Broken Bodies, Broken Nations: Roberto Bolaño on Neoliberal Logic and (Un)Mediated Violence

The present study attends to the metaphorical role of geometry and photography throughout Roberto Bolaño's oeuvre in relation to the author's persistent interrogation of authoritarian politics and aesthetics in Latin America. In a comparative reading of four works, focusing particularly on Estrella distante *(1996) and* 2666 *(2004), I posit that Bolaño grapples with the shifting norms of waning national modernity and burgeoning neoliberal globalization across his literary corpus. My reading of these works shows how the female body is figured as a metaphor for the body politic of the nation. I maintain that Bolaño revisits and re-presents the same scene across multiple novels, deploying a revisionist aesthetics that seeks to comprehend and render legible the shifting dynamics of politics in the present. In this way, the aesthetic authority of the photographer stands in for the political sovereignty of the nation state in the earlier works, a relationship that is later supplanted in* 2666. *This comparative reading unfolds via two principal inquiries: by examining the space in which female bodies are disclosed in each narrative and by considering the role of aesthetic mediation in that disclosure.*

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—Pero volvamos al origen, volvamos a Carlos Wieder y al año de gracia de 1974 (Bolaño, *Estrella distante* 86)

Reflecting on the work of twentieth-century Chilean photographer Sergio Larraín, Roberto Bolaño (1953-2003) opens the essay "Los personajes fatales" (2004) with the description of an imagined scene.[1] "El asesino," Bolaño begins, "duerme mientras la víctima lo fotografía" (259). He then elaborates upon the scene in a series of crisp narrative snapshots:

> En imágenes: una cama individual, barata, en una habitación ni soleada ni en penumbras, sobre la cama un tipo confiado, dormido boca arriba o de lado, vestido con calzoncillos y camiseta, calcetines oscuros, sin sábanas que lo cubran, en el estado de abandono propio de un durmiente, y una sombra, ni hombre ni mujer, solo sombra, silueta andrógina situada a los pies de la cama, escorada hacia la izquierda, hacia el centro de la habitación, que sostiene una pequeña cámara en el aire y que mira por el objetivo . . . La máquina fotográfica que sostiene con las manos, esto es importante subrayarlo, da la impresión de estar afianzada en un trípode, un trípode imaginario en el centro de esa habitación ligeramente desordenada . . . (259–60)

A preoccupation with the geometry of the setting runs through this opening narrative sketch. The angled ("escorada") silhouette of the victim-photographer creates a line that draws the eye toward the center of the room. This shadow holds a smaller rectangle—the camera—and the scene insists on ("esto es importante subrayarlo") an imagined tripod that steadies the camera in the victim-photographer's hand. Finally, the narrative draws attention to the circular lens ("el objetivo") that will (or may or could) shutter and capture an image, suggesting an implicit rectangle—the deferred photographic rendering of the sleeping assassin.

Geometry as intrinsic to the art of photography emerges thematically and formally throughout the essay. The piece is comprised of brief, Polaroid-like narrative portraits that describe and interpret a handful of Larraín's photos as well as his artistic process—or the process as imagined by Bolaño the essayist. The concise accounts reference the framing and the perspective of the images. What's more, "Los personajes fatales" stands out visually in *Entre paréntesis*—a compilation of newspaper articles, speeches, and essays penned or delivered by Bolaño between 1998 and 2003—due to its distinctive formal appearance. Of the 125 short texts that make up *Entre paréntesis*, "Los personajes fatales" is the only piece in which each paragraph stands separated by a double indention. The narrative blocks, often detailing a suspended moment in time, materialize like photographs on a page. Luz Horne observes a related gesture in Argentine author Sergio Chejfec's novels, which she describes as narrative that "does not include images, [but rather] generates them through their textuality: books that are not strictly made of images but which are in the process of 'becoming images'" (234).[2]

It is no mere caprice that Bolaño's reflection on aesthetics and geometry arises in relation to Larraín's work. In 1963, Larraín published

a chapbook of photos and essays entitled *El rectángulo en la mano*, in which he meditates on a sort of aesthetic sovereignty enjoyed by the photographer:

> Es en mi interior que busco las fotografías cuando con la cámara en la mano paseo la vista por fuera, puedo solidificar ese mundo de fantasmas cuando encuentro algo que tiene resonancias en mí. La realidad visible es la base del proceso fotográfico, y también es el juego de organizar un rectángulo; geometría, con el rectángulo en la mano (la cámara), yo busco. Fotografía: ello (el sujeto) dado por la geometría. (Preface)

Larraín makes solid, constitutes, a world of possible subjects by electing a particular geometric arrangement with his camera. In Larraín's accounting, the image of the "subject" is a rendering that relates more to the photographer's capacity to decide what fits inside the rectangle, as selected and captured by the camera in the photographer's hand. Here, I posit that Bolaño transposes this photographic sovereignty to his narrative fiction as an allegorical stand-in for the sovereign authority of the nation state. Similar to the photographer, whose deciding hand "organizes the rectangle," the state partitions national subjects and mediates between the local and the global throughout national modernity.

In what follows, I home in on the constellation of geometry, aesthetics, and political violence as it persistently emerges and, significantly, eventually recedes in Bolaño's oeuvre. In particular, I am interested in how mediated violence relates to state sovereignty in *Estrella distante* (1996), and how this pairing is interrogated and supplanted in the posthumous *2666* (2004). My reading proposes that Bolaño's aesthetic engagements with politics undergo a substantive transformation across his narrative works, which evidences a literary reckoning with the shifting political and economic landscape that comprises the current epoch of neoliberal globalization. I show how Bolaño revisits the same violent scene with a sort of revisionist aesthetics. Across multiple works, the body, and principally the female body, comes to stand as a metaphor for the national body politic. In this way, Bolaño's narratives interrogate and lay bare the shifting dynamics of politics in the neoliberal present. To this end, I attend to the role of aesthetic mediation—namely, photographic mediation—in the representation of violence, as well as the centrality of place—specifically the domestic realm versus the hyper-exposed desert—as these emerge across Bolaño's literary corpus.

Geometry and the Nation State

Carl Schmitt defines the modern state as "the political status of an organized people in an enclosed territorial unit" (*The Concept of the Political* 19). Schmitt locates the authority of the modern state in two form-giving properties: the "constitution" of the state and the "terrestrial fundament" upon which the state's boundaries are demarcated (*Constitutional Theory* 62–65, *The Nomos of the Earth* 47). According to Schmitt's theory, constitution refers not to a particular document or set of norms, but rather to the authority-granting will of a people that consents, in advance, to form a unity under the rule and protection of a sovereign (*Constitutional Theory* 64).[3] In this, Schmitt follows Thomas Hobbes's emphasis on protection and obedience, wherein state legitimacy—in the form of the willing submission of a people to the sovereign—is earned via protection (Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* 52). This political will under a sovereign arises in a particular territory; thus Schmitt locates the ordering principal of the modern state at the conjuncture of politics and geometry. Following Schmitt, political theorist Carlo Galli emphasizes that, during national modernity, "it is politics that determines space" (17). A geographic cut divides physical space into an inside and an outside (Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth* 46–47), and the dynamic will of individual subjects submits to forming part of a collective state (Schmitt, *Constitutional Theory* 61). Combined, these two processes confer political form on a given space, thus structuring internal and external policies, inclusions, and exclusions. Schmitt refers to this theory of modern political space as the nomos of the earth.

Often associated with modern law and order, nomos denotes spatial form, and Schmitt points to the term's etymological origins in the Greek *nemein*, signifying "to divide" and "to pasture" (*The Nomos of the Earth* 326–27). Schmitt frequently invokes the English term for the nomos: "the radical title" (47, 70), which etymologically appeals to both the "essence" and "root" of an act of land-appropriation ("Radical"). In its modern usage, he defines nomos as "the immediate form in which the political and social order of a people becomes spatially visible" (*The Nomos of the Earth* 70). As is apparent in his definition, this demarcation is both political and material in that it gives shape to a national identity and a territorial border. Just as Larraín's camera grants aesthetic form to the figures arranged in its lens, the modern state imparts political form to both space and individuals.

In recent decades, there has been a breakdown in modern politico-spatial relations and a failure in the explanatory capacity of Schmitt's political system to account for this breakdown. In a related fashion, scholars have noted that nation states respond defensively to the collapse of national order. Wendy Brown's *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*, Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson's *Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor*, and Thomas Nail's *Theory of the Border* observe a proliferation of walls and border architecture and posit that these edifices and mechanisms act as a means of forcibly and spectacularly reasserting diminishing state authority. To varying degrees, these authors note the geometric (territorial) breakdown that is symptomatic of the decline of state power (Nail 1; Mezzadra and Neilson 16; Brown, *Walled States* 34). Gareth Williams calls these processes "post-Westphalian decontainment," a nuanced synonym for the epoch of globalization ("Decontainment" 160).[4] Following Galli's *Political Spaces and Global War*, Williams describes how "deterritorialized—unfettered and financialized—capital" constitutes the new nomos of the earth ("Decontainment" 160), which renders those modern political vocabularies and conceptualizations of space explicated in Schmitt's political philosophy obsolete.

Here, it should be acknowledged that, in Latin America, state sovereignty and national subjectivity often did not materialize in the same way as in Europe and the United States. In "Nuestro pobre individualismo" (1946), Jorge Luis Borges attributes this to state corruption and a healthy skepticism about official organs on the part of the Argentine people, succinctly summarizing, "lo cierto es que el argentino es un individuo, no un ciudadano" (373). Scholars such as Ángel Rama, Julio Ramos, and Ileana Rodríguez echo Borges's observation in a broader context, noting that this tendency relates in large part to the effects of colonialism and foreign interventionism, differences in the development of national literatures, state violence and genocide, and the failure of Latin American governments to consolidate subjectivities around a coherent national identity. Notwithstanding these significant differences, the nation state has existed as an aspirational entity in Latin America—which, synecdochically, makes the deferred, undeveloped photograph of Bolaño's essay on Larraín even more fitting.[5] Likewise, despite distinctions in terms of sovereign legitimacy and the formation of national subjectivities, it is undeniable that the geopolitical

borders of the Latin American nation state (i.e. national geometries) were staked out and consolidated in a manner similar to Europe and the United States. Finally, it is revealing that Bolaño sets the originary breakdown of the nation state in Chile, which, prior to the 1973 coup, was historically considered the most stable representative democracy in Latin America.[6]

Broken Bodies

Estrella distante, the first of Bolaño's Chilean novels, is a fictional meditation on the aftermath of the 1973 military coup. The novel begins in Concepción of pre-coup Chile, in a poetry workshop that is attended by the unnamed narrator, a group of Left-wing friends and lovers (the Garmendia twins, Angélica and Verónica, are the objects of desire of nearly every workshop attendee), and the sinister Alberto Ruiz-Tagle, who later comes to be called Carlos Wieder, among other pseudonyms. After the coup, Wieder emerges as the golden child of the military dictatorship due to his enthusiasm for violent military assignments. However, after staging a public exposition of his exploits as a death squad torturer and assassin, Wieder is forced to disappear. The narrative then becomes quasi-*neopolicíaca* when a Chilean detective, Abel Romero, hires the narrator to track down Wieder by trailing his aesthetic endeavors, given that "para encontrar a un poeta necesitaba la ayuda de otro poeta" (126). As is the case in much of Bolaño's writing, fascist violence and literature are entangled, and the narrator, a poet-turned-detective-turned-accomplice in extrajudicial murder, is portrayed as complicit when he is paid for his part in Wieder's death at Romero's hands in Blanes, Spain.

The 1973 military coup and dictatorship period serve as the historical backdrop of *Estrella distante*. Kate Jenckes calls Pinochet's coup "one of the hot fronts of the Cold War" (xiv), and this violent Cold War front is also the birthplace of neoliberalism as a political doctrine. The coup resulted in the assassination of democratically elected President Salvador Allende and the neoliberalization-by-force of Chile under military dictator General Augusto Pinochet. Integral to this background are international factors that played a role in the overthrow of Allende and the installation of the military junta. A desire to protect US business interests and a fear of communism led the United States to become

deeply involved in Chilean politics in the 1960s. To avoid the election of a pro-labor socialist who campaigned on the promise of nationalizing Chilean industries owned by foreign, chiefly US, corporations, the CIA financed Allende's 1964 opponent, Eduardo Frei, and distributed anti-Allende propaganda. Frei won the 1964 election, but the CIA could not prevent Allende from claiming victory six years later, and, even before Allende was confirmed by Congress, the United States implemented the Viaux Solution, which involved orchestrating a future military coup by replacing anti-coup Army generals with pro-coup commanders. Naomi Klein singles out the 1973 coup d'état as the genesis of the deployment of the "shock doctrine" in US foreign (and eventually domestic) policy (90), which is a terror-based counter-revolutionary tactic that uses both economic and physical violence to quash ideological dissent from the tenets of neoliberal capitalism (83).[7]

My reading of *Estrella distante* centers on the so-called Santiago gala ("gala santiaguina"), in which fascist politics and neo-avant-garde aesthetics commingle. The Santiago gala is a two-part exhibition that poet-pilot Wieder stages in 1974, soon after the coup. The first half of the gala comprises a dangerous feat of sky poetry, which has been analyzed by Williams as a scathing critique of the Chilean neo-avant-garde group Colectivo Acciones de Arte (CADA), and as an exposé of the relationship between avant-garde praxis and the state of exception in Chile.[8] The present analysis focuses on the second half of the Santiago gala: a photo exhibit staged in Wieder's rented bedroom in an apartment in Santiago de Chile, which is attended by military and art scene acquaintances of the poet-pilot, as well as his father and three surrealist journalists.

The content of the fictional exhibition, indirectly described in an account by attendee Julio César Muñoz Cano, is comprised of hundreds of photos of individual corpses, body parts, and dying bodies of tortured—mostly female—victims of the military dictatorship, which are displayed on the walls and ceiling of the bedroom. Muñoz Cano describes the bodies in the photos: "Las mujeres parecían maniquíes, en algunos casos maniquíes desmembrados, destrozados, aunque . . . un treinta por ciento de los casos estuvieran vivas en el momento de hacerles la instantánea" (97). *Estrella distante* emphasizes that both the violence enacted on the bodies and their photographic display are carefully controlled by Wieder: "El escenario de las fotos casi no variaba de

una a otra por lo que deduce es el mismo lugar. . . . El orden en que están expuestas no es casual: siguen una línea, una argumentación, una historia (cronológica, espiritual . . .), un plan" (97). Thus the carefully framed photos are arranged in a precise sequence on the bedroom walls; Wieder, as the synecdochical figure of the Chilean state, wields sovereign decision-making power over life, death, and spatial ordering.[9] However, his meticulous organization of the Polaroids into a visual narrative constitutes an act of aesthetic excess that leads the state to disavow him. As I show below, the tension between sovereign control and aesthetic dispersion introduced in *Estrella distante* unravels in *2666*, where, through a sort of aesthetic revisionism, Bolaño revisits and represents this scene of the female corpse.

Published almost a decade after *Estrella distante*, *2666* is replete with similarly mangled female bodies, but the context, circumstances, and perpetrators of the violence are distinct. *2666* meditates on state and interpersonal violence, as well as the complicity of art and intellectuals in that violence. The settings and historical backdrop of the novel are sprawling, shifting from pre-World War II Prussia to post-Cold War Europe, and finally to the Mexico-US border of the mid-1990s. The choice of dates is historically significant, as the leaders of Canada, Mexico, and the United States signed the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in December 1992, and the legislatures of each country began the ratification process in January 1993. This agreement would lead to the sharp rise of the maquila industry in northern Mexico, which inaugurated a paradoxical economic situation. The employment opportunities offered in the maquiladoras incited an influx of migrants, and border towns tended to enjoy the lowest unemployment rates in all of Mexico. However, at the same time, NAFTA granted the factories generous tax breaks, which meant that cities like Ciudad Juárez did not receive the necessary funds to keep up with the population boom. Laura Barberán Reinares observes, "[a]s a result, the city's slums grew exponentially, while basic services such as electricity, sewage, transportation, and public safety for these areas lagged behind" (53). The population growth and lack of public services created a dangerous environment, particularly for women.

Of interest to the present study is the section entitled "La parte de los crímenes," which is punctuated by more than one hundred descriptions of the condition, location, and manner of death of female

corpses found in the desert of Santa Teresa, Mexico, a border town with a booming maquiladora industry that is a fictionalized version of Ciudad Juárez. The first corpse is discovered by children in an abandoned lot in January 1993, and she becomes the first recorded victim of the infamous *feminicidio*, or the gendered violence against and murder of women and girls, often migrants and factory workers, at the border. Interspersed among the descriptions of corpses are stories of the ineffectual efforts of the Santa Teresa police to solve the murders and the hands-off stance of the national government toward the *feminicidio* crisis.

The uncanny similarity between the description of the women in the hundreds of photos on Carlos Wieder's bedroom walls in *Estrella distante* and the more than one hundred female corpses found on the Mexico-US border of *2666* establishes an intertextual thread between Bolaño's texts. To unravel this thread, I interpret the victims' bodies as a metaphor for the body politic of the nation state, and I read the descriptions of the victims in Santa Teresa as a sort of re-presentation of the victims in the photos lining Carlos Wieder's bedroom in *Estrella distante*, however, with the telling distinction that there is no photographer-assassin acting as mediator of the aestheticized violence in *2666*. At stake in this re-presentation is a narrative indexing of the shift from a geometrically bounded modern state to the undifferentiated space of neoliberal-administered globalization. To interpret this epochal shift, I analyze the function of space and mediation in each novel in order to address the political metaphoricity of the female corpses. Unlike in *Estrella distante*, in which the setting is demonstrative of the state's overzealous role in the sovereign decision to inoculate itself against its own citizenry, in *2666*, the setting becomes indexical of the state's near complete absence in the death and display of the corpses.

The Body (Politic) Exposed

The macabre exhibition of photographs in *Estrella distante* is staged in an apartment, in the domestic space of Wieder's bedroom in Santiago de Chile. In *Afterlives of Confinement*, Susana Draper examines how the architecture of twentieth-century South American dictatorships—the prisons and detention centers that housed political prisoners

and often served as torture and death chambers—were transformed into luxury malls and memorial sites to reflect new economic values of the neoliberal transition. Draper analyzes Bolaño's *Nocturno de Chile* (1998) to posit that the architecture of the home figures as the nation in the novel. She shows how this figurative house "needed to be cleaned and put in order to become secure" (128). Klein proffers a similar observation about dominant rhetoric following the coup: Pinochet turned to "those fascist standbys of cleaning, scrubbing, uprooting and curing . . . On the day of the coup, Pinochet referred to Allende and his cabinet as 'that filth that was going to ruin the country.' One month later he pledged to . . . bring about a 'moral cleansing' of the nation" (104). Tellingly, Schmitt also underscores the ways in which, historically and philologically, nomos is bound up with *oikos* (*The Nomos of the Earth* 338–39), or the "house, dwelling place, habitation" ("Ecology").

In contrast, the victims of *el feminicidio* in *2666* are most often found "a la intemperie" (246, 415, 541) in the desert borderlands. The locations of the bodies—"un pequeño descampado" (443), "un callejón" (446), "un basurero" (449), "las faldas del cerro" (451), "el basurero clandestino" (466), "cerca de la carretera" (514)—underscore the exposed nature of their final resting places. The metaphor of the nation as home no longer holds in *2666*. Suggestively, a recurring space in "La parte de los crímenes" is "el basurero clandestino," commonly known as "El Chile" (466), which is "el mayor basurero clandestino de Santa Teresa, más grande que el basurero municipal" (752). No fewer than seven victims of *el feminicidio* are discovered in this trash heap (466, 506, 566, 580, 584, 631, 686), and detectives are frequently drawn to El Chile during their investigations. Indeed, the dump becomes an enigmatic cornerstone to both the crimes and the generalized anomie of Santa Teresa. When former FBI detective Albert Kessler visits Santa Teresa to lend his expertise to the investigations, he is compelled to visit El Chile (752). Likewise, the city attempts to demolish the illicit trash dump, but the municipal crews' efforts prove futile:

> En octubre . . . las obras para eliminar el basurero clandestino de El Chile se interrumpieron definitivamente. Un periodista de *La Tribuna de Santa Teresa* que hizo la nota del traslado o demolición del basurero dijo que nunca en toda su vida había visto tanto caos. Preguntado sobre si el caos lo producían los trabajadores municipales vanamente empeñados en el intento, contestó que no, que el caos lo producía el pudridero inerte. (592)

In this way, El Chile becomes metonymic of neoliberal logic, as the dump constitutes its own self-reproducing machinery that exceeds the bounds and control of the state forces that seek to comprehend and contain it.

Moreover, El Chile dump becomes a revealing link between the neoliberal experiments initiated in Chile of *Estrella distante* and the neoliberal nightmare experienced in Mexico of *2666*. This "basurero clandestino" may be read in relation to Walter Benjamin's interpretation of Paul Klee's "Angelus Novus" in *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (466). Benjamin posits that Klee's angel is both staring back at and moving away from the violent detritus of history, the wreckage of which is piling up at his feet, "caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them" (258). In this interpretation, Benjamin uses the analogy of the expulsion from Paradise—that biblical space of protected domesticity—into the unprotected violence of a storm, which he interprets as an allegory for "progress" (258). There has been no political system so bound up with the discourse of progress as national modernity. Consistent with Benjamin's reading of Klee, progress leads not to stability, but rather to extreme exposure and precarity across Bolaño's narrative fiction. Chile, that carefully ordered domestic space in which the *golpista* state betrayed its sovereign duty as guarantor of the people's security, is rendered a chaotic (anomic) trash heap in Mexico's neoliberal present.

The state-surpassing logic of El Chile echoes the supranational positioning of the corpses, indicative of the shift to the epoch of neoliberal-administered globalization at the Mexico-US border. A common denominator in the lives and deaths of the women are the transnational maquiladoras that operate in Santa Teresa (as well as in the actual Ciudad Juárez, on which the city is based). Many of the victims are either factory workers or the daughters of workers, and a significant amount of the dead bodies are found on the maquiladora grounds. Likewise, the roads leading to the maquiladoras and the industrial parks that comprise their factory grounds often serve as coordinates for pinpointing where the violence against women takes place: "El quince de agosto fue hallado el cadáver de Angélica Nevares, de veintitrés años, más conocida por el apelativo de Jessica, cerca de un canal de aguas negras al oeste del Parque Industrial General Sepúlveda" (645–46). The tidy geometric space of the nation cedes terrain to foreign-owned maquiladoras, which proliferate due to NAFTA.[10]

La intemperie, as it emerges in *Estrella distante* and *2666*—and, indeed, across Bolaño's literary corpus—is not only a spatial metaphor, but also a temporal one. Here, I follow Ryan Long, who interprets the persistent incursion of *la intemperie* in Bolaño's *Amuleto* (1999) as "a maladjustment both in terms of time and space, *intemperie* suggests a more complete exposure, an at once historical and geographical condition of being unsettled" (133). Long reads *Amuleto*'s recourse to *la intemperie* in relation to the 1968 occupation of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) by the Mexican armed forces and the Tlatelolco massacre, positing that the "untimeliness" constitutes "a strong critique of the ideologically motivated insistence upon teleology and progress that often informs discussions of 1968 in Mexico and its legacy" (130). Long seeks to unsettle historical notions of progress and closed interpretations of 1968 in the present, and this temporal analysis of the concept of *intemperie* is constructive here. Beyond the geopolitical and geometric flux characteristic of globalization, taking the temporal exposure of the term into consideration makes visible the epochal disjuncture that emerges as the primacy of the nation state wanes and neoliberal globalization becomes dominant.

I conceive of this epochal flux in terms of "post-nationalism." My theorization of this term is indebted to Brown, who, in a discussion of the post-Westphalian world, explains, "The prefix 'post' signifies a formation that is *temporally after but not over* that to which it is affixed. 'Post' indicates a very particular condition of afterness in which what is past is not left behind, but, on the contrary, relentlessly conditions, even dominates, a present that nonetheless also breaks in some way with this past" (*Undoing the Demos* 21). Thus the "post" of post-nationalism marks the continued ideological, juridical, and political impact of national modernity, while at the same time acknowledging that the economic system of neoliberal globalization is becoming increasingly dominant in terms of structuring world relations. As David Alworth argues in *Site Reading*, rather than merely serving as a backdrop for plot and form, narrative setting—a novel's "figuration of sites, vibrant assemblages of persons and things"—may provide important information about collective experience and sociality (4). Bolaño's narrativization of the crisis of *el feminicidio* at the Mexico-US border points to the contradictory post-national nature of the space. The border is an exemplary space of epochal disjuncture in that, at one and the same time, this site

mediates between 1) the idealized national modernity of the Global North, exemplified by the national project of the United States, and 2) the globalized future as exemplified by export processing zones like Ciudad Juárez that have sprung up as a direct result of transnational treaties and post-national economic policies.

Notably, a symbolically charged spatial and epochal roadmap similarly emerges in *Estrella distante*, as three towns—Concepción, Nacimiento, and Providencia—come to signify three phases of the state's shift toward fascism. As mentioned, the novel begins in a poetry workshop in Concepción (conception), a sort of onomastic metaphor for Ruiz-Tagle/Wieder's initiation as a fascist poet. The first act of violence that is tragically legible to the narrator occurs when Wieder murders the beloved Garmendia sisters in Nacimiento (birth); thus the self-annihilating violence of the state is enacted, metaphorically born. Finally, the exhibit with the hundreds of photographs of dead bodies is staged in Providencia. Providence, meaning prudence or foresight, "a looking to, or preparation for, the future; provision" ("Providence"), has a deeply temporal connotation that signals that this macabre destruction of the citizenry by the Chilean state will usher in a new era.

Moreover, this post-national future also slips into Wieder's exhibition. This becomes apparent when the omnipresent epochal disjuncture—*la intemperie*—creeps into Wieder's meticulously orchestrated house of horrors. When the apartment owner proffers the living room for the event, Wieder declines, insisting that "las fotos necesitaban un marco limitado y preciso como la habitación del autor" (87). However, despite carefully selecting the exhibition's location, the confined setting is breached. As the first person to view the exhibit, Tatiana von Beck Iraola, leaves the bedroom, one attendee remarks that "en aquel momento tuv[e] la sensación de que [los invitados] estaban *a la intemperie*, bajo la noche oscura y a pleno campo" (96, my emphasis). The epoch-rupturing violence of the coup and the subsequent state of exception, during which the Chilean government murdered and disappeared thousands of its own citizens, opens the door to *la intemperie*, which, as noted above, permeates the exposed, unheimlich setting of *2666*. Furthermore, Muñoz Cano notes that the photos contain an air of nostalgia (97). Nostalgia, of course, signals a "longing to return to one's home or native country" ("Nostalgia"). Wieder's violent aesthetics is figured as the originary rupture that makes it impossible to recapture

the (already) lost national geometry and state sovereignty. The dead and dying bodies of the women—Chilean citizens killed by their own state—become the sign of the self-annihilation of a moribund state, a sign that is transplanted into *2666* as the festering, self-perpetuating chaos of El Chile trash heap.

Post-National Photography

Important to this interpretation of Bolaño's aesthetic revisionism is the fact that *Estrella distante* comprises a novella-length expansion of an entry in *La literatura nazi en las Américas* (1993), an apocryphal encyclopedia that, as described on the work's back cover, is comprised of "la literatura filonazi producida en América desde 1930 a 2010" (Bolaño, *La literatura nazi*). The final encyclopedic entry, entitled "Ramírez Hoffman, el infame," contains an initial account of the *santiaguina* photo exhibition. Many of the details are the same, causing the distinctions between the source fiction and *Estrella distante* to stand out. Most notably, the reader is never made privy to the content of the photographs in *La literatura nazi*. The dead and dying "maniquíes" and body parts, including the tortured corpses of the Garmendia sisters, are not referenced or described in the earlier text. Instead, the reader is presented only with the reactions of the partygoers—Tatiana runs from the room after less than a minute, vomits in the hallway, and leaves the party visible shaken (201); the owner of the apartment views the photos and confronts Ramírez Hoffman (201); a young cadet begins crying and cursing (202).

Each of these details is also narrated in *Estrella distante*, but this later narrative goes further, including a description of the photos' contents in the testimony of Muñoz Cano. Revealingly, the presence of *la intemperie* is also absent in *La literatura nazi*. In this way, the earlier text provides a carefully mediated aesthetic intervention, and when "tres militares de Inteligencia" arrive to "limpiar de fotografías la habitación" (*La literatura nazi* 202), the sovereign control of the state over the aestheticized violence in the photos remains intact. However, in the rewriting of this episode in *Estrella distante*, the intelligence officers "llegaban a horas *intempestivas* a hacer la limpieza" (100, my emphasis). The spatial and temporal exposure goes hand-in-hand with the erosion of state sovereignty in the rewriting of this scene.

But what of photographic mediation in *2666*? What does a post-national photography look like? One scene in "La parte de los crímenes" is illustrative of this logic. As the narrative recounts, in April 1997, two workers find a body near the shed of a soda bottling company. The body is surrounded by piles of tires, and soon "el sitio estaba lleno de curiosos" (699). Reporters ask the investigator on the scene for permission to photograph the body, which he allows, and the corpse is later taken to be examined by a coroner. In this post-national crime scene, the bodies of victims are abandoned, only to be discovered and documented by individuals who were not the original agents of violence.[11] In a logic akin to graffiti, the aesthetic content is shorn of its author; *2666* proffers no analogue to Carlos Wieder proudly presiding over the morbid display of aestheticized violence. Instead, the *feminicidio* victims appear like biopolitical Readymades, at once subject to aesthetic dispersion and a testimony to the impotence of the state.

This logic has only become more pronounced in the years since Bolaño's death in 2003. When President Felipe Calderón declared the War on Drugs in 2006, the systematic display of corpses as both sign and signature of the cartels was also inaugurated. Morbid spectacles—hooded bodies hanging from bridges, castrated corpses, and severed body parts piled up on busy roads—began to appear as a visual warning to rivals and authorities, a practice that continues today. Rita Laura Segato has written extensively on this phenomenon, particularly in relation to the violence against women that serves a linguistic or ritualistic purpose rather than a retributive one, observing that "esa victimización de quien no es el contrincante tiene una eficacia mayor como espectáculo de poder, en su barbarie y ferocidad, en su mensaje de prerrogativa de arbitrariedad soberana, en otras palabras, como expresividad de un supremacía anómica" (363). The unmediated violence at the Mexico-US border of *2666* gives narrative form to this "anomic supremacy."

Broken Nations

The crimes of *Estrella distante*—both the real-world crimes and their fictional renderings in the novel—are committed by state actors against Chilean citizens. The purging of the Chilean citizenry in *Estrella distante* by death squads during and after the 1973 coup may be read as

a sort of violent self-protection against ideologies that contradicted the values of the military junta. According to this logic, Salvador Allende and those communists, socialists, students, and workers that demanded political rights incompatible with emerging neoliberal capitalism had to be expelled from the body politic and their ideals silenced by the newly acting Chilean state. Indeed, Chilean sociologist Tomás Moulian has argued that the violence of Pinochet's coup and subsequent dictatorship can be read as a "democracia protegida" (47), which, as Draper argues, served to "immunize" the nation against a possible return of the type of Marxism that initially led to Salvador Allende's Chilean socialism (128). In line with Draper, this "immunization" turns out to be an autoimmune defense, which paves the way for the collapse of state legitimacy and the sovereignty of the market that accompanies the neoliberal policies imported after the coup.

In this way, neoliberal-administered globalization is ushered in by state-sponsored violence that ignores the democratic process and forsakes the constitutive consent upon which the nation state is founded. Circling back to Schmitt, if, as detailed above, the modern state draws its authority from two form-giving properties—the authority-granting will of its people and the terrestrial fundament of national territory—then the betrayal of these two terms leads to the loss of sovereign authority. In 1973 Chile, the betrayal of the first term occurs in concert with the coup d'état and the assassination of Chilean citizens by death squads on ideological grounds. However, as mentioned above, repression and violence by Latin American states are not unique to Pinochet's Chile, and it is the concomitant disavowal of the second term—the terrestrial fundament—that, in Schmittian terms, guarantees the loss of sovereign authority. This occurs when the military junta acts in the interest of inter- and supranational entities, instituting free market policies and privatizing domestic industries, including banks, mining operations, public utility companies, and even the nation's social security system, which effectively dissolves the state's role as mediator between the local and the global. In this way, the coup's violent installation of neoliberal economic practices and its autoimmune violence against the Chilean body politic become the self-annihilation of state sovereignty.

2666 demonstrates the inevitable outcome of such self-annihilating logic. In contrast to the state's autoimmunization depicted in *Estrella distante*, the violence of *2666* is no longer state-sanctioned.

Indeed, the state does not have control over, let alone the ability to contain, this violence. The *feminicidios* in *2666* are portrayed as unsolvable—perhaps committed by a single serial killer, perhaps committed by jealous lovers, perhaps part of ritualistic gang violence. As Brett Levinson observes, "the invented investigations within *2666* not only fail to locate the perpetrators, they do not even manage to limit—on the contrary, they multiply—the number of possible killers" (177). Whereas Wieder, as representative of the Chilean state, enacts violence on the body politic and enjoys aesthetic sovereignty over the dead and dying bodies of his victims, the representatives of the Mexican state in Santa Teresa are only capable of stumbling upon the unmediated corpses found *a la intemperie* in the desert.

For Williams, in *Estrella distante*, the denouement of the novel points to what he calls "melancholic paralysis" on the part of Bolaño as an author who cannot write beyond the politics of the nation state and Schmitt's friend-enemy distinction, and thus cannot think beyond the type of politics that determined space and relationships in national modernity: "Bolaño might point to the absurdity or injustice of the geometry of hostility to which he is drawn over and over again. But he still remains ensconced within it. . . . It provides for good literature, without doubt. But I think a question remains as to whether it is good enough" ("Sovereignty" 138–39). On my reading, *2666* answers the question posed in *Estrella distante* and, via aesthetic revisionism, provides a narrative matrix for comprehending the shifting dynamics of neoliberal globalization. Without romanticizing the epoch—these works elucidate how the dream of national modernity has often been more of a nightmare in Latin America—Bolaño's narrative fiction both indexes the emergence of a new era of politics and stages the coming undone of the nation state on a global scale.

Beyond this mere indexicality, the narrative relay between the past and the present serves a cautionary function. Whereas *Estrella distante* presents the reader with a mediated archive—the poet-assassin's photography exhibit—*2666* dissolves this mediation. In *2666*, an uncontainable accumulation of bodies proliferates, which mimics the logic of neoliberal capitalism. As inequalities and new forms of precarity and violence emerge with neoliberal globalization, the specter of national sovereignty threatens to reemerge. Bolaño's re-presentation of the betrayal of the body politic by the modern nation state as staged in

Estrella distante, and exposed, *a la intemperie*, in the Santa Teresa desert of *2666*, warns against a reactionary return to the false promise of the nation state, a return that we are witnessing at an alarming rate today.

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NOTES

[1] I reference the essay published in *Entre paréntesis*; however, an earlier version formed part of the exhibit catalog of a 1999 exposition of Larraín's photography at the Institut Valencià d'Art Modern in Spain. As Sharon Larisch notes, it is striking that the "image" that Bolaño describes in this opening scene does not correlate directly to any of Larraín's photographs (431).

[2] Horne examines the indexicality of Chejfec's novels and the ways in which Chejfec, while deploying avant-garde techniques, manages to create realist representations of the unique temporal experience of advanced capitalism. Horne calls this phenomenon "photographic realism." On the other hand, I examine how Bolaño associates photographic mediation with state representation and violence, as well as how the lack of mediation in the posthumous *2666* becomes indexical of the failure of the state as political mediator.

[3] Schmitt diverges from political thinkers such as Alexis de Toqueville, who "consistently advocated the inalterability of the constitution [document] and emphasized that the collective powers of the people, of the king as well as of parliament, are derived from the constitution, and that outside of the constitution, all of these political powers are nothing" (*Constitutional Theory* 63). Schmitt submits that without that constitutive consent of the people governed, there is no sovereign and the constitutional document has no validity.

[4] Westphalian sovereignty is referenced in both Brown (*Walled States*) and Williams ("Decontainment"). This concept relates to the signing of the Treaty of Münster, which was one of two treaties that ended the Thirty Years' War (1618-48). The Treaty of Münster enshrined the sovereign right of each individual state over its domestic territory into international law.

[5] Indeed, political scientists and philosophers have long theorized the inherently "imperfect" or "incomplete" nature of all democratic societies. Jacques Rancière's meditations on the distribution of the sensible emphasize that those who "count," or those who enjoy political recognition as part of a political community, necessarily exist in contrast to those who "do not count," or those who are supplementary to and unac(count)ed for in the community. This is developed throughout Rancière's writings, but a succinct discussion of this logic is discussed in "Thesis 5" of "Ten Theses

on Politics" (33–35). Likewise, political scientists have coined multiple terms to describe varying degrees of democracy, including "incomplete democracy" (Garretón), "competitive authoritarianism" (Levitsky), and "delegative democracy" (O'Donnell), all of which are utilized to analyze democratic institutions in Latin America, often in the Chilean context, but have also been applied to democratic practices in Europe and the United States.

[6] Lisa Hilbink notes, "On September 11, 1973, General Augusto Pinochet helped to lead the overthrow of one of Latin America's most celebrated democratic regimes" (1). This opinion is still expressed decades later, as seen in responses to the October 2019 riots in Santiago de Chile: "As the most developed economy and most stable democracy in Latin America, Chile was the last country observers would have expected to see riots and looting" (Navia). Even more telling, however, is that immediately following the 1973 coup, entities around the world protested the overthrow of a democratically elected president. For instance, in reaction to the coup, 106 Spanish intellectuals denounced the military junta, stating "Chile era el testimonio de pasar por un camino pacífico y legal de la democracia formal a la auténtica democracia" (García Gutiérrez 215). Considering this, a similar literary analogy would not be as convincing if Bolaño's narrative had been set in the violence of, for instance, Mexico of the 1968 Tlatelolco Massacre, because representative democracy had not become as firmly rooted in that context. By situating the origins of the dissolution of national geometry in Chile, the state's deployment of illegitimate violence is more convincing and legible as a betrayal of representative governance.

[7] In *Speculative Fictions*, Alessandro Fornazzari notes, "Frequently heralded as the first project of neoliberal state formation and one of the great modern laboratories of political and economic experimentation, the Chilean dictatorship and postdictatorship period is, almost by antonomasia, linked to terms such as *structural adjustment*, *economic shock treatment*, and the *economic miracle* and to a series of economic reforms that have become hypostatized under the general rubric of neoliberalism" (1–2).

[8] Williams reads *Estrella distante* alongside Chilean theorist Willy Thayer, who posits that the coup and later free market dictatorship neutralize any future possibility for rupture or anti-institutional artistic praxis. Thayer argues that the coup's very logic is one of non-representation, as it violently negates and suspends the democratic election of Salvador Allende and excises representative democracy. Consequently, Williams emphasizes that "the Chilean neo-avant-garde of the 1980s is always already captured within the terrain of the national state of exception that was inaugurated in the flames that engulfed La Moneda on September 11, 1973" ("Sovereignty" 134). Bolaño launches a similar narrative critique of neo-avant-garde praxis by resituating the sky poetry of CADA member Raúl Zurita as an aesthetic intervention of the fascist Wieder during the first half of the Santiago gala (*Estrella distante* 89). The polemic surrounding the Chilean neo-avant-garde is best understood in the disagreement that has arisen between Thayer and Nelly Richard, with the former drawing on Pablo Oyarzún's criticism of the latter. In addition to Williams's succinct rehearsal of the debate, the dispute has

been analyzed and commented upon by scholars of the Chilean avant-garde and literary scene. For further details and illuminating discussions of the polemic, see Sergio Villalobos Ruminott's "Historicism, Nihilism, and the Chilean Neo-Avant-Garde"; Patrick Dove's *Literature and "Interregnum"*; and Kate Jenckes's *Witnessing Beyond the Human*; in addition to the original debate as it arises in Richard's *Márgenes e instituciones* and *La insubordinación de los signos*; Oyarzún's "Arte en Chile" and *El rabo del ojo*; Oyarzún, Richard, and Zaldívar's *Arte y política*; Thayer's *El fragmento repetido*; and Richard and Moreiras's *Pensar en/la postdictadura*.

[9] Glen Close reads the "mediation of literary death scenes by photography" in Latin American narrative fiction as an accounting of the male subject's desire to disassociate himself from the female corpse in a (futile) attempt to renounce both femininity and death (596). In regard to *Estrella distante*, Close reads Wieder as a representative of "totalitarian masculinism" who murders "beautiful young leftist women . . . in the interests of refounding an authoritarian patriarchal social order" (606). Like Close, I am interested in the mediation of aestheticized violence, particularly given that Wieder's aesthetic rendering of political violence is what compels the Chilean government to disavow their golden child lieutenant. Diverging from Close, I show how this attempted "refounding" actually constitutes the unraveling of the political order.

[10] The question of geometry in Bolaño's narrative fiction has been examined by Larisch and Dove, particularly in relation to "La parte de Amalfitano" in *2666*. The second of five parts, "La parte de Amalfitano" invites this scrutiny, as the eponymous narrator reenacts Marcel Duchamp's "Unhappy Readymade" in the Santa Teresa desert with Rafael Dieste's *Testamento geométrico*. Duchamp's Readymade was a wedding gift to his sister that included instructions for hanging an unspecified geometry textbook outside on her balcony: "the wind had to go through the book, choose its own problems, turn and tear out the pages" (Cabanne qtd. in Naumann 13). Mimicking this art installation, Amalfitano hangs Dieste's *Testamento geométrico* outside "para ver cómo resiste la intemperie, los embates de esta naturaleza desértica" (Bolaño, *2666* 246). Dove examines Amalfitano's Santa Teresa Readymade as a means of grappling with the potential (or lack thereof) for avant-garde rupture in neo-avant-garde repetition (related to the debate addressed in Note 8). Apropos of the present study, following Galli, Dove reads Amalfitano's Readymade as an interrogation into the efficacy of the vocabulary of Euclidean geometry in explaining sociopolitical relations in the neoliberal present (240–42). Meanwhile, Larisch underscores that, in "La parte de Amalfitano," geometric space is imbued with the criminal space of the Santa Teresa *feminicidio* (436). Reading this spatial overlap alongside the many references to violence on a world-historical scale in *2666* (the Holocaust, 1973 Chilean coup, Franco's Spain), Larisch posits that the resulting spatiality contains a menacing potentiality that may be "activated elsewhere" (446).

[11] Considering the long cultural import of *la nota roja*—or graphic and spectacular journalism covering violent events, such as murder, car accidents, and executions—this scene resonates in the Mexican context. Pablo Piccato describes how, following the

Mexican Revolution and throughout the twentieth century, the educated and capitalist elite became tightly allied with the political elite, which meant that the directors and owners of public education and media outlets often did not offer radical criticism of the ruling political class (the Partido Revolucionario Institucional governed from 1929 to 2000). Particularly before the 1970s, when a free press was no longer possible due to the authoritarian-corporate state, Piccato emphasizes that the dissemination of *la nota roja* allowed newspapers to offer subtle commentary on the government: "crime was a theme that allowed critical ideas about the government to be published with little or no censorship. . . . the *nota roja* encouraged the critical involvement of readers in public affairs" (196). Piccato concludes that, in a context in which the state tightly controlled the narrative surrounding truth, justice, and legitimacy, the *nota roja* provided a space where readers could question such narratives (200). Bolaño's *2666* demonstrates that the state no longer enjoys this tight control of the narrative.

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