolaño’s previous work has toyed with routing geopolitical allegories through individual characters—suggesting that Ana just “is” South America, or that Frau Else just “is” Germany—the opening pages of *2666* shred the gears of this technique, prompting and refusing a reading in terms of national allegory with almost farcical speed. The novel’s first section, “The Part about the Critics,” is centered on a quartet of European intellectuals obsessed with the reclusive German writer who publishes under the name Benno von Archimboldi. Indeed, the quartet is so carefully composed that the novel seems to follow the schematic structure of the setup to an ethnic joke: a Frenchman, a Spaniard, an Italian, and an Englishwoman walk into a conference on a German novelist . . . The allegorical invitation could not be more bald, and we are tempted to play the hermeneutic game the structure prompts: surely it matters that the male academics come from countries with experiences of fascist governments, and the woman from the country whose resistance to those versions of European integration represented by Nazi occupation and the European Union remains such a defining feature of its modern history . . . (but even as we articulate it, the allegory teeters under the weight of its portentousness). Surely the fact that Morini is confined to a wheelchair is significant. Could it be . . . a comment on the state of the Italian economy, or on the early occupation of southern Italy by the Allied forces?

runs errands for drug traffickers, Taibo’s private dick has receded into an almost entirely private world, conducting internal conversations with the ghost of Pancho Villa and taking virtually no action in the border’s dense criminal networks. These various solutions to the task of reaching toward a comprehensive understanding of Latin American political crime echo and interestingly depart from Bolaño’s: both writers employ the allegorically weighty proper name (“Somalia,” “Germany”); both writers diagnose the inadequacy of personal action to geopolitical problem via adjacent but noncommunicating plotlines; both writers reach for ever-expanding geographic coverage, and both thereby threaten the reader with a certain narrative diffusiveness. The distinction is that Bolaño abandons the person of the private detective as the container of his geopolitical diagnosis. See Paco Ignacio Taibo II, *Días de combate*, in *Todo Belascoarán: la serie completa de Héctor Belascoarán Shayne* (Mexico City: Planeta, 2010), 126–27; my translation. For an excellent account of Taibo’s attempts to politicize noir, see Glen S. Close, *Contemporary Hispanic Crime Fiction: A Transatlantic Discourse on Urban Violence* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 29–48.

The questions are as absurd as they are inevitable: of course the allegory fails to land in any satisfying way.

And yet *2666* continues in this fashion, as if in an accelerated version of the process operative over the arc of Bolaño's career, whereby proliferating comparisons issue in allegorical overtones. It can sometimes seem that the novel's default mode is to juxtapose national or ethnic characteristics and to imbue the resulting arrangement with obscure but crucial significance. Indeed, the ethnic-joke structure is overtly cited not far into "The Part about the Critics," when Morini calls Norton to tell her "a silly joke" whose premise is that "an Italian, a Frenchman, and an Englishman are in a plane with only two parachutes."²³ Like the larger narrative structure it epitomizes, the meaning of Morini's joke (which Bolaño does not retell) never becomes clear. But it acclimatizes us to a fictional environment in which—for example—when a man offers to take his estranged and ill wife to a Barcelona hospital, she refuses by "saying French doctors had always been better than Spanish doctors" (184); in which the narrator informs us that "just as the sea was the symbol or mirror of the English, the forest was the metaphor the Germans inhabited" (639); or in which an ethnically Italian Chilean avers that "all Chileans were faggots," only to concede to his son's passionate opinion that "it's really the Italians who are faggots, just look at World War II" (197). The comparative mode is most visible in its manic hypertrophy, as when one character claims that "the Welsh are swine," that "the English are swine, too, but not as bad as the Welsh," and that the "Scots are bigger swine than the English and only a little better than the Welsh"—a tirade that swells to incorporate the French, Italians, Austrians, Hungarians, Bohemians, Jews, Bavarians, Rhinelanders, Poles, Serbs, Canadians, French Canadians, Americans, Irish Americans, Turks, Saxons, Westphalians, Swedes, Norwegians, and Finns into a carefully graded and near-universal history of infamy (642–43).

But if we are tempted to conclude that this rampant ethno-national mapping is meaningless, *2666*'s first lines signal that it remains key to the novel's own structure. The opening paragraph introduces Jean-Claude Pelletier as he encounters Archiboldi's novel *D'Arsonval*. "The young Pelletier didn't realize at the time," Bolaño writes, "that the novel was part of a trilogy (made up of the English-themed *The Garden* and the Polish-themed *The Leather Mask*, together with the clearly French-themed *D'Arsonval*)"

23. Roberto Bolaño, *2666*, trans. Natasha Wimmer (New York: FSG, 2008), 107; hereafter cited parenthetically.

(3). The comment cannot fail to evoke the structure of *2666*, itself divided into “parts” whose relation to one another is the major interpretive issue the novel presents as a single novel.²⁴ The metanarrative effect here is enhanced by the “note from the author’s heirs” (immediately preceding these words in the printed text) indicating that in the interests of artistic unity Bolaño’s executors have contravened his plan to publish the novel’s five parts as separate books so as to increase the novel’s profitability (xi): like Pelletier, the reader of *2666* must be structurally uncertain as to the proper context for the text in her hands, as well as the part-whole relations that govern its internal operations. As important, the comparison underscores the signal difference between Archimboldi’s trilogy and Bolaño’s novel-in-parts: while the former is wholly European in scope, the latter explicitly folds its European sections into a larger transatlantic structure.

This fact, in turn, makes clear that the failure of “The Part about the Critics” to work as an allegory of intra-European meaning is precisely its point: it works instead as an allegory of Europe itself. More than representatives of their countries of origin, the ensemble of critics functions as an image of a federated Europe, where differences have become cultural inflections on a sturdier continental identity. The Rohmeresque erotic competition in which the critics politely engage only increases their essential unity, as does their affection for Archimboldi, whose Germanness here indexes not Europe’s historical demons but a distance from national chauvinism: hence Espinoza affiliates to Archimboldi against the Iberian dogmatism of his peers in Madrid, who write about Baroja, Ortega y Gasset, or Cela (7); hence also the Archimboldians’ major academic antagonists are the Teutonic team of “Schwarz, Borchmeyer, and Pohl” (11). Only once we recognize the critics’ obsession with Archimboldi as an investment in a cosmopolitan Europe does the larger structure of which this intra-European comedy is a component part come into view. When Bolaño abruptly transports the critics to the northern Mexican state of Sonora, the move forcibly provincializes their ecumenism; Bolaño makes the Europeanness of “The Part about the Critics” visible—not most interestingly as the object of satire or of critique but simply as *partial*, as inadequate to the structures *2666* has in its sights. The undermotivation of the novel’s swerve to the New World (the critics implausibly depart for Mexico after talking with a writer

24. “The problem is not that the incidents are arbitrarily placed, hence unrelated; it is that the form of the relation is not easily readable.” Brett Levinson, “Case Closed: Madness and Dissociation in *2666*,” *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 18, nos. 2–3 (December 2009): 178.

who claims to have a friend who says he's met Archiboldi there) only emphasizes the sense that the critics are obeying some other than psychological exigency: call it the exigency of the novel itself. For no reason that can be justified in terms of novelistic probability, *2666* wants to confront its critics, and the comparative European literature (i.e., "Literature") for which they stand, with a developing world that has scarcely crossed their consciousness.

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And, of course, they are not sent just to "Latin America" or to the "developing world" but to Santa Teresa, Bolaño's fictional transmutation of Chihuahua's Ciudad Juárez, ravaged since the early 1990s by the unsolved killings of hundreds of women and since 2008 (five years after Bolaño's death, but in a development which would not have surprised him) by Felipe Calderón's failed drug war, which has made it among the world's most murderous cities. These facts have prompted at least one recent commentator to conclude that *2666* partakes of a marketable fashion for representations of Latin America as a maelstrom of apocalyptic violence.²⁵ But the mythic qualities with which Bolaño invests Santa Teresa result not only from the violence for which it has become an emblem but from its geopolitically peculiar status as a border town (Juárez shares the border with El Paso, Texas; Bolaño's version abuts the Arizona desert). Santa Teresa is situated at the very boundary of the global North and South—a fact that must inform any understanding of *2666*'s "partness," its conspicuous formal self-division. If Bolaño first trains us to think of literary parts as analogous to (European) geopolitical formations before setting the partialness of Europe over against a larger global expanse, the book's definitive arrival on the border (Santa Teresa is the only setting to occur in all five parts) regrounds the comparative dynamic on this particular terrain, formally insisting that *this* division is the one that matters most at the current historical moment. The book's parts become visible not as a compositional convenience or as an abstract testament to the partialness of any given perspective but as the formal emblem of a specific border; the partitions that divide *2666* from itself are indices of the United States' determining influence on a geopolitical space it abuts and would prefer to ignore.

The border conditions the novel's ancillary detail—so that a Santa

25. See Sarah Pollack, "After Bolaño: Rethinking the Politics of Latin American Literature in Translation," *PMLA* 128, no. 3 (May 2013): 663.

Teresan police inspector channel surfing will, as a matter of course, hit “Mexican channels and American channels, channels with crippled madmen who galloped under the stars and uttered unintelligible greetings, in Spanish or English or Spanglish” (534)—but also its more surreal effects, like the fast-food joint called El Rey del Taco that is “decorated like a McDonald’s, but in an unsettling way,” with chairs of straw instead of plastic and with the waitstaff inexplicably dressed as Mexican *federales* (312). The imaginary of the border, in which two proximate entities are at once superimposed and differentiated, infects the text even when the matter at hand bears no overt relation to the US-Mexico boundary: thus, when the African American journalist Oscar Fate remembers his recently deceased mother, he fixes on the image of “the scales of Blind Justice, except that instead of two platters, there were two bottles,” one filled with desert sand, the other with acid (348); and thus, when Charly Cruz wants to explain how the mind retains retinal images, he describes the “magic disc” toy he had as a child which, when spun, made it seem that the drunken man depicted on one side was enclosed in the bars drawn on the other (334–35). Both images have taken on the dualistic coloration of the topography in which they are articulated: the sand one might confuse for a corrosive poison and the prison whose bars are only flickeringly visible are both poetically compressed emblems of the US-Mexico border.

Perhaps nowhere is 2666’s border imaginary more evident than in the names Bolaño invents for the *maquiladoras* at which so many of the female victims are employed. The company monikers ring like a litany through “The Part about the Crimes,” in grating counterpoint to the forensic details of the violated corpses. “File-Sis” (359), “K&T” (374), “Nip-Mex” (390), “Multizone-West” (393), “Interzone-Berny” (402), “Holmes & West” (412), “EastWest” (413), “Horizon W&E” (426), “Rem&Co.” (460), “Country&SeaTech” (461), “Dutch&Rhodes” (507), “Dun-Corp.” (518), “MachenCorp.” (527), “WS-Inc.” (546), “Cal&Son” (549): plausibly unlovely as these all are, a cursory glance at the names of Juárez *maquiladoras* shows that the frequency with which Bolaño invents compound verbal formations—abbreviations linked with ampersands, or two words, or portions of words, simply squashed against one other—far exceeds their actual incidence.²⁶ Even at the level of the grapheme, then, Bolaño submits his text to a borderization. The *maquiladora* names semantically capture the cognitive

26. See www.seccionamarilla.com.mx/resultados/maquiladoras/chihuahua/ciudad-juarez (accessed October 17, 2013).

operation performed by the border as Bolaño conceives of it: to bring two entities into visible contiguity in the same space.

This operation can clearly no longer be comprehended under the rubric of comparison: where comparison must at some basic level assume the isolation of its component terms (walling off "Italy" from "Spain," or the "political" from the "cultural," in order to collate their analogous parts), Bolaño makes perceptible the material terrain that links and separates the terms. His fidelity to his comparative imagination, then, ultimately pushes him to a different cognitive operation entirely—pushes him from the plotting of discreet terms on an abstract grid to a mapping of systemic relations. "You do not *compare* parts of a whole," writes Nirvana Tanoukhi, paraphrasing the methodological insight behind Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems theory.²⁷ Or, as Bolaño puts a similar motto in *2666*, ventriloquizing the thoughts of Hans Reiter (a.k.a. Archimboldi), "All the seas were ultimately the same sea" (704). Both sentences rely on a spatialization to show the inadequacy of comparison to the work of structural comprehension. If this transformation can be best understood in terms of comparison yielding to allegory, it is also clear that the very literality of *2666*'s spatialization saps allegory of its metaphysical orientation. In *2666*, the border (as a represented locale, as a structural principle of the book's own self-splitting, and as an omnipresent repertoire of image and grapheme) demands to be read as an allegorical referent drained of mystical weight—an allegorical referent with its geopolitical resonance intact.

Doing so requires taking some distance from critical accounts that, justifiably eager to resist an understanding of Bolaño's work as adequately explained by Latin American literary tradition, have claimed for him a "global" or otherwise unplaced aesthetic: hence, Brett Levinson, in noting the novel's intense formal patterning, writes that "it sometimes appears that, for Bolaño, any content will do," while Sergio Villalobos-Ruminott claims that it is "impossible to conceive of [Bolaño] as a simple part of the Latin American canon" and that he must be interpreted according to a "global history [that] does not refer to the problem of representation of any particular region in a postcolonial vein, but to the configuration of a planetary scenario marked by the exhaustion of both modern sovereignty and the figure of the nation state."²⁸ One can agree with both of these assess-

27. Nirvana Tanoukhi, "The Scale of World Literature," in *Immanuel Wallerstein and the Problem of the World: System, Scale, Culture*, ed. David Palumbo-Liu, Bruce W. Robbins, and Nirvana Tanoukhi (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 92.

28. See Levinson, "Case Closed," 178; Sergio Villalobos-Ruminott, "A Kind of Hell:

ments and yet feel that the crucial point about Bolaño's work is not its totalizing vision but its grounding of this vision at the border of North and South. Santa Teresa is an emblem neither of a particular Latin American horror nor of a generalized Weltschmerz but of a global situation whose contours are variably visible from distinct geopolitical locations. It is, in other words, a diagnosis of what Fredric Jameson calls a "blindness at the center" of world power—a blindness specifically to the "fundamental dissymmetry between the United States and other cultures."²⁹ In an important sense, the United States—its power and the epistemological warping consequent on it—is the referent of *2666*'s massively elaborated comparative structures. That the designation remains implicit in *2666* is one measure of the depth of the dissymmetry: while the book's fabric is determined by the shaping presence of the United States just beyond the various borders it obsessively encodes, it is in no explicit way directed to an American readership. For readers elsewhere, that presence is no doubt so obvious as to go without saying.

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But Bolaño is also interested in the conditions under which the facticity of the border, the undeniableity of the geopolitical distinction it adumbrates, become cognitively available to those on the privileged side of it. As we have seen, one of Bolaño's favored staging grounds for the symptomatic appearance of the developed world's geopolitical unconscious is the troublingly extended vacation: Ana and Ángel's murderous summer, Udo's menacing Costa Brava getaway. Unlikely as it seems, he contrives to have the world of leisure, of hotels and of "time off," play an outsize role in *2666* as well. The critics who fly to Santa Teresa on such scant evidence spend most of their time in the city's Hotel México, and what transpires there suggests that leisure's extraterritoriality—at once temporal (adjacent to but outside of everyday time) and spatial (not home, not quite wherever one is visiting, either)—makes it a privileged modality for intimating the determining features of the imperial everyday. Each of the critics' rooms is characterized by a visual peculiarity: Pelletier's toilet bowl is missing

Roberto Bolaño and the Return of World Literature," *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 18, nos. 2–3 (December 2009): 193, 195.

29. Fredric Jameson, "Notes on Globalization as a Philosophical Issue," in *The Cultures of Globalization*, ed. Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 59, 63.

a large chunk of porcelain, below which streaks of dark red material are visible; Espinoza's wall is adorned with an enormous desert scene featuring men on horseback who might be "in the army or a riding club" (110); Norton's room contains two mirrors on opposite walls that, from a certain position, create an impression of infinite space. In the dreams the critics have on their first night, these features take on a deictic function, pointing the hotel guests to the outside world: Espinoza's picture turns into a window onto the desert through which he perceives menacingly moving figures; the walls of Pelletier's bathroom are covered with something that might be shit or blood or vomit, as if the toilet bowl has become a conduit from some hideous exterior; Norton sees a woman in the reverberating mirror-space she believes is "just like me . . . but she's dead" (116). These effects could come across as cheap surreal horror, or as what John Beverley has identified as the "postmodernist tourist sublime," in which the perception of a steep power differential becomes fodder for the metropolitan viewer's self-understanding.³⁰ And indeed, they may be just that for the critics themselves. But *2666* has no interest in exploring the dreams' psychic implications: the critics will shortly exit the novel, as if ushered out by exactly these dreams, and *2666* will follow the directional vector of these images out into the landscape of Santa Teresa. Utterly lacking in personal meaning, the dreams are instead registration devices of the sociopolitical context, precisely recording the violence by which the critics do not yet realize they are surrounded. The Hotel México is literally a series of apertures onto the space in which it is situated.³¹

If the correlation of the critics' dreams suggests that their import is not psychologically but geopolitically symptomatic, the impression is confirmed when, several hundred pages later, the PRI congresswoman, Azucena Esquivel Plata, travels to Santa Teresa in search of a missing school friend and stays in what appears to be Norton's room in the Hotel México, noting in slightly different terms the effect of the mirrors before continuing her (better-informed) investigation. The novel's internal chronology makes it impossible to know which of these visits precedes the other: what matters is not that the Mexican's visit foretells the Englishwoman's (or vice

30. See Beverley, *Against Literature*, 44.

31. Morini, the one critic who does not travel to Santa Teresa, has in a sense already been there: the dream he has earlier in the novel places him in a vacation-space opening on a vista of international traffic, where what at first seems "an ordinary hotel pool" reveals itself to be "at least a thousand feet wide and more than two miles long," its water spotted with "oil patches, the kind you see in harbors" (46).

versa) but that the women are brought to share the same literal ground, the better to map the cultural and political distance between them. The insistence of the pattern confirms Jameson's well-known claim that modernism maps geopolitical symptoms through intimations of sublime space.³² But while the relation of the modernist symptom to its colonial referent was necessarily obscure to its metropolitan readers, Bolaño's symptoms are variably legible: painfully opaque to most of the characters who experience them, unavoidably clear both to the readers who live on that ground and to those other readers who are being educated in their meaning by these very images. Deliberately fixing the abstract space of consumer enjoyment on specific geopolitical ground, these visions from the Hotel México are perhaps the novel's privileged aesthetic emblems of the border.³³

It is hardly irrelevant to Bolaño's conception of this hotel world that one preferred vacation activity is relaxing with a book. Aside from dreaming, reading is the activity that most occupies the guests of the Hotel México: Espinoza spends his mornings scanning the local papers, while Pelletier obsessively rereads Archimboldi's novels. Both projects ostensibly serve their search for the German writer, but again this leisure activity functions primarily to make evident the ground on which it takes place. When, in what are almost the final lines of the novel's first part, Pelletier tells Espinoza that "Archimboldi is here . . . and we're here, and this is the closest we'll ever be to him" (159), his deictic "this" refers all at once to the hotel terrace on which they sit, the reading in which they have been immersed, the formal edges of "The Part about the Critics" itself, and the very realm of the literary of which the critics are ambassadors.

Bolaño's tendency to materialize such space-times (reading, border, hotel, vacation) on concrete ground is confirmed when, at the other end

32. Fredric Jameson, "Modernism and Imperialism," in *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature*, ed. Seamus Deane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990).

33. Ciudad Juárez—a party town before the devastation of the last twenty years—can itself be understood as a symbolically ambivalent leisure space. Jean Franco draws attention to Sergio González Rodríguez's use, in his crucial 2002 book on the Juárez murders, of the word *traspatio* to characterize the city: Franco notes that *traspatio* (roughly "backyard") suggests "a place for obsolete things—for rejects, discards, and for enterprises that can be run more cheaply south of the border." The word also indicates a space of leisure and recreation, whose adjacency to the bourgeois interior makes it a precise spatial analogue of the vacation: *traspatio* is semantically multivalent enough to serve as the title not only of a 2010 film about the Juárez murders (as Franco notes) but also of a chic eatery in Mexico City's Roma neighborhood. See Franco, *Cruel Modernity*, 218, and Sergio González Rodríguez, *Huesos en el desierto* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 2002), 27.

of *2666*, he contrives to make an oddly peaceful, eerily extended scene of reading the central event in his chronicle of World War II's eastern front. Kosetkino, the liquidated Ukrainian Jewish village where Reiter's platoon is forgotten for several months, is described by one of his comrades as a "frozen paradise," a designation that seems naturally to produce its corollary activity when Reiter discovers Boris Ansky's journals and settles into the obsessive task of "reading, reading" (707, 708). But this would-be escapist endeavor ends by reorganizing Reiter's cognitive map of the ground on which he reads, so that on finishing the journal he pictures Ansky's mother secreting it in exactly this space in which he, Reiter, is reading: "He imagined her finding a safe place for her son's notebook and then, in his dreams, he watched her go off with the other Jews of Kosetkino toward the waiting German punishment, toward us, toward death" (737). The disorienting pronoun shift (from "he" to "us") makes it uncertain whether the sentence is narrated from the perspective of the pursuing Germans, the fleeing Jews, or from some impossible position above them—as if the text were straining for an aerially vectored grammar adequate to the geopolitical situation embracing both Ansky and Reiter.

This particular act of reading occurs not only on another continent but in another "part" of *2666* entirely, on the far side of one of the novel's formal frontiers. The geopolitical environment partitioned off by "The Part about Archiboldi" is, of course, very different from what precedes it in the novel: here, Latin America is an exotic conversation piece but hardly a relevant political entity; here, Germany's role as a marker of a unified Europe is far from innocuous. Bolaño's move to this European space-time, the second massive swerve taken by *2666*, presents one of the central conundrums of the novel. The placement of the World War II material in the final section might lead us to see it as containing the truth of everything that has gone before: the sense that the "answer" to the crimes of Santa Teresa are to be found on the distant killing fields of Europe is buttressed by Bolaño's invocation of detective fiction, where the discourse achieves epistemological closure by moving back to the story's prehistory. Following such cues, Julio Sebastián Figueroa Jofré has claimed that "if this novel is also linked to Nazism . . . this is because Nazism continues to function as the measure of all crime."³⁴

Certainly we have seen Bolaño employ such hierarchical distribu-

34. Julio Sebastián Figueroa Jofré, "Bolaño con Borges: juegos con la infamia y el mal radical" in *Roberto Bolaño: Ruptura y violencia en la literatura finisecular*, ed. Felipe A. Ríos Baeza (Mexico City: Ediciones Eón, 2010), 458; my translation.

tions of meaning: in *Consejos*, we sense that Ana and Ángel's crime spree somehow "really" refers to a Spanish or Southern Cone fascism that never achieves representation, just as in *The Third Reich*, Udo's board game points both to the German past and to the Latin American regimes only obliquely mentioned in the text. The operations of these texts could be usefully approached via Fletcher's resonant definition of allegory, which figures the conceptual line between the literal text and its allegorical meaning as a hierarchizing wall: the wall in Bolaño's earlier novels would simply be the outer boundary of the text itself, which separates the (implicitly devalued) material that receives diegetic elaboration from the (implicitly valorized) truth it intimates. In *2666*, by contrast, Bolaño moves the allegorical barrier into the interior of the text, thereby investing the boundaries between his novel's parts with the epistemological provocation of allegory but making it undecidable on which side of these intramural partitions truth lies. Thus relocated, that barrier no longer serves allegory's hierarchizing function: Bolaño has turned allegory's wall into a border.

Understanding the privileged epistemological division in *2666* as a border alters our sense of the text's geopolitical significance and of its distribution of truth: one side of a frontier is no more or less real than the other, and only the map that includes them both comprehends the meaning of the border or of life on either side of it. This is the perspective that makes sense of the massive diegetic elaboration of the novel's fifth, "German" section, "The Part about Archiboldi"—which otherwise might seem either simply irrelevant to the devastating account of the Sonoran murders or, worse, a somewhat repugnant attempt to guarantee the gravity of the Mexican crimes by connecting them to the Big Meaning of the Holocaust. But it is precisely Bolaño's exhaustively realistic treatment of both of these sections that refuses to make either term the mirror of the other. The sheer referential weight of both the Mexican and the European sections of the novel corrodes any absolute status for the Nazi genocide—and this corrosion does nothing to claim these two spaces' equivalence: any such argument falters on the very proliferation of detail in both sections. Each location remains stubbornly and viscerally itself. Thus does Bolaño's text short-circuit allegorical thought with the density of its verisimilitude; more precisely, it retains the structure of allegory but refuses to tell us which side of the code takes precedence.³⁵

35. Compare what, from this perspective, seems the problematic economy of Toni Morrison's invocation (in the famous dedication of *Beloved*) of the "Sixty Million and more" vic-

Perhaps surprisingly, the best theoretical account of this hermeneutic operation is Erich Auerbach's analysis of *figura*, the category of patristic scriptural exegesis according to which Old Testament events lose none of their historical validity once they are interpreted as figures for New Testament events to come. Figural interpretation, Auerbach writes, "refused to consider the Old Testament as mere allegory . . . it had real, literal meaning throughout, and even where there was figural prophecy, the figure had just as much historical reality as what it prophesied. The prophetic figure . . . is a concrete historical fact, and it is fulfilled by concrete historical fact."³⁶ Auerbach is describing a universe that is pregnant with allegorical significance but where no datum gives up its referential and historical heaviness. Bolaño gives voice to a strikingly congruent sense of the crimes of Santa Teresa when he has a nameless hotel clerk tell Fate that "every single thing in this country is an homage to everything in the world, even the things that haven't happened yet" (339). What might seem a comment on the derivative nature of the cultural life of the developing world—every Rey del Taco a shadow-McDonald's—ends by reorganizing our sense of historico-ontological priority in ways startlingly reminiscent of Auerbach. In the context of *2666*, whose structurally terminal part is chronologically earliest, "the things that haven't happened yet" in the 1990s—the period in which the clerk speaks these words, near the novel's midpoint—include the details of Archiboldi's experiences in World War II, at which the reader only arrives in the final stretches of the text. As elsewhere, the novel's complex temporal organization charges both spaces with heightened significance but refuses to promote or devalue one at the expense of the other. Thus does an overtly mystical vision of the world as menaced with obscurely connected outbreaks of evil result in a pitilessly secular poetics.³⁷

tims of slavery. The problem is not in bringing New World slavery into the same semantic field as Nazism (a move signaled by Morrison's invocation of the Holocaust's six million victims) nor in pointing out that the victims of slavery far exceeded those of Nazism—both operations could be understood to usefully specify the particularity of each crime—but in the rhetorical logic that in one stroke mythologizes the Holocaust as the gold standard of historical crime *and* inscribes it in a numerical system of value.

36. Erich Auerbach, "Figura," in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (1959; repr., Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 30. José Ramón Ruisánchez Serra invokes Auerbach's essay to argue that allegory in *2666* "modifies the nature of the past and the future." See José Ramón Ruisánchez Serra, "Fate o la inminencia," in *Roberto Bolaño*, ed. Ríos Baeza, 394–95; my translation.

37. Bolaño's fictional project could thus be understood as a literary analogue to Auerbach's critical career, devoted both to the explication of medieval systems of religious

This secular historical vision governs the narrative architecture of each part of *2666* as well as their relations to one other. The latter is clearest in the avuncular—the *merely* avuncular—relationship that *2666* establishes between “The Part about the Crimes” and “The Part about Archimboldi.” Klaus Haas, the unsavory electronics store owner who is arrested in Santa Teresa on suspicion of multiple murder, is, we learn, the nephew of Hans Reiter/Archimboldi. But the revelation is wholly anticlimactic—not least because, while Haas is obviously a violent man, he is just as obviously not “the” author of the hundreds of killings, if of any. Their genetic relation brings the men into narrative proximity but issues in no narrative solution; much less does it assert a “blood tie” between genocide and *feminicidio*.³⁸ A similarly paratactic structure informs the sections individually: several pages taken almost at random from the opening pages of “Crimes,” where the narrative grammar of the section is established, include one case in which a woman is shot by her boyfriend (who may or may not have subsequently crossed into the United States); two murders of *maquiladora* workers that the police investigate only desultorily and whose solution is blocked by bureaucratic obstacles; a kidnapping and murder that the police attempt to pin on an obviously innocent Salvadoran immigrant (who later dies of dehydration illegally crossing the border); and a matricide that is “solved” following a confession the investigating officer suspects to be false (390–94). Serial in the root sense, these crimes submit to no overarching logic and have in common only an evident structural misogyny and a context in which the state has abandoned the most vulnerable elements of the population.³⁹

thought and to the secular drive to represent everyday life. On these only apparently competing valences of Auerbach’s work, see Jacob Hovind, “Figural Interpretation as Modernist Hermeneutics: The Rhetoric of Erich Auerbach’s *Mimesis*,” *Comparative Literature* 64, no. 3 (2012): 257–69.

38. As claimed by Peter Elmore, “*2666*: La autoría en el tiempo del límite,” in *Bolaño salvaje*, ed. Edmundo Paz Soldán and Gustavo Faverón Patriau (Barcelona: Candaya, 2008), 261; my translation.

39. Carlos Oliva Mendoza explains that the neologism *feminicidio* was adopted by feminist activists to denote the “social permissibility” and the “impunity of the Mexican state” that distinguish the Juárez murders; see Carlos Oliva Mendoza, “Construcción cultural de la nación y feminicidio en Ciudad Juárez,” in *Feminicidio: Actas de denuncia y controversia*, ed. Ana María Martínez de la Escalera (Mexico City: UNAM, 2010), 18; my translation. In an insightful discussion of *2666*, Elisabeth Ladenson calls attention to Bolaño’s success in “depicting violence against women without any appeal to the reader’s prurience at all.” See Elisabeth Ladenson, “Violence in Literature from Homer to Bolaño,” talk

A similarly horizontalizing aesthetic governs “The Part about Archimboldi”: in Reiter’s encounter with the Eichmannesque Nazi officer Leo Sammer (who complains self-pityingly about the logistical headaches he faced in disposing of five hundred Greek Jews), Bolaño includes the kind of episode that is virtually a *scène à faire* in Holocaust literature. But he puts alongside it Ansky’s notebooks detailing the horrors of Stalin’s purges—precisely the historical event at the center of the 1980s *Historikerstreit*, the German historians’ dispute over how and whether to compare the magnitude of the Nazis’ crimes with the gulag.⁴⁰ Bolaño’s paratactic treatment preserves the terms of this dispute but rejects comparison as the relevant ethical issue: both terms in the historical series demand diegetic elaboration, and only that narrative working-through avoids promoting one of these as the realer crime. “The Part about Archimboldi” is, in other words, a relentless deconstruction of the metaphysics of the Holocaust that subtracts nothing from the Holocaust’s historical weight. This demetaphysicizing function justifies—more strongly, it *requires*—the massive elaboration of the novel’s German “part”: in devoting the last stretches of his final book to the reality of Nazism, Bolaño is not installing the Holocaust as the “measure of all crime” but giving historical flesh to what he has previously employed as an allegorical measuring stick. This completism results directly from the narrative unfolding demanded by the movement of the allegorical conception to the plane of secular history, and it accounts for the curious modesty that cohabits with the novel’s monumental ambition.⁴¹

presented at the “Vida y Resistencia en la Frontera Norte” conference at the Colegio de la Frontera Norte, Ciudad Juárez, 2011; Spanish version in Salvador Cruz Sierra, ed., *Vida, muerte y resistencia en Ciudad Juárez: una aproximación desde la violencia, el género y la cultura* (Ciudad Juárez: El Colef, 2014).

40. Beatriz Sarlo invokes the *Historikerstreit* to explain the Latin American preoccupation with Nazism, pointing out that the German debates overlapped with the transitions to free elections in Argentina (1983), Uruguay (1984), and Chile (1990). The coincidence of the German controversy with the loosening of political discourse in the Southern Cone, Sarlo suggests, made the comparison inevitable. See Beatriz Sarlo, *Tiempo pasado: Cultura de la memoria y giro subjetivo; Una discusión* (Mexico: Siglo XXI, 2006), cited in Daniella Blejer, “Pensar/Clasificar/Denunciar: Las resignificaciones del archivo en 2666,” in *Roberto Bolaño*, ed. Ríos Baeza, 269.

41. As Alberto Medina aptly observes, “The extraordinary size of some of [Bolaño’s] novels is in this sense deceiving: it is not that they are very long narratives; it is that there are a lot of small narratives.” But where Medina goes on to conclude that Bolaño’s work is made for people “just interested in good stories that don’t last for too long,” the effect he describes is more interestingly seen as a narrative model of the “quick empirical curiosity” that Bruce Robbins has argued is necessary to responsible transnational political

Moreover, Bolaño's lateralizing aesthetic offers a supple narrative tool for at once naming the importance of a given historical crux and showing its historicity. The fact is essential to the meaning of his invented border city. Some readers have faulted the theological tones implicit in Bolaño's sense of Ciudad Juárez as an image of "hell" (the word he invoked to describe the city in an interview shortly before his death).⁴² But there is nothing metaphysical about the violence on the US-Mexico border depicted in *2666*. Very much departing from his procedure in *The Savage Detectives*, whose conclusion takes place against the backdrop of a quasi-mythical adventure realm denominated "Sonora," in the later novel, as we have seen, Bolaño crowds the identical territory with the markers of its economic and political present. This difference subtends Bolaño's sense of the special status of the murders of Santa Teresa, encapsulated in the much-quoted opinion of one of the novel's characters: "No one pays attention to these killings, but the secret of the world is hidden in them" (348). Such claims do indeed infuse the border with figural heaviness, and the novel does claim a world-historical import for the crimes occurring on the US-Mexico frontier.⁴³ But that border has no transcendental authority, and the geopolitical configuration it emblemizes has no guarantee of eternal longevity. The novel, after all, has opened with a contemporary Europe where national divisions feel like chits in a low-stakes board game and gone forward narratively (and backward historically) to a Europe where those same divisions are of the most serious consequence. Similarly, its insistence on the priority, now, of this particular border diagnoses at one and the same time the United States' global hegemony and the historicity of that hegemony.

The Auerbachian frame that I have used to unfold Bolaño's poetics pertains to an early Christian world whose conceptual coherence was guaranteed by a religious belief saturating the realm of politics, culture, and thought. Such coherence is obviously not ours. But a newly insistent geopolitical closure has, just as obviously, been registered across a variety

commitment. See Medina, "Arts of Homelessness," 549; Bruce Robbins, *Feeling Global: Internationalism in Distress* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 59.

42. See Roberto Bolaño: *The Last Interview and Other Conversations*, 114.

43. Compare Rodrigo Parrini's characterization of the border as "one of the topoi par excellence of postmodernity and global capitalism. . . . It is as if everything were condensed into it, yet it remains extremely undefined, a space that is always postponed." Like Bolaño, Parrini understands the border as a figural emblem, an allegorical space that indexes a stubbornly real historical dispensation. See Rodrigo Parrini, "Bodyscapes: Globalization, Corporeal Politics, and Violence in Mexico," *Social Text* 28, no. 3 (2010): 76.

of cultural and intellectual realms under the name of globalization. This obscurely but palpably unified world is Bolaño's subject in *2666*. However senseless the murders of Santa Teresa/Juárez appear in their details, their condition of possibility has clearly been the neoliberal restructuring of the border economy, which has pooled vast populations of vulnerable migrants from Mexico and Central America (from whose ranks the female victims have disproportionately come) at Latin America's northern edge; in that sense, this suffering is the endpoint of a hemispheric story of US dominance that begins in Chile in 1973. While that story could, of course, be started earlier and elsewhere (the Dominican Republic in 1965, Guatemala in 1954 . . . and so on, at least as far back as 1846 in northern Mexico itself), the salience of the Chilean case is, as Harvey claims, partly a matter of the unprecedented restructuring of the domestic economy which that particular coup entailed; where the object of earlier American interventions was to preserve these countries in a state of neocolonial dependence on the United States, the Chilean coup made that nation a testing ground for the neoliberal economy that would eventually take root in the United States itself.⁴⁴

If so far the United States' role in the world's increasingly undeniable intimacy with itself has been elusive to Bolaño's American readers, it is worth remembering that his work has only begun to be absorbed here. Historical developments might soon enough force us to abandon the project of comparing Bolaño's work to imagined US analogues and instead to recognize his work as the epic of a singular history. In the meantime, the peculiarity of address in Bolaño's work—in every way written around American power, in no particular way directed to it—may be its true originality and its truest claim to status as "global" fiction, if we understand the latter to mean neither some particularly portable brand of writing nor one that covers mul-

44. The Chilean starting point of Bolaño's conception of Latin American history is no doubt a matter of personal mythology, but no less geopolitically and aesthetically suggestive for that. Note, for example, how the accident of Chile's geographical situation conduces to a particular brand of totalizing continentality in Bolaño's work, evident in the northward thrust of his poem "Los neochilenos" ("The Neochileans," 1993), which details a breakneck journey of a rock group from Santiago into and across Peru and ends with a breathless vision of the Ecuadorean border—as if the poem's eponymous protagonists are obeying a directional vector implicit in their nation's elongated shape. At the other end of his career, of course, *The Savage Detectives* and *2666* are both drawn toward the very upper boundary of the Latin American continent, as if in tacit completion of that originary trajectory. See "The Neochileans," in *The Unknown University*, trans. Laura Healy (New York: New Directions, 2013), 749–79.

tiple locales, but one that gives form to the structures equally shaping the realities of North and South. It is central to the effect of Bolaño's writing that its address to US readers occurs as it were incidentally; his work compels conviction not because it is news from elsewhere but because it is news of a shared historical condition, news the more pressing because that condition is lived so unequally. Bolaño's body of work cannot be reduced to an accusation lodged at the American Empire, but understanding the coherence of his work, and of the contemporary world, remains impossible unless one takes such an accusation for granted. One way to measure the importance of Bolaño's popularity in this country is to note that he has made those tasks inextricable from one another.