

MEMORIALS FOR THE UNMOURNED: REPRESENTATIONS OF POLITICIZED
VIOLENCE IN CONTEMPORARY U.S.-MEXICO BORDER FICTION

by

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INTRODUCTION

Memorials

Memory is the only witness that
Remembers the women of Juárez
Now statues,
Scattered bones,
Heads and little ears.

There lie the remains of the women of Juárez
Who have left behind their spirits and lives
Their steps on the sand
Their moans on my hands that engrave
Their names in these words
That are a prayer, a supplication.

- Marjorie Agosín, *Secrets in the Sand*

Between 1993 and 2005, more than 370 women were murdered in or near the Mexican border city, Ciudad Juárez, their (often mutilated) bodies dumped in the desert. A third of those victims were also victims of sexual violence (“Mexico: Justice fails”). Although public awareness of the murders has increased in recent years, the murders continue. According to an Amnesty International study, “In the first three months of 2012, at least 13 bodies of young women and girls were discovered in the Valle de Juárez district outside Ciudad Juárez” (“Annual Report”).

Government administrators, police officers, journalists, activists, academics, and artists offer varying explanations for the crimes and their persistence. Theorists blame a combination of institutional misogyny, neoliberal economics, racism, U.S. immigration policies, police and government corruption, the crimes’ high rate of impunity, and the power of drug cartels (among other factors) for the murders. As Rita Laura Segato states, through research and activism, the murders have gradually become more perceptible: “It is possible we have taken a step toward understanding the facts. We can see an image,

pale but recognizable, in the scattered pieces that make up this sinister charade” (89). Nevertheless, through the normal juridical vocabulary, the crimes remain largely unintelligible. They are a diffuse, systemic genocide, the agents of which enjoy essentially full impunity. Journalist Sergio González Rodríguez even refers to the “femicide machine” in Ciudad Juárez as a legalizing apparatus: “This anomalous ecology mutated into a femicide machine: an apparatus that didn’t just create the conditions for the murders of dozens of women and little girls, but developed the institutions that guaranteed impunity for those crimes and even legalized them” (7). The murders’ persistence, coupled with a high rate of impunity, calls us to formulate new theoretical frameworks for understanding politicized violence. Faced with a new form of legalized violence that silences victims of torture and rape by murdering them and hiding their bodies in the desert (sometimes carefully, sometimes haphazardly), activists and victims’ families seek to memorialize the maquiladora murders and make them intelligible.

Not surprisingly, the effective legalization of the maquiladora murders, as well as the systematic efforts to silence dissenting voices, lead victims’ families to speak out against the juridical order through activism as well as writings, such as *testimonios*. Eva Arce, whose daughter Silvia Arce disappeared on March 11, 1998, claims in her *testimonio* that Mexican officials knew where her daughter was and still chose not to investigate Silvia’s disappearance:

We kept protesting in front of the DA’s office, but they never gave us any credible response—just pure lies and mistreatment. The *judiciales* would laugh and say, “Let’s see who lasts the longest,” and others told me, “We’re just waiting

for the order to go get her,” and they never did anything. It was all a lie; all of them knew where she was being held, and they never rescued her. (46-7)

When the juridical powers refuse to hear the voices of activists and victims’ families, and when they allow widespread, gendered violence to persist, they force activists and victims’ families to speak out in alternative ways, through *testimonios*, protests, academic research, legal battles, and even art.

Activist art about Ciudad Juárez, such as the poet Marjorie Agosín’s *Secrets in the Sand: The Young Women of Juárez*, often serves the dual function of highlighting the sociopolitical mechanisms that enable the maquiladora murders to occur, while simultaneously memorializing the murders’ otherwise voiceless, ungrievable victims. Agosín, in her short poem, “Memory is the only witness,” contrasts the maquiladora murder victims’ dead, discarded bodies—which give evidence to the cruelty they suffered and also confirm their disposability by virtue of having been disposed of—with the memories Agosín views as the only *authentic* witnesses to these women’s lives. Because the problem of disposability presents itself as a problem of representation, scholars, such as Athena Athanasiou, ask how artists in particular might attempt to counteract it. For Athanasiou, “As long as bodies are deemed disposable, found discarded, and remain uncounted, the notion of disposability will be associated with the concepts and practices of dehumanization and necropower” (*Dispossession* 147). While maquiladora murder victims’ very bodies speak against them, positing their disposability, public acts of mourning, such as *testimonios*, protests, and poetry like Agosín’s, the “hands that engrave / Their names in these words” (65), affirm the victims’ lives as lives, and subvert the dominant, juridical narrative that seeks to efface them. What Agosín’s poem suggests,

and what I explore in the remainder of this thesis, is the capacity for art to memorialize and render grievable those lives that the juridical powers in the borderlands have cast outside the frame of who is to be mourned as lost, those lives that, as Judith Butler claims, “can be apprehended as living,” but are “not always recognized as [lives]” (*Frames* 7-8). Following Butler and Athanasiou, I posit the ethical necessity of art and other forms of representation, such as Agosín’s poetry and the works of historical fiction I discuss in this thesis, that “allow the claim of life to be made and heard” (*Frames* 181).

Political Violence and the Borderlands

Present-day violence in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands is not limited to the maquiladora murders. According to Amnesty International, in Mexico, between 2006 and 2012, “more than 60,000 people were killed and 150,000 displaced as a result of drug-related violence.” In that same period, Amnesty states, 98% of all crimes remained unpunished (“Annual Report: Mexico”). And although the most blatant forms of permitted violence in the borderlands occur predominantly on the Mexican side of the border, other, more subtle forms prevail in the United States. For example, hundreds of Central American immigrants, pressured to take dangerous routes through the U.S. deserts by the presence of Border Patrol officers and the threat of violence from vigilante border patrol groups, have died crossing the border from Mexico into the United States (“Annual Report: United States,” Garza). In addition, state laws in border states, such as those in Arizona requiring law enforcement officials to check the immigration status of people they suspect might be undocumented, can often lead to racial profiling, as such suspicion is often motivated by distinction between racialized markers (“Annual Report:

United States”). That this border violence almost always targets poor Latina/o men, women, and children is sharply summarized in Gloria Anzaldúa’s oft-quoted declaration that “The U.S.-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* (an open wound) where the Third World grates against the First and bleeds” (11).

In view of the reality of permitted violence in the borderlands, it is not surprising that violence predominates in fictional representations of the U.S.-Mexico border. Popular American television shows, such as *Breaking Bad* and *Sons of Anarchy* capitalize on a recurrent consumer fascination with drug and arms-trafficking and the violence produced by organized crime. Recent film representations of violence on the border are far too numerous to list exhaustively, but include Oscar-winning films, such as *Traffic* and *No Country for Old Men*. Yet, while screen representations of border violence occasionally provide nuanced depictions of the complex interactions between state-sanctioned powers and organized illegalities, most follow the proscribed genre codes of crime narratives wherein (good guy) detectives attempt to bring (bad guy) criminals to justice, and the line between the lawful use of force and criminal violence is sharply demarcated.

In my project, however, I will focus on three contemporary literary novels: Cormac McCarthy’s 1985 novel, *Blood Meridian*, Carmen Boullosa’s 2013 novel, *Texas: The Great Theft*, and Roberto Bolaño’s 2004 novel, *2666*. All three novels loosely fictionalize real historical events: the exploits of the Glanton gang, the First Cortina War, and the maquiladora murders in Ciudad Juárez, respectively. I posit that each novel attempts to complicate the distinction between lawful state violence and criminal violence, and to illustrate the ways in which the social, spatial, and political configuration

of the border often serves to create violence rather than prevent it. Additionally, I argue that the novels seek to memorialize, in various ways, the indigenous American and Mexican victims of politicized violence in the borderlands. While each novel engages with politicized violence in its own particular way, their (often explicit) depictions of permitted violence all serve rhetorical rather than entertainment purposes. By tracing the power mechanisms by which violence persists, these novels both aim to move readers to an emotional and intellectual comprehension of the injustices that continue to take place in the borderlands, and to use fiction as a means for memorializing the subaltern victims of borderlands violence.

One way the novels move readers to an understanding of politicized border violence is by providing narrative blueprints of the mechanisms by which the violent matrix of power in the borderlands functions and persists. By situating the novels within a biopolitical theoretical framework—utilizing the work of Giorgio Agamben, Judith Butler, Achille Mbembe, and Alexander G. Weheliye, in particular—I aim to unmask the complex collection of apparatuses that differentiate one life from another in the borderlands, protecting and valuing some lives at the expense of others.

While I deal with concepts from several theorists, Agamben's concept of bare life and Butler's concepts of precarity and ungrievability underpin my analyses of all three novels. Bare life, which Agamben parallels with the ancient Roman figure of the *homo sacer*, denotes a subject who can be killed without the charge of homicide, but who cannot be sacrificed in religious rituals (8). Agamben holds that "Western politics first constitutes itself through an exclusion (which is simultaneously an inclusion) of bare life" (7). For him, bare life is not simply a side-effect of Western forms of sovereignty, but

their defining quality, one by which certain individuals are cast outside of the juridical order and are thus subject to permitted, legalized violence. On the other hand, Butler's concepts of precarity and ungrievability, which serve to modify Agamben's theory, are characterized by a human physical vulnerability (precarity) that "becomes highly exacerbated under certain social and political conditions, especially those in which violence is a way of life and the means to secure self-defense are limited" (*Precarious* 29). For Butler, human beings are always vulnerable to physical violence, but she argues that under certain sociopolitical conditions and for certain individuals, this typical human vulnerability can often intensify. Ungrievability, then, occurs when media and other forms of representation differentiate a given subject on the basis of race, religion, nationality, gender, and/or geographic location, and subsequently amplify that subject's precarity by presenting them as something other than a livable life in their own right (*Frames* 15). Agamben's concept, while useful, tends not to take differentiating variables into account, while Butler acknowledges that fluctuations and variations of a subject's level of vulnerability can take place depending on variables such as race, religion, gender, nationality, and geography. As she claims:

Lives are supported and maintained differently, and there are radically different ways in which human physical vulnerability is distributed across the globe. Certain lives will be highly protected, and the abrogation of their claims to sanctity will be sufficient to mobilize the forces of war. Other lives will not find such fast and furious support and will not even qualify as "grievable."

(*Precarious* 32)

Thus, the differentiation of lives is not all that is at issue for Butler; she is also concerned with the differential maintenance of life across various geopolitical spaces. For this reason, any examination of bare life, precarity, and ungrievability in the borderlands must also take into account the borderlands themselves, their unique geopolitics, as well as their occasionally uncertain divisions of sovereignty.

Of course, the borderlands space enables violence against Latinas/os through its very configuration. As Arturo J. Aldama asserts:

Contrary to the free zone where all Euro-American taboos drop, the border is also a free zone of violence, a barrier to those trying to cross from the south—as evidenced by the Border Patrol, weekend vigilantism, bandits, and *coyotes* who, after collecting their fees, rob, rape, and denounce border crossers. (23)

As Aldama suggests, the contemporary borderlands distribute sovereignty unevenly; in the unsurveilled desert spaces of the borderlands, Anglo-American vigilantes, *coyotes*, drug- and arms-traffickers, and bandits are free to exert their own forms of sovereignty. Yet, while borderlands sovereignty is not restricted to U.S. and Mexican government officials, some officials (such as the *judiciales* described in Eva Arce's *testimonio*) use their positions as a means for taking advantage of Latinas/os who the borderlands space has set outside the normal juridical order. In each case, as Aldama argues, the selectivity of the border “forces a discourse of inferiorization on Mexicans and other Latinos, especially those whose class position, ethnicity, and skin color emerge from the *campesina/o* and urban proletariat groups” (23). In other words, enforced selectivity at the site of the border crossing—a selectivity that is often predicated on racism and classism—extends beyond the border site itself in the form of ideology.

Further, while Aldama primarily refers to the contemporary borderlands in his analysis, his observations nonetheless apply to the borderlands of the 19th century, wherein Anglo-Americans used the ideology of Manifest Destiny to justify colonial violence against Mexicans and indigenous Americans. Manifest Destiny as an ideology illustrates one of the means by which borderlands narratives contribute to politicized violence, especially insofar as they frame Latina/o lives as inferior to Anglo-American lives. And, as scholar Timothy Parrish argues, much of postmodern U.S. historical fiction is concerned with critiquing traditional U.S. historical narratives. Parrish claims, “In the postmodern era, by contrast, the most effective artists are those who control what we might call the means of historical representation” (23). For Parrish, U.S. history is not a monologic “truth,” but a narrative practice that ought to be “subject to the same kinds of critiques as any other kind of narrative practice” (11). Following Parrish, I argue in the following chapters that McCarthy, Boullosa, and Bolaño each critique or modify traditional U.S. histories of the borderlands in their novels, although they each utilize unique strategies in order to do so. Cognizant of the means by which colonial narratives serve, especially, to differentiate between differentially racialized subjects, each of the three authors, I contend, uses historical fiction to draw attention to the limitations and injustices of colonial histories.

In the first chapter, “‘A Raw Place in the Stone:’ Residues of Erasing the Ungrievable in Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*,” I read Cormac McCarthy’s 1985 novel through theoretical concepts from the works of Giorgio Agamben and Judith Butler. Set largely in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands in 1849, *Blood Meridian* fictionalizes the exploits of the Glanton gang, a group of scalp hunters hired by the Mexican

authorities to kill Apache Indians in northern Mexico. Initially celebrated by the citizens of Chihuahua City as heroes and protectors of the Mexican frontiers, the Glanton gang soon take to slaughtering Apaches and Mexican villagers alike. Due to vast array of geographic, social, and political considerations, alongside the gang's transient guerilla tactics, the governor of Chihuahua City ultimately finds himself compensating the gang for the murder of his fellow Mexican citizens. In my discussion of *Blood Meridian*, I focus especially on the ways in which racist ideologies make possible, and even encourage, the state-sanctioned racist and gendered violence committed by the Glanton gang against Mexican citizens as well as indigenous Americans.

By drawing parallels between the violence depicted in the novel and Giorgio Agamben's concept of bare life and Judith Butler's concepts of precarity and ungrievability, I argue that *Blood Meridian* formulates the borderlands as a camp space that renders all lives bare life and, simultaneously, amplifies precarity in indigenous American and Mexican lives. Following Butler's slight modification of Agamben's theory, I claim that bare life fluctuates, intensifies, and subsides alternately in a given subject based, first, on that subject's race and gender, and, subsequently, on their movements across borders and through various geographic, social, and political spaces. While many critics of *Blood Meridian*, such as John Beck, assert that the novel is "reactionary" ("Filibusters and Fundamentalists"), by reading the novel through the lenses of Agamben and Butler, I intend to show that, rather than effacing the indigenous American and Mexican victims of the Glanton gang, the novel highlights the fact of their erasure by allowing indigenous/Mexican mourning to slip through the narrative frame.

Finally, to conclude the chapter, I examine the enigmatic relationship in *Blood Meridian* between Judge Holden and the kid, a relationship which has been the source of much critical puzzling. While the kid participates in the Glanton gang's murder of indigenous American and Mexican subjects, he nonetheless subverts the judge's colonial worldview by memorializing the Glanton gang's victims in his wanderings at the end of the novel. Faced with the kid's refusal to ascribe to the colonial narrative the judge wishes to enforce, the judge murders the kid in Griffin, Texas. Yet, while the novel seems to end nihilistically, with the judge claiming victory over the kid as well as over the narrative of the borderlands, I posit that his attempts to silence competing narratives must ultimately fail because they leave behind residues of erasure, such as the kid's dead body and the bodies of the Glanton gang's indigenous American and Mexican victims. In that sense, *Blood Meridian* presents itself to readers as "a raw place in the stone" (173 *Blood*) that marks the colonial erasures of indigenous American and Mexican lives and cultures in the borderlands.

In the second chapter, "The Legacies of Colonialism and the Places Where Violence Cannot Be in Carmen Boullosa's *Texas: The Great Theft*," I discuss Boullosa's metahistorical engagement with racialized colonial violence in the borderlands. While Boullosa's fiction has not received as much critical attention in the United States as McCarthy's and Bolaño's works have, she is celebrated in Mexico and internationally, having won the Xavier Villaurrutia Award for her 1989 novel, *Antes*. Set in the US-Mexico borderlands in the 1850s, *Texas: The Great Theft* begins in the town square of Bruneville, Texas when the town sheriff, Sheriff Spears, insults a prominent local rancher, Don Nepomuceno, by calling him a "dirty greaser" (3). What follows is an

explosion of retributive violence wherein US soldiers and rangers do not distinguish between innocent bystanders (often marked by skin color or linguistic differences) and Mexican seditionists, their ostensible targets for violence. In my analysis of the novel, I show how Boullosa frames the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and the subsequent border disputes in Texas as a precursor and progenitor of present-day racism, misogyny, and oppression on the US-Mexico border, as well as to contemporary acts of violence in Mexico, such as the maquiladora murders in Ciudad Juárez. For Boullosa, the oppressive mechanisms depicted in *Texas: The Great Theft*, though taking place in the 1850s, are not only still in play, but reach their fulfillment in the 21st century.

In addition, utilizing Achille Mbembe's description of the functions and mechanisms of *colonial occupation* as well as Alexander G. Weheliye's concept of *racializing assemblages*, I argue, first, that the racist ideologies held by Bruneville's Anglo residents in the novel, such as the idea that U.S. Anglos need to "civilize" Mexico, are invented and sustained for the sake of economic and imperial interests. Second, I claim that *Texas: The Great Theft* illustrates, through fiction, the means by which acts of racialized, politicized violence in the borderlands, such as lynchings, criminalize Mexicans and indigenous Americans, forcing murdered men and women to speak against themselves through their dead, displayed bodies. While Boullosa's novel illustrates the pernicious mechanisms of racialization and politicized violence in the borderlands, like McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, it nonetheless conceives of art as a hopeful solution to the problems it poses. Boullosa portrays this ultimate hopefulness, namely, through the character of Lázaro Rueda, whose lynching at the hands of Bruneville's Anglo residents serves as the novel's climax. Faced with the terrors of colonial violence, Lázaro responds

not with retributive violence, but with an interior affirmation of himself, his people, and his culture. At the end of the novel, though Lázaro's lynched body speaks against him and against all Mexicans who are similarly racially marked, his music, sung by a young boy in Matasánchez after Lázaro's death, subtly undermines the colonial apparatus that would render Lázaro and all Mexicans "not-quite-human."

In the final chapter, "The Ethics of Stepping into the Abyss: 'Feeling One's Way in the Dark' in Roberto Bolaño's *2666*," I read Bolaño's 2004 novel as presenting an ethical standpoint from which one may combat systemic violence. Composed of five interconnected sections and based largely on the maquiladora murders, *2666* centers around a series of hundreds of murders of women and young girls in the fictional U.S.-Mexico border city, Santa Teresa. In Bolaño's novel, the geographic fluctuations of bare life depicted in *Blood Meridian* and the ungrievability of subaltern life portrayed in *Texas: The Great Theft* converge to a point wherein murder and sexual violence against dark-skinned, working-class, migrant women is effectively legalized. Through *2666*, Bolaño exposes the maquiladora murders as taking place within an ominously complex and seemingly insuperable matrix of police corruption, drug and human-trafficking, institutional misogyny, racism, state-sanctioned violence, coloniality, and bare life. Further, through characters in the novel who risk their own safety by battling the oppressive power structures, such as the budding police detective, Lalo Cura; the feminist congresswoman, Azucena Esquivel Plata; the courageous journalist, Sergio González (based on Sergio González Rodríguez); and the reclusive novelist, Benno von Archimboldi (who, in many ways, resembles Bolaño himself), Bolaño's novel suggests that human beings have an ethical responsibility to stand up against politicized violence,

even in the face of danger. To conclude the chapter, I argue, first, that Bolaño's novel illustrates the necessity of accepting responsibility for the vulnerable in the face of state-sanctioned violence. Second, I claim that, like *Blood Meridian* and *Texas: The Great Theft, 2666* asserts that art has the capacity to subvert and unmask the power mechanisms that create and sustain the possibility for politicized, racialized, and gendered violence in the borderlands.

Making borderlands violence intelligible requires both an understanding of the borderlands (its geopolitics, its uncertain division of sovereignty) as well as an understanding of the way political violence functions within a given space by differentiating between individuals based on various racial, gendered, cultural, or national markers. That is to say, borderlands violence takes place at the convergence of geography and the politicized, racialized, gendered body. It is by illustrating this convergence, in all its insidious complexity, that the three novels I analyze achieve their effectiveness as rhetorical objects. In the face of historical and contemporary narratives that continue to devalue Latina/o and indigenous American lives, art that memorializes the ungrievable illustrates and, more importantly, interrupts the ontological violence inherent in the racial, cultural, gendered, and national differentiation between various bodies in the borderlands.

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CHAPTER I

“A Raw Place in the Stone:” Residues of Erasing the Ungrievable in Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*

The straight and the winding way are one and now that you are here what do the years count since last we two met together? Men’s memories are uncertain and the past that was differs little from the past that was not.

- Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*

Set largely in the US-Mexico borderlands of 1849, *Blood Meridian* tells the story of the Glanton gang, a group of predominately American mercenaries who hunt Apaches in Mexico, collecting large bounties for Apache scalps from the Governor of Chihuahua. Despite its loose basis in non-fictional characters and events, critics often read the novel in mythic rather than historical or political terms, focusing on the mysterious Judge Holden, his affinities to Captain Ahab and Milton’s Satan, his elusive and obscure philosophy of war, and his enigmatic paternal relationship with the novel’s silent, everyman protagonist, whom the narrator simply refers to as “the kid,” and later, “the man.”

While it must be admitted that *Blood Meridian* certainly lends itself to mythic readings, to read the novel as simply a myth or romance, or to view the Glanton gang’s murderous exploits as merely the dramatized means by which the novel’s narrator (and, by extension, the reader) explores existential questions about the nature of humankind and the universe (“to try whether the stuff of creation may be shaped to man’s will or whether his own heart is not another kind of clay” (*Blood* 5)), is to reduce the gang’s victims, the gang members themselves, and all the inhabitants of the novel’s setting to narrative or symbolic ciphers with no agencies, histories, or faces of their own.

Furthermore, to separate the events of the novel from their geohistorical setting, placing them instead in a timeless intertextual vacuum, is to ignore the novel’s unmistakable

engagement with a specific event in borderlands history, as well as to avert the critic's gaze away from the Glanton gang's effaced, indigenous American and Mexican victims, who are murdered, raped, and mutilated with impunity.

Of course, *Blood Meridian* often avoids describing characters' personal histories or psychological states in detail, and it is no coincidence that some critics and reviewers accuse McCarthy of denying faces and agency to the Glanton gang's indigenous/Mexican victims. Critic John Cant praises *Blood Meridian* for its aesthetic value, but claims that it "lacks the qualities of human emotion that characterize most of McCarthy's other works" (176). In "Filibusters and Fundamentalists: *Blood Meridian* and the New Right," critic John Beck accuses McCarthy's novel of being "reactionary." And critic Jay Ellis, while disagreeing with Beck, nonetheless notes that "there is no one named in *Blood Meridian*, whom we or any of the characters might mourn" (172). Due to the narrator's impassive tone and seemingly non-anthropocentric perspective, the novel is frequently taken to be indifferent to the violence it depicts.

This perspective is understandable insofar as the novel's narrator rarely provides any point of reference or background information with regard to the slain indigenous Americans and Mexicans, rarely detailing their names or histories, and often refusing even to describe their faces. Except for the victims' humanity, the novel rarely gives readers anything tangible to mourn. And yet, to illustrate that these people are faceless and voiceless in the presence of Glanton's murderous rabble is not necessarily to endorse their subjection, nor is it even to repeat it. Simply because a novel does not describe a particular character's name, face, or history does not mean its readers are to suppose that the character does not have a name, a face, or a history. And simply because a given

character is not named or buried in a novel does not mean that readers or other characters in the novel may not mourn them. In fact, as Steven Frye posits in “*Blood Meridian* and the Poetics of Violence,” “Through aesthetic rather than polemical means, [the novel’s] cinematic method, poetically rendered, makes ethical considerations unavoidable” (115). While *Blood Meridian*’s narrative voice passes all ethical considerations on to the reader, ethics are nonetheless made present in the novel through the very representation of violence.

Presupposing that mere humanity is sufficient for mourning, this chapter will show that, far from being indifferent to violence against indigenous American and Mexican subjects, *Blood Meridian* portrays violence in order to illustrate the injustice of indigenous/Mexican precarity, bare life, ungrievability, and the conditions that serve to create and sustain these injustices. The purpose of this chapter, then, is to ask: How might indigenous/Mexican precarity and ungrievability be read in *Blood Meridian*, and, further, how might the novel demonstrate the ways in which the geohistorical makeup of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands (in its desolate vastness and uncertain division of sovereignty) allows both the United States and Mexican authorities to turn a deaf ear to human suffering?

Bare Life, Precarity, and the Camp Space of the Borderlands

When readers first encounter the Glanton gang, they are described as “viciouslooking humans,” riding ponies decorated with human skin, hair, and teeth. They enter Chihuahua City dressed in animal skins, wearing “scapulars or necklaces of dried and blackened human ears,” and, despite their gruesome attire, are permitted entrance to

the governor's palace (78-79). Moments later, readers learn that Glanton has negotiated the release of Toadvine and the kid, who are in the Chihuahua City jail and have been sentenced to death (the kid for riding into Mexico with Captain White on a clandestine mission to conquer states in northern Mexico for the United States), so they can join the Glanton gang in their mission to rid the Mexican frontier of Apaches. In the span of a few days, Toadvine and the kid have gone from being enemies of the state to riding out of Chihuahua City in a state-sanctioned parade of mercenary prowess: "they rode out singlefile through the streets with the governor and his party...smiling and bowing and the lovely darkskinned girls throwing flowers from the windows" (79-80). This strange reversal in Chihuahua City's position toward Toadvine and the kid is indicative of the larger societal attitudes illustrated by the novel, wherein white criminals are only subject to the death penalty for committing crimes, while Apaches and other indigenous Americans are subject to death simply for being who they are. In an effort to ensure the destruction of indigenous Americans who are perceived as a threat to the Mexican frontier, the Mexican government issues a bounty for Apache scalps, ultimately setting the Glanton gang's string of massacres in motion.

Here, I would like to draw a parallel between the conditions suffered by the indigenous American victims of the Glanton gang's violence and Giorgio Agamben's concept of bare life, which he first defines in *Homo Sacer*. Agamben first distinguishes between two Greek words for life: *zōē*, which refers to life as such and is common to gods, men, and animals; and *bios*, which is "the form or way of living proper to an individual or group," in other words, politicized life (1). For him, bare life falls somewhere between *zōē* and *bios*, "remain[ing] included in politics in the form of an

exception, that is, as something that is included solely as an exclusion” (11). Bare life is politicized only insofar as the sovereign excludes it from the polis; its de-politicization is a result of its politics. Agamben then traces the concept of bare life through the figure of the *homo sacer*, the sacred man, who “*may be killed and yet not sacrificed,*” and who Agamben asserts serves the paradigmatic function in modern politics (8). In *Blood Meridian*, most indigenous Americans, Apaches in particular, fall into the realm of bare life. Although indigenous Americans are the original inhabitants of the Mexican and U.S. frontiers, and ostensibly could be regarded as subjects of the governments that conquered those lands, the Mexican and United States governments both de-politicize them and permit, even incentivize, other subjects to kill them.

Additionally, Agamben makes a point to locate bare life within the sphere of the sovereign: “*The sovereign sphere is the sphere in which it is permitted to kill without committing homicide and without celebrating a sacrifice, and sacred life—that is, life that may be killed but not sacrificed—is the life that has been captured in this sphere*” (83). While the indigenous Americans in *Blood Meridian* are perhaps viewed as enemies in a war and not subjects of the U.S. and Mexican governments, they are nonetheless captured in the sovereign sphere, subject to the sovereign’s laws, de-politicized by them, but not under their protection, as they can be killed without the charge of homicide.

It is important to note, also, that the novel’s events take place in a particular type of space, the deserts and mountains of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, wherein the law is regularly suspended. In this sense, the borderlands can be considered a kind of *camp*, which, for Agamben, “*is the space that is opened when the state of exception becomes the rule*” (168-169). While Agamben is referring primarily to Nazi concentration camps here,

which—insofar as they are a spatial arrangement consciously constructed for the purpose of creating bare life—are markedly different types of spaces than the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, the borderlands nonetheless manifest many of the same characteristics. Notably, Agamben does not argue that the *camp* must always take the same shape or structure as the Nazi concentration camps he uses as his example. In his words:

If this is true, if the essence of the camp consists in the materialization of the state of exception and in the subsequent creation of a space in which bare life and the juridical rule enter into a threshold of indistinction, then we must admit that we find ourselves virtually in the presence of the camp every time such a structure is created, independent of the kinds of crime that are committed there and whatever its denomination and specific topography. (174)

Like the concentration camp, the U.S.-Mexican frontier is “a piece of land placed outside the normal juridical order, but it is nevertheless not simply an external space” (169-170). Readers of *Blood Meridian* will not fail to notice that the U.S.-Mexican frontier portrayed in the novel is unambiguously outside the normal juridical order. Not only indigenous Americans, but also Mexicans and Anglo-Americans are subject to the anarchic violence of the borderlands, which the novel depicts in grisly detail: the kid’s early life is characterized by senseless (sometimes murderous) violence; an American man the kid meets tells of cutting out one of his black slaves’ heart; in a battle against a group of Comanches, Captain White’s men are raped, disemboweled, and castrated; Griffin, Texas, where the novel ends, is described as “as lively a place for murders as you’d care to visit” (319); desert travelers frequently stumble upon massacred caravans, burned villages, and once even a bush hung with the bodies of dead babies. *Blood Meridian’s*

borderlands are peppered with an excess of unpunished, ungrieved cruelty, and the narrator cites the borderlands as “terrains so wild and barbarous to try whether the stuff of creation may be shaped to man’s will or whether his own heart is not another kind of clay” (4-5). In the vast camp space of the novel’s borderlands, few (if any) lives can avoid being rendered bare life.

While the borderlands in the novel can be described as a camp, wherein all lives caught in them are rendered bare life, they are not a flat space. Sovereign exceptions, such as the bounty on Apache scalps, tend to differentiate bare life even in the camp space of the borderlands, causing certain subjects to be more or less vulnerable than others based on race, ethnicity, nationality, and/or geographic location. Initially celebrated by the citizens of Chihuahua City as heroes and protectors of the Mexican frontier, the Glanton gang soon take to slaughtering indigenous Americans and Mexican villagers alike. In the attack on the Gileños village, the gang do not discriminate between men, women, and children, nor do they spare the Mexican slaves held there by the Gileños: “There were in the camp a number of Mexican slaves and these ran forth calling out in spanish and were brained or shot” (156). Though the Mexican government hired the Glanton gang to protect Mexican lives, outside of governed spaces the gang use the bounty for Apache scalps for their own ends, as an excuse to kill Mexican citizens alongside indigenous Americans, as a means to bolster their own wealth, and as an expression of their racist ideologies. Later in the novel, after having embarked from Chihuahua City for a second time and having a harder time finding indigenous Americans to kill, the gang begin to kill Mexicans in larger numbers, and on one

occasion engage in battle with an entire company of Mexican soldiers after accidentally stumbling upon them in a village.

Ironically, upon their second return to Chihuahua City, the Governor even pays the Glanton gang for delivering Mexican scalps: “They entered the city haggard and filthy and reeking with the blood of the citizenry for whose protection they had contracted. The scalps of the slain villagers were strung from the windows of the governor’s house and the partisans were paid out of the all but exhausted coffers” (185). By permitting the Glanton gang to murder certain people in the borderlands (Apaches and other indigenous Americans), the Mexican authorities open up a realm of exception wherein Mexican lives are ultimately included in the sphere of state-sanctioned violence which was only permitted to exist, in the first place, for the sake of their protection.

Judith Butler, in her engagement with Agamben’s theory, illustrates the ways in which bare life can be variegated based on race, gender, ethnicity, and nationality (among other factors). Critiquing Agamben slightly, Butler argues that his theories “do not tell us how sovereignty, understood as state sovereignty in this instance, works by differentiating populations on the basis of ethnicity and race” (*Precarious* 68). In *Precarious Life* and *Frames of War*, Butler posits that all lives are in some sense precarious, that is, socially constituted, exposed to other people, and therefore vulnerable to the possibility of violence. However, she also holds that precarity is not evenly distributed among all lives; rather, for some lives vulnerability “becomes highly exacerbated under certain social and political conditions, especially those in which violence is a way of life and the means of self-defense are limited” (*Precarious* 29). Rather than being an absolute condition imposed on a subject or population, precarity can

be variegated depending on the convergence of certain social factors, such as race, ethnicity, and, as I argue, geography. Further, Butler argues that state-sanctioned violence can serve to amplify precarity: “To be protected from violence by the nation-state is to be exposed to the violence wielded by the nation-state, so to rely on the nation-state for protection *from* violence is precisely to exchange one potential violence for another” (*Frames* 26). For her, state-sanctioned violence does not negate precarity, but only changes its source. For the Mexican villagers in *Blood Meridian*, violence suffered at the hands of indigenous Americans is replaced by violence suffered at the hands of the state-sanctioned Glanton gang.

Butler is careful to distance precariousness from bare life, however, arguing that precarious lives “are not cast outside the polis in a state of radical exposure, but bound and constrained by power relations in a situation of forcible exposure” (*Frames* 29). While *Blood Meridian* certainly illustrates both bare life (de-politicization) and precarity (“forcible exposure”) in different degrees and at different times, the border inevitably muddies any distinction between them. Perhaps it can be said that a life lived in the borderlands can be both de-politicized *and* “constrained by power relations” simultaneously. In other words, the political situation of the borderlands fictionalized in *Blood Meridian* creates a de-politicized space wherein *all lives* are reduced to something less than *bios*, and also, in a different respect, state-sanctioned violence creates the possibility for amplified precarity on the basis of racial, ethnic, and/or national difference.

Here, we must pay special attention to the way geography modifies and facilitates bare life and precarity. It is only because of the vast distances and poor lines of

communication between cities and villages, inhospitable desert conditions, and the gang's transient guerilla tactics, that the Governor of Chihuahua finds himself compensating the gang—unknowingly—for the murder of his fellow Mexican citizens. As the narrator states, referring to the borderlands: “Here beyond men's judgments all covenants were brittle.” (106). Separated geographically from the centers of power, the Glanton gang are free to exert their own forms of sovereignty. For example, after battling the company of Mexican soldiers they stumble upon in a village, a few Mexican soldiers escape, racing the Glanton gang back to Chihuahua City in an attempt to seek refuge and to warn the Governor of the gang's activities. The gang overtake the soldiers just outside the city, kill and bury them, and burn their uniforms. Despite being caught violating the terms of their agreement with the Mexican government, the Glanton gang utilize the frontier space as a protective buffer zone that allows them to prevent such incriminating information from reaching Chihuahua City. Even when the Governor of Chihuahua finally discovers that the Glanton gang have been hunting Mexicans as well as Apaches, the gang simply procure a similar contract from the Governor of Sonora, who has no way of knowing that the gang members have no intention of sparing any Sonoran inhabitants, indigenous American or Mexican.

Social and political spaces both limit and enable the Glanton gang's violence. Glanton, for example, remains near the border if he crosses into the United States because he is subject to arrest on U.S. soil. The gang are hesitant, too, to kill Mexicans in larger cities and towns where they are unable to control the flow of information. On one occasion, when they stop in the town of Nacori, one of their members is stabbed in a cantina and a fight ensues. During the fight, the gang kill and scalp all twenty of the

Mexican townspeople who happened to be in the cantina, before quickly riding out of town. The narrator explains that even the Glanton gang's violence is subject to certain limitations: "They'd not have shot men in public in a town so large but there was no help for it" (180). It can be presumed, then, that the same subject living in a larger town, although not entirely invulnerable to violence, nonetheless suffers a lesser degree of precarity than they would if they resided in (or simply happened to be caught moving through) the desert or one of the small desert villages.

As we have seen, spatial and geographic considerations can both temper and encourage the state-sanctioned racist and gendered violence committed by the Glanton gang against Mexican citizens as well as indigenous men, women, and children. It can be said, then, that while bare life is the rule in the camp space of *Blood Meridian's* borderlands, precarity nonetheless fluctuates, intensifies, and subsides alternately in a given subject based, first, on that subject's race and gender, and, subsequently, on their movements across borders and through various geographic, social, and political spaces. By illustrating these social, political, and geographic mechanisms that serve to amplify indigenous/Mexican precarity, *Blood Meridian* subverts and complicates traditional U.S. narratives of the borderlands that attempt to render indigenous American and Mexican lives ungrievable.

Eradicating and Forgetting the Ungrievable

In *Religion in Cormac McCarthy's Fiction*, Manuel Broncano presents a convincing postcolonial reading of *Blood Meridian* as an *intra-history* that challenges the United States' grand narratives of the Mexican-American War, Manifest Destiny, and

subsequent Western conquests. Drawing parallels between the ‘hegemonic’ and the ‘canonical’ and, then, between the ‘subaltern’ and the ‘apocryphal,’ Broncano calls attention to the distinctions between History, as narrated by the State, and personal histories, which are often anti-hegemonic and subversive (18, 32). Ultimately, Broncano posits that *Blood Meridian* is, itself, an anti-hegemonic counter-allegory that tells an apocryphal history of “how a new world—that of the Mexican-American border—came to happen” (45).

As I have already shown above, *Blood Meridian* depicts the mechanisms by which state-sanctioned violence and the camp space of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands serve to reduce lives caught in the borderlands to bare life and to simultaneously intensify the precarity of indigenous American and Mexican lives. What Broncano’s analysis implies, and what I would like to explore further, is the possibility that, rather than perpetuating indigenous/Mexican voicelessness, as many critics suggest it does, *Blood Meridian*, in fact, memorializes the subjects it depicts, albeit in a seemingly counter-intuitive fashion, by illustrating, graphically, the methods by which indigenous American and Mexican lives are stripped of meaning, forgotten, and otherwise rendered ungrivable or unmourned. Furthermore, in analyzing both the judge’s and the kid’s respective positions on indigenous/Mexican ungrivability, I aim to reconcile a postcolonial reading of the novel with a familiar critical question: that is, what is the reason for the judge’s enigmatic disappointment in the kid? In order to do so, I must first examine the ways in which indigenous American and Mexican lives in the novel are rendered ungrivable.

Blood Meridian narrates erasure, eradication, decay, and forgetting. Communities, buildings, towns, bodies, and individuals are destroyed, killed, burned, and left to rot until they leave only scant traces of what they were. Judge Holden, who keeps records of creatures, people, geological formations, and indigenous artwork in a ledger and then, to claim dominion over them, erases from the world whatever he wishes, figures both as a preserver and an eradicator in the novel. For example, when the gang stumbles upon a rock formation covered in indigenous paintings, the judge copies several paintings into his ledger and then chooses one of them to erase: “Then he rose and with a piece of broken chert he scapped away one of the designs, leaving no trace of it only a raw place in the stone where it had been” (173). That the judge should only erase one painting among hundreds seems to be a small thing, and yet, this one erasure is significant insofar as it allows the judge to dictate which of the previous artists’ expressions shall move forward into the future and which shall not. In erasing one painting, Judge Holden therefore takes dominion over all of the paintings, bending the artistic utterances of the painters to his own will, making the rocks tell the story he wishes them to tell.

Later in the novel, the judge will explain the rationale behind his ledger to the other gang members, claiming, “Whatever in creation exists without my knowledge exists without my consent” (198). Although he often preserves indigenous history by giving consent to certain existences (such as the paintings he does not erase), in consenting to them and choosing which histories should be told and which should not, the judge necessarily resituates them according to his own narrative aims. The judge’s worldview is quintessentially colonial; by framing the world within his own epistemological terms, he succeeds in dominating not simply the material world he

inhabits, but also the narratives by which that material world (and its past, its history) is understood and interpreted.

It goes without saying that the judge's erasures are not limited to indigenous artwork, but extend also to the very bodies and lives of indigenous Americans and Mexicans. After the Glanton gang destroy a Tigua village, slaughtering its peaceful inhabitants, the narrator's gaze, which would customarily follow the gang as they move on to the next slaughter, remains in the village:

In the days to come the frail black rebuses of blood in those sands would crack and break and drift away so that in the circuit of few suns all trace of the destruction of these people would be erased. The desert wind would salt their ruins and there would be nothing, nor ghost nor scribe, to tell to any pilgrim in his passing how it was that people had lived in this place and in this place died. (174)

The Glanton gang, in doing violence to whole communities, erase not only individuals, but also memories of those individuals; they take not only lives, but also the possibility of those lives being remembered as lives. In the same way that the judge gains dominion over indigenous narratives by scraping away a painting, the Glanton gang exacts authority over indigenous histories by slaughtering whole villages. The Glanton gang's violence, like the colonial violence of U.S. westward expansion is a two-pronged injustice; it is both material and historical; it seeks to eradicate not only the indigenous/Mexican life, but also all record of the indigenous/Mexican life as life.

It is appropriate, now, to return Judith Butler, noting the similarities between the Glanton gang's violence, a violence that attacks not only bodies, but also dictates the way those bodies are framed and understood, and Butler's concepts of precarity and

ungrievability, as theorized in *Precarious Life* and *Frames of War*. As we have already seen, *Blood Meridian* illustrates the ways in which the geographical makeup of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, combined with racist colonial ideologies, creates the circumstances for bare life and amplified precarity. Additionally, I have already shown how Butler's concept of precarity, which is closely tied to ungrievability, differs from and compliments Agamben's concept of bare life.

In *Frames of War*, Butler distinguishes between grievable and ungrievable life by noting that some lives, though they are *apprehended* as living, are not always *recognized* as lives. She defines grievable and ungrievable lives thusly:

In other words, "this will be a life that will have been lived" is the presupposition of a grievable life, which means that this will be a life that can be regarded as a life, and be sustained by that regard. Without grievability, there is no life, or, rather, there is something living that is other than life. Instead, "there is a life that will never have been lived," sustained by no regard, no testimony, and ungrieved when lost. (*Frames* 15)

The problem, for Butler, is not that lives are precarious (she holds that social embodiment ensures that all lives are precarious in some sense), but that precarity is unevenly distributed and that this uneven distribution contributes to ungrievability. While the conditions that determine grievability and ungrievability are myriad (they include but are not limited to differentiation and framing based on race, gender, ethnicity, and nationality), for Butler, the problem is, at its core, an ontological one, and her aim is, first, that we begin to "consider how existing norms allocate recognition differently" (*Frames* 6). Second, she questions what could possibly be done "to shift the very terms of

recognizability in order to produce more radically democratic results” (*Frames* 6).

Borrowing a phrase from Trinh Minh-ha, Butler argues that one way to examine our existing norms and the way they allocate recognition is to “frame the frame,” to show that the frame through which we define what is recognizable as a life is itself always limited (8-9). For Butler, “to call the frame into question is to show that the frame never quite contained the scene it was meant to limn, that something was already outside, which made the very sense of the inside possible, recognizable” (9). Although the specific frames Butler refers to are those by which contemporary wars and conflicts, such as the War on Terror, are waged and justified, her concepts nonetheless apply to the Glanton gang’s violence, both to its framing and to its effects.

We can see this framing quite evidently in the ways Anglo-American characters in the novel think (or do not think) of indigenous/Mexican lives as grievable. Early in the novel, after murdering a Mexican bartender in cold blood, the kid is recruited to join an American cavalry company, which is engaged in a clandestine mission to claim Mexican lands, such as Sonora, that were not already taken in the Mexican-American War. The company’s leader, Captain White, in a meeting with the kid, justifies their extension of the war on racist grounds, arguing that the Mexican people’s tolerance of indigenous Americans is evidence of their being something less than human: “What we are dealing with, he said, is a race of degenerates. A mongrel race, little better than niggers. And maybe no better. There is no government in Mexico. Hell, there’s no God in Mexico. Never will be” (34). Further, he claims they are not capable of governing themselves, and that if Americans do not rule Mexico, then Europeans will. And Captain White is not the only character in the novel who professes such views. Later in the novel, when the

expiest Tobin narrates the gang's first encounter with the judge and the gang's subsequent massacre of a group of Apaches who had been tracking them, he often refers to the Apaches as if they were animals, speculating that they tracked the gang by following their scent, and, when the Apaches think they have beaten the Glanton gang, describing their war cries as "yapping on the slope like dogs" (134). The Apache's lives, rather than being viewed as livable lives in their own right, are viewed as obstacles to livable life. Both White's cavalry and the Glanton gang justify violence against Mexicans and indigenous Americans on the grounds that they are protecting the borderlands from violence.

Not only do White's cavalry and the Glanton gang subject indigenous/Mexican lives to physical violence, but they also subject them to the violence of ungrievability. Thus, indigenous/Mexican vulnerability in the novel corresponds with Butler's description of ungrievable populations, of which she says, "Such populations are "lose-able," or can be forfeited, precisely because they are framed as being already lost or forfeited; they are cast as threats to human life as we know it rather than as living populations in need of protection from illegitimate state violence, famine, or pandemics" (*Frames* 31). Alongside the violence done to the indigenous/Mexican lives in the novel, there is also an ontological violence that fails or refuses to recognize them as lives.

That is not to say, however, that the novel itself fails to recognize them as lives. Although scenes of mourning are infrequent in *Blood Meridian*, when they do occur, they inexorably point to the fact that the narrator's typical frame of reference, which usually remains in the Glanton gang's or the kid's vicinity, leaves out indigenous/Mexican responses to the gang's racist violence. In other words, infrequent though they may be,

scenes wherein indigenous/Mexican mourning slips into the narrative frame, “frame the frame” by making visible the novel’s customary exclusion of indigenous/Mexican perspectives. One example of this slippage occurs after the kid kills the Mexican bartender, as he and a soldier are on their way to meet Captain White. As they pass a house near where the bar was, presumably the deceased bartender’s house, the sounds of women mourning slip into the narrative frame: “They passed a little house where women inside were wailing and the little hearsecart stood at the door with the horses patient and motionless in the heat and the flies” (31). Whether the kid recognizes that the women’s mourning is the result of his violence is not directly addressed, although an attentive reader will draw the connections between the house’s proximity to the bar, the hearsecart waiting outside, and the bartender’s death the night before. By allowing mourning to slip into the narrative frame, the narrator points to the situated nature of the kid’s and other members of the Glanton gang’s perspectives, subtly undermining the racist, colonial ideology that renders Mexican lives ungrievable. By bringing the frame itself into the reader’s view, this slippage illustrates that even the third person form, restricted as it is to a particular physical vicinity (that of the kid and the Glanton gang), recounts the Glanton gang’s exploits from a biased, colonial perspective. In the same way that the kid and the other members of the Glanton gang only see indigenous/Mexican lives being mourned when mourning takes place in their presence, readers only see such mourning when it slips through the narrative frame. That said, while readers are shown few instances of indigenous/Mexican lives being mourned, scenes such as this highlight the fact that even when the Glanton gang’s indigenous/Mexican victims are not mourned within view of the reader, their lives are nonetheless grieved outside of the novel’s limited narrative frame.

In this way, *Blood Meridian* depicts the ungrievability of indigenous/Mexican lives in the borderlands whilst simultaneously pointing to and subverting the colonial perspective, or frame, that produces ungrievability.

The slaughter of the Tiguas is another of the few scenes in the novel wherein the Glanton gang's victims are mourned on-stage (albeit briefly). After describing the gang's attack on the village, the narrative gaze lingers at the scene of violence: "Long past dark that night when the moon was already up a party of women that had been upriver drying fish wandered howling through the ruins" (174). As we have already seen above, the Glanton gang, through destroying entire communities, attempt to eradicate not only lives, but also memories and records of those lives as lives. In this passage, however, the women who were away from the village during the Glanton gang's attack return to grieve the loss of their friends, family, and neighbors. While the narrator claims that the village will soon leave no physical trace of the slaughter to travelers passing through, a mental trace of the Glanton gang's violence (as well as the lives they killed) will remain, not only in the memories of the indigenous women who return to the village after dark, but also in that of each member of the Glanton gang who participated in the slaughter. This fact is particularly significant to the judge because in order to take control over the narrative and to ensure the ungrievability of indigenous/Mexican lives, every member of the Glanton gang must participate in the colonial frame. According to the judge, "Men's memories are uncertain and the past that was differs little from the past that was not" (330). By taking control of the Glanton gang's narrative, the judge hopes to have such power over the past that he can render complete the virtual nonexistence of the indigenous/Mexican people who suffered and died at the gang's hands.

Thus, I will argue that the judge's enigmatic disappointment in the kid, which is the site of significant critical puzzling, is partly the result of the kid's preservation of indigenous/Mexican lives as grievable lives in his memory, a preservation that is made evident in the kid's wanderings near the end of the novel. After Toadvine and Brown, two former Glanton gang members, are hung in Los Angeles, the kid buys Brown's necklace of human ears from a soldier: "With his last two dollars he bought from a soldier the scapular of heathen ears that Brown had worn to the scaffold" (312). While Brown clearly kept the ears as trophies, it is not immediately clear what motivates the kid to spend his last bit of money on them. Later in the novel, however, when a group of young foragers ask the kid what his necklace is made of, he is adamant that they understand the ears once belonged to indigenous Americans. When one of the boys doubts the kid's account of the ears, saying, "You dont know where them ears come from. That old boy you bought em off of might of said they was injins but that dont make it so... Them ears could of come off of cannibals or any other kind of foreign nigger," the kid replies, "They wasnt cannibals... They was Apaches. I knowed the man that docked em. Knowed him and rode with him and seen him hung" (321). While there is an element of boastfulness in the kid's story, his insistence that the foragers know where the ears came from indicates that his wearing of them serves a memorial function. Though the ears have decayed and blackened beyond physical recognition since the kid traveled with the Glanton gang, the kid's knowledge of what the ears are connects them to their previous owners in a way that would not occur if the necklace were in the possession of someone who was not present when Brown took the ears as trophies. This scene is significant because it provides readers with evidence that the kid's "clemency for the

heathen” (299), to which the judge alludes, consists partly of him preserving indigenous/Mexican lives and deaths in his memory and, subsequently, communicating that memory to others. While that is not to say that the kid should necessarily be read as the novel’s hero, his defiance of the judge’s will that the indigenous/Mexican lives the Glanton gang destroyed should be subsumed under a colonial narrative can be read as an act of courage and of resistance, however small.

In another scene, when the kid is traveling through the desert and discovers the bodies of a group of murdered pilgrims, he approaches the bodies and finds among them a kneeling, indigenous old woman, whom he offers to help reach safety: “He told her that he would convey her to a safe place, some party of her countrypeople who would welcome her and that she should join them for he could not leave her in this place or she would surely die” (315). When he touches her, he finds that she has been dead for years and he moves on. Broncano, in his analysis of this scene, shows that the kid’s “confession” to the old woman is evidence of a spiritual conversion (41). I would add also that despite the fact that the woman is already dead, the kid’s offer of protection and his reference to her as “Abuelita” indicates his identification with her as a human being and even as a member of his own family without regard for any racial or ethnic differences between them. This kind of identification is a far cry from earlier scenes in the novel, such as the scene wherein Glanton murders an old woman in the town square and none of the gang step in to protect her or to protest when Glanton demands her scalp as a receipt to be traded for a bounty from the Governor of Chihuahua. While the kid’s identification with the old woman at the end of the novel can be read as evidence of his maturity, the judge’s attitude toward the kid throughout the novel suggests that the kid

has always, to some (perhaps very small) degree, conceived of indigenous/Mexican lives as lives to be identified with and to be understood as grievable lives.

Ineffectual though it may be, the kid's perception of indigenous/Mexican lives as grievable lives, first, by memorializing their slain bodies through wearing Brown's scapular, and second, by identifying with the old woman in the cave, stands in open defiance of the judge's racist, colonial worldview. At the end of the novel, the judge and the kid meet again in Griffin, Texas. Faced with the kid's mutinous "clemency for the heathen," the judge kills the kid in the saloon's jakes. What remains of the kid's body is left undescribed in the novel and its readers only receive a suggestion of the jakes' contents by a saloon patron's reaction to opening the door: "The first man watched him go and then opened the door of the jakes. Good God almighty, he said" (334). The kid's dead body, like other displayed bodies in the novel, is reconfigured as an object that elicits disgust. Like other displayed bodies in the novel, the kid's dead body serves a rhetorical function. Although the kid's cause of death is not disclosed to the reader, it can be reasonably presumed that he has been mutilated or sexually violated (or both) in such a way that he is no longer recognizable as human to the saloon patron who sees him. It is telling that the patron does not seek to avenge his death or even to discover who the kid's killer might be; he simply closes the jakes door and walks back up to the saloon. Like the indigenous/Mexican lives destroyed by the Glanton gang, the kid's life is rendered ungrievable. As a result, his body, which ostensibly bears marks that might lead to his killer, is not read as something to be mourned or avenged, but as something to be hidden and avoided. While the kid's ungrievability is brought into being not by his race or

ethnicity, but by the anarchic camp space of Griffin, Texas, it nonetheless prevents his life from being read as a livable life worthy of protection or remembrance.

It is notable, too, that at this point in the novel the kid and the judge are the only two remaining members of the Glanton gang and the only two living witnesses to the destruction of many of the villages the gang attacked. In killing the kid, the judge hopes to sever the last possible counter-narrative of the Glanton gang's exploits. It is as if the judge thinks that if he does not consent to the indigenous/Mexican's existences, he can erase them from existence by controlling the places they lived and the objects they left behind.

Even so, the judge's erasures have limitations; the kid's body remains, dehumanized as it may be; the scratched out painting is replaced by a raw mark on the stone; women in the Tigua village who were out drying fish survive to mourn their dead. Destruction always leaves traces of itself, evidence that *something* has been erased, even if it mars details of what exactly that something was. And the judge seems to lament this fact. When the gang camp in a gorge where indigenous Americans used to live, some gang members question the judge about the gorge's previous residents:

What kind of Indians has these here been, Judge?

The judge looked up.

Dead ones I'd say, what about you, Judge?

Not so dead, said the judge. (142)

Just as he did in the scene with the rock paintings, the judge destroys many of the gorge's artifacts (shards of pottery and a suit of armor) by throwing pieces of them into the fire.

But he cannot destroy every artifact or every memory of the indigenous/Mexican inhabitants of the borderlands, though he might wish to.

The judge's only recourse is to be the last man standing and thus the sole interpreter of all knowledge: "There is room on the stage for one beast and one alone" (331). But although the novel seems to end on a nihilistic note, with the judge dancing in victory over the kid and proclaiming his immortality, the novel, in narrating the destruction of borderland peoples and cultures, is itself a form of memorial that extends beyond the judge's reach. In this sense, the novel can be read as the solution to its own problem. While the judge attempts to claim dominion over the history of the borderlands by choosing which histories and lives to erase and which to preserve, through passages that allow indigenous/Mexican perspectives to subtly slip into the narrative frame, the novel calls the reader's attention to the injustice inherent in the judge's attempted erasures. Although *Blood Meridian* rarely describes the lives or faces of the Glanton gang's indigenous/Mexican victims (in both their fictional and non-fictional manifestations), the novel nonetheless makes the fact of their erasure present and palpable.

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CHAPTER II
The Legacies of Colonialism and the Places Where Violence Cannot Be in Carmen
Boullosa's *Texas: The Great Theft*

The rag burns him a little. It's bearable. It's not searing. The pain reminds him: "You are Lázaro Rueda, you were born in the south, you have been a *vaquero* forever; you've been in the Valley of the Río Bravo since the beginning of time."

- Carmen Boullosa, *Texas: The Great Theft*

Carmen Boullosa's 2013 novel *Texas: The Great Theft*, set in the US-Mexico borderlands in the late 1850s, begins in the town square of Bruneville, Texas (a fictionalized version of Brownsville, Texas) when the town sheriff, Sheriff Shears, insults a prominent local rancher, Don Nepomuceno, by calling him a "dirty greaser" (3). What follows is an explosion of retributive violence wherein US soldiers and rangers do not distinguish between innocent bystanders (often marked by skin color or linguistic differences) and Mexican seditionists, their ostensible targets for violence. While the U.S. authorities in the novel justify their violence by claiming that it is a response to seditious activities by Don Nepomuceno and his followers, Boullosa shows that such justifications merely obscure the U.S. authorities' real racial and colonial motivations. Critiquing the racist U.S. exceptionalist ideologies of the 1850s, Boullosa's novel illustrates the ways in which colonial cultural imaginaries subject Mexican, indigenous American, and African-American lives to state-sanctioned and/or unpunished violence. Furthermore, I posit that Boullosa's novel sets up a causal connection between the border conflicts of the 1850s and the present day racist attitudes toward Mexicans, African-Americans, and indigenous Americans, attitudes which continue to dehumanize these groups and render their lives ungrievable, or, not-quite-human.

Known among critics and scholars for utilizing a form of writing Carrie C. Chorba describes as "historiographic metafiction," Carmen Boullosa is recognized,

particularly, for writing historical fiction that challenges the idea that complete, reliable histories can be written (Chorba 302). Chief among Boullosa's concerns is the way colonial histories—often written in order to preserve the interests of colonial nation-states or to create and sustain oppressive, racist or classist ideologies—serve to erase the voices of subaltern subjects (especially Mexicans, indigenous Americans, African-Americans, and/or women). As critics have already noted, Boullosa's fictions give voice to historically underrepresented subjects, sometimes impossibly, as in the case of her aptly titled novel, *Llanto: novelas imposibles* (1992), which tells two conflicting accounts of Moctezuma's death, or in the case of *Son vacas, somos puercos* (1991), which retells (again) Alexander Olivier Exquemelin's oft-rewritten memoirs about a group of pirates called the Brotherhood of the Coast, this time from the perspective of a pirate named Smeeks. Chorba's essay on *Llanto* and *Son vacas, somos puercos*, which paved the way for later readings of Boullosa's work, argues that Boullosa's use of "historiographic metafiction" enables her to humanize subaltern subjects who are left out of historical texts and, simultaneously, to question the validity of monologic, colonial histories in the first place. For Chorba, Boullosa's "project does not simply rewrite history, but it actually debates the very texts upon which it is based" (310). Other lines of scholarship, such as those espoused by Anna Reid and Oswaldo Estrada, build from Chorba's work, discussing the ways in which Boullosa's novels illustrate fragmented Mexican subject formation as well as critique the current Mexican social order.

Though Boullosa's characteristic form of "historiographic metafiction" is present in *Texas*, which critiques the mainline colonial history of Texas in much the same manner as her previous novels (such as *Son vacas, somos puercos*, *Llanto: novelas imposibles*,

Duerme (1994), and *Cielos de la tierra* (1997), among others), what I would really like to explore, rather, is the way Boullosa frames the colonial attitudes that led to the annexation of Texas by the United States and the subsequent border disputes in Texas as precursors and progenitors of present-day racism, misogyny, and oppression in the US-Mexico borderlands and beyond. In *Texas*, Boullosa is not only reformulating the past, she is also asking her readers to adopt a critical (even self-critical) approach to the present. Donald L. Shaw makes a similar point in his essay on Boullosa's *Llanto*, in which he argues that Boullosa proposes "the responsibility of the writer to try to rescue a meaning from the past which will contribute to our understanding of the present" (69). In *Texas*, like in *Llanto*, Boullosa draws a causal connection between the present state of Mexico and the colonial past. I argue, then, that for Boullosa the colonial attitudes exhibited by the United States in the 1850s and afterward, as well as the cultural imaginaries which served to justify racialized and gendered violence in the Texas borderlands, left a persistent ideological residue that continues to permeate current relations between the United States and Mexico, largely as a result of the distorted (colonial) accounts of history that have been passed down to us. In this sense, *Texas* can be read both as a revisionist fictional account of the First Cortina War and, more broadly, as a rhetorical plea to readers to recognize the persistent colonial attitudes that enable and incentivize racial and gendered violence.

Like McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, Boullosa's *Texas* illustrates a complex matrix of power relations at work in the borderlands. Thus, before I can fully engage with the rhetorical aspects of Boullosa's novel, I must first outline the ways in which the colonial ideologies demonstrated in *Texas* serve the interests not only of Bruneville's Anglo

residents (at the expense of subaltern lives), but also those of the United States itself. In order to do so, I will draw upon theoretical concepts from Achille Mbembe and Alexander G. Weheliye.

Racialization and Other Methods of Justifying Murder

From the beginning, *Texas* narrates Mexican, African-American, and indigenous American disenfranchisement in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. Though the novel focuses primarily on oppression of minority groups by Anglo-Americans, economic, national, and personal motivations incentivize characters of all races and economic classes to take advantage of others by means of lawful slavery, state-sanctioned murder, unsurveilled plains and territories, as well as legal loopholes that tend to favor Anglo-American businessmen over everyone else (albeit with a few exceptions). Throughout the course of the novel, racialized and gendered violence reigns: Texas Rangers lynch a Mexican resident of Bruneville simply for witnessing a crime; a Mexican barge pilot is shot for landing at a closed dock, which was closed only hours before during a state of martial law; white women are enslaved by indigenous American tribes; indigenous American women are enslaved by Bruneville residents; an African-American slave is sexually assaulted by an Anglo man at a party; a free African-American girl is tortured in a scientific experiment; a young Anglo boy tortures an African-American girl (who later dies of her wounds), and his family attributes his cruelty to his high intelligence; the rape of a Mexican woman by an Anglo man is not treated as a punishable crime; a group of Hasinai, mourning the death of Moonbeam (a Hasinai slave who was murdered by Sheriff Shears) are slaughtered in their sleep by a group of U.S. scouts. Boullosa attributes all

these occurrences to the very structure of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. For her, these injustices are inherent aspects of U.S. imperial expansion.

In the novel's opening note, the narrator explains the political situation in Bruneville and Matasánchez (a fictionalized version of Matamoros, Tamaulipas), particularly how the United States, "motivated by their own interests, especially the right to own slaves (IV)," invaded Mexico, ultimately moving the border yet further south, from the Neuces River to the Río Bravo. Already, readers will note the narrator's interestedness in the story, his/her antipathy toward the United States and the manner by which the U.S. annexed Texas, as well as the conscious, unapologetic bias that is characteristic of Boullosa's narrators. The narrator of *Texas*'s portrayal of Anglo-Americans, particularly Anglo-Texans, as opportunists and racists asks readers to question the colonial histories of the Mexican-American War, to ask whether it was undertaken justly by the United States, and to question whether justifications the Anglo characters give in the novel for stealing from and doing violence to minority groups are valid. And this narrative point of view, which asks readers to interpret events through the biased, mediating consciousnesses of the narrator and the residents of Bruneville and Matasánchez (who themselves interpret events incessantly—and rarely accurately) is a defining rhetorical feature of the novel. As Reid says of Boullosa's *Llanto*, "Each particle of dust has a different version of the past to communicate, creating a multivocal vision, and so historical narrative, seemingly fixed as a written text, is dislodged and dismantled by the inclusion of those who have been silenced, exposing the gaps within knowledge of the past" (87-88). The effect of Boullosa's similarly multivocal narrative strategy in *Texas* is manifold. First, as in Boullosa's previous novels, *Texas* refuses to privilege one

version of history over another. Even the novel's apparent hero, Don Nepomuceno, appears alternately as a hero and a villain, depending on whose perspective the story filters through. And perhaps most importantly for my purposes, Boullosa's multivocal narrative strategy serves to highlight the ideological presuppositions and allegiances behind characters' opinions of and actions toward other characters. In allowing readers to see the ideological grounds on which characters base their decisions, Boullosa enacts a visible critique of the colonial apparatus that serves to justify racialized violence.

One remarkable example of this occurs during a party at the Stealman's mansion in Bruneville, which takes place in under the specter of the rising conflict between Don Nepomuceno and the Texas Rangers. At the party, Bruneville's Anglo elite and their wives discuss the annexation of Texas, the colonization of Mexico by the Spanish, and how they ought to go about "fixing" the various minority groups and "purifying" Texas, among other things. Throughout the course of the party, which the narrator describes for several pages, Anglo characters are seen espousing a range of racist opinions. For example, when some of the women at the party are discussing westward expansion, one says, "We arrived in the Wild West with the intent to conquer the forests, beasts, and the natives. We brought culture and salvation" (150). Here, the war that annexed Texas, rather than being seen as an act of imperial aggression (as the narrator clearly sees it), is viewed as something salvific, a work of charity. Not everyone at the party concurs, however. Catherine Anne, a visitor to Bruneville from the north, argues that they have not gone far enough, that bringing culture to racial minorities is insufficient to Americanize Texas: "That's Richard W. Walker's opinion: it's best if the Negroes escape from Texas to Latin America, crossing the border and mixing with the Mexicans...He

believes it's a 'natural migration' for the Negroes to go to Mexico and Ecuador" (150). But Charles Stealman, the owner of the mansion where the party is being held, overhears Catherine Anne and promptly retorts, "Excuse me, but I disagree, ma'am. That opinion lacks all common sense. The slaves are our property. How would Walker feel if his houses got up and walked across the border, or his furniture, or his investments..." (150). While the partygoers' argument is ostensibly an attempt to solve a real "problem" (minority groups' lack of "civilization," their biological inhumanity, which U.S. Anglos have taken upon themselves to "cure"), Stealman's response to Catherine Anne betrays what, for Boullosa, is the real purpose of racialized dehumanization—that is, for the sake of material gain, both for individual interests (particularly those of Anglos) and for the U.S.'s national interests.

Despite all the partygoers' talk about Americanizing Texas as an ideal to strive for, their racist ideologies are not directed toward achieving racial purity or toward "civilizing" minority groups, as they seem to be, but actually serve what Achille Mbembe describes in his essay, "Necropolitics," as the functions of *colonial occupation*. For Mbembe:

Colonial occupation itself was a matter of seizing, delimiting, and asserting control over a physical geographical area—of writing on the ground a new set of social and spatial relations. The writing of new spatial relations (territorialization) was, ultimately, tantamount to the production of boundaries and hierarchies, zones and enclaves; the subversion of existing property arrangements; the classification of people according to different categories; resource extraction; and, finally, the manufacturing of a large reservoir of cultural imaginaries. These

imaginaries gave meaning to the enactment of differential rights to differing categories of people for different purposes within the same space; in brief, the exercise of sovereignty. (25-26)

Key to Boullosa's critique of racism, as exemplified in the above exchange at the Stealman's party, is the way in which the dehumanization of minority groups is used by Anglo-Texans primarily as a form of justification for stealing land and property from its previous owners, or for treating people themselves as property. By citing innate racial differences between "civilized" humans and "savage" Mexicans, indigenous Americans, and African-Americans, the Anglo-Texans enable themselves to differentiate, within the same sovereign space, between people who are deserving of rights and the "savages," "greasers," and "property" who are not. Thus, in *Texas*, racism and racialized violence are so intertwined with U.S. imperialism that the violence that occurs in the novel cannot be separated from the U.S.-exceptionalist ideologies that serve to justify it. In other words, for Boullosa, racism is not merely an unfortunate side-effect of U.S. Anglo identity; rather, it is constitutive of it.

We can see how Boullosa formulates racism and imperialism as constitutive of U.S. Anglo identity most clearly when her characters cite U.S. literature and culture as formative mechanisms for the colonial cultural imaginary. At the Stealman party, for example, Judge Gold, an Anglo-Texan businessman, cites Walt Whitman in his argument that Mexicans are an impure, subhuman race: "'On my last visit to the refinery, I read a piece in the *Brooklyn Eagle* by a fellow called Walt Whitman'—he pitches his voice again, lowering it like a preacher in the pulpit—'What has miserable, inefficient Mexico to do with the great mission of peopling the New World with a noble race?'" (153). This

slight (mis)quotation of Whitman serves a dual function in the novel: first, Boullosa clearly intends for it to shock Anglo-American readers by highlighting the fact that Whitman, who is famously known for encapsulating U.S. identity, held racist views toward Mexicans. Second, the (mis)quotation emphasizes how literature and culture can help shape and promote U.S. imperial impulses.

That literature and culture are viewed in nationalist terms or even in terms of the international economy is also relevant for Boullosa. Later on at the party, Catherine Anne expresses her distaste for Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and another partygoer concurs, blaming the novel's popularity on the English: "If it weren't for the English no one would have even taken notice of it. Have they lost their literary sense? They just supported it to hurt this country" (172). By attacking the institution of slavery, an institution by which the Anglo U.S. Southerner defines him/herself, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* challenges not just slavery itself, but the entire cultural imaginary that bolsters U.S. Anglo identity. This is why, at the end of the conversation, the Anglo partygoers can concur that "It's unpatriotic to like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*..." (173). Boullosa's characters do not separate whiteness from Americanness, nor does it occur to them that a non-white person could potentially be fully human, let alone American.

Here, building from the idea that racism, for Boullosa, is central to U.S. Anglo identity, I would like to draw upon Alexander G. Weheliye's concept of *racializing assemblages*, as described in *Habeas Viscus*. Weheliye argues in *Habeas Viscus* that *racializing assemblages* "construes race not as a biological or cultural classification but as a set of sociopolitical processes that discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans" (4). Adopting Gilles Deleuze's and Felix Guattari's loosely

defined term “assemblages,” which denotes an object “made of variously formed matters, and very different dates and speeds,” which is an “increase in the dimensions of a multiplicity that necessarily changes in nature as it expands its connections” (3, 8), Weheliye highlights the multiplicity of forms and the shifting, amorphous quality of racialization in its function, criteria, and effects. Developing his concept as a response to Giorgio Agamben’s *bare life* and Michel Foucault’s biopolitics, Weheliye claims that Agamben’s and Foucault’s theories of sovereignty ignore the aspects of racialization that Weheliye feels cannot be transcended by the supposed universality of *bare life* and biopolitics, but are central to any study of political violence. For Weheliye, “homo sacerization commonly goes hand in hand with racialization...” (72). In other words, Weheliye holds that race is created for the benefit of some humans and at the expense of others, and, further, that while it appears to have its basis in biology, racialization merely uses biology as a means to mark or distinguish between bodies so that full humanity (and all its accompanying rights and privileges) may be attributed to some and not others (26). While racialization is grounded in the biological sphere, its originary motivation is political: it “aids in the perpetuation of hierarchical categorizations along the lines of nationality, gender, religion, race, culture, sexuality, and so on” (43). The concept of *racializing assemblages* is helpful for a discussion of Boulosa’s *Texas* because it provides a framework for a study of politicized violence along the lines of *bare life* and biopolitics that is attuned to the ways in which laws apply differentially to different subjects in a given sovereign space based on embodied racialized markers.

Although Weheliye’s concept is primarily theorized in relation to the ways in which black subjects undergo racialization, he explicitly does not restrict his analysis to

the black body and intends that it should ultimately be applied to any situation where the racialization of bodies leads to political violence. As we will see, in *Texas*, while *racializing assemblages* that were set in motion long before the events of the novel reduce Mexican, African-American, indigenous American, and/or female subjects to the not-quite-human, the specific effects of racialization vary between subjects based on a convergence of numerous spatial and social factors. It is these differentiating factors that I would like to outline now. While I have so far tended to speak of minority groups (as portrayed in *Texas*) as one collective group oppressed by Anglo-Texans, in the remainder of my paper I will discuss the ways in which political violence in the novel differentiates between differentially racialized subjects.

In the first place, the U.S.-Mexico border in the novel is a site of differentiation. For example, early in the novel, the narrator describes the arrest of a Comanche named Green Horn, who tortured a free African-American girl (named Pepementia) on the Mexican side of the border because he wanted to “see if they’re as black on the inside as they are on the outside” (36). As the narrator explains, because slavery is legal in the U.S., but not in Mexico, “It would have been impossible to for Captain Mercy to bring charges [against Green Horn] in Bruneville, or any other American territory, but in Mexico he knew the authorities would take it to heart” (36). Notably, Green Horn is juxtaposed against a prisoner on the U.S. side of the border, Urrutia, who makes money by luring fugitive slaves across the border into Mexico, where he sells them into indentured servitude or ransoms them back to their “masters” in the United States. The result of this juxtaposition is that it brings to the readers’ attention the absurdity of U.S. slavery. Although both characters are imprisoned for their treatment of African-

Americans, Green Horn is punished for harming Pepementia, while Urrutia's real crime is in defrauding white slave-owners. By illustrating this contrast between Mexican and U.S. laws concerning African-Americans and the way in which black characters are rendered not-quite-human on one side of the border, while being protected by the law (at least from direct physical harms like torture and murder) on the other, Boullosa calls into question the dichotomy proposed by many of the Anglo characters in the novel that the U.S. Anglos are "civilized," while the Mexicans are uncivilized "mongrels."

Socio-spatial considerations also serve to differentiate between variously racialized subjects. This is most clearly evident in the case of Anglo men and women whose bodies are made increasingly vulnerable in vast, un surveilled frontier spaces or who are held captive by indigenous American tribes. For example, the governments and residents of both Bruneville and Matasánchez live in continual fear of indigenous American raids, especially on the outskirts of town and in the frontiers. In one such raid, Comanches destroy the nearby city of Ciudad Castaño, take prisoners, weapons and ammunition, and kill all the *federales* before riding back to their camp. Additionally, throughout the novel, several female characters are captured in raids and taken into slavery, often being forced to marry the chief of the tribe that captured them.

Furthermore, Anglo characters, even U.S. military and Texas Rangers, are vulnerable to retributive violence by Mexican characters, and vice versa. On one occasion, a group of Texas Rangers, tracking Don Nepomuceno, stumble upon a camp of *vaqueros* in the plains. The *vaqueros* offer food to the Rangers and then one of them begins singing a song that makes fun of Anglo-Texans. Upset by the song and frustrated that they cannot catch Don Nepomuceno, the Rangers kill the *vaqueros* in cold blood. Only moments

later, however, some of Don Nepomuceno's scouts, who witnessed the murder of the *vaqueros*, sneak up on the Rangers and kill them. Certainly, Boullosa creates these moments, in part, as an intentionally exaggerated attempt to villainize the Texas Rangers, but, as I argue, exchanges of violence such as these also serve to illustrate the differentiating levels of precarity between given subjects based on racialized markers, as well as within varied types of social, national, and topographical spaces.

Of course, Bruneville's Anglo residents frame the violence done to Anglo subjects by Mexicans and indigenous Americans in the frontier spaces of the borderlands as a justification for further violence. Just as many of the characters in *Blood Meridian* justify their violence against indigenous Americans based on the fear of attack, Bruneville's residents, the Texas Rangers in particular, do not view indigenous American (and, often, Mexican) lives as livable lives in themselves, but as obstacles to livable life. Furthermore, this view is not restricted to Anglo residents, as even Don Nepomuceno, on one occasion, slaughters a village of Karankawas claiming it was done to avenge the attack on Ciudad Castaño, although it is clear, even to many Bruneville residents, that it was actually Comanches who attacked Ciudad Castaño. That the *racializing assemblages* at work in Bruneville do not differentiate between different indigenous American tribes (or between indigenous Americans as individuals), preferring to refer to them collectively as "savages," is relevant here, as violence done by one group of indigenous Americans can be cited as justification for violence done against another, unaffiliated group of indigenous Americans.

This attitude, expectedly, leads to atrocities against peaceful indigenous American groups. Later in the novel, when Sheriff Shears accidentally murders a Hasinai slave,

Moonbeam, Bruneville do not want to bury her in the Christian cemetery because it is only for “civilized Texans,” so they wrap her in a sheet and bury her without a ceremony. Hearing that she has not been buried properly, the Hasinai journey to Bruneville to claim her body, but on the way, U.S. scouts—who are on edge because of their skirmishes against Don Nepomuceno and his soldiers—murder the mourning Hasinai in their sleep. One of the most poignant and compassionate scenes in the novel, Boullosa’s beautiful description of the Hasinai’s ritual mourning, followed immediately by their senseless murder, alerts readers to the injustice of their racialization and dehumanization by the U.S. scouts, and also functions as a literary memorial for the lives and cultures lost to such violence.

Similarly, *racializing assemblages* that do not differentiate between Mexicans and seditionists are used by the Texas Rangers and U.S. authorities in the novel to do violence to the Mexican residents of Bruneville. While dozens of Mexican characters are murdered in the novel, the most notable examples of this are three Mexican men, Santiago, Arnoldo, and Lázaro, all three innocent bystanders, who are not simply murdered by the Texas Rangers, but whose bodies are hung from trees in Bruneville to serve as examples to other Mexicans. Like the racist colonial ideologies espoused at the Stealman party, this refusal to attribute full humanity to Santiago, Arnoldo, and Lázaro on the basis of embodied racialized markers is not what it appears to be, and it serves particular psychological and ideological effects beyond what is immediately apparent. Though the Texas Rangers cite (martial) laws as their reasons for killing Mexican subjects like Santiago, Arnoldo, and Lázaro, their real motivations are deeply embedded in the imperialist, racist ideologies that created the borderlands in the first place,

ideologies which have defined Santiago, Arnoldo, and Lázaro as not-quite-human long before any laws were broken. Furthermore, as I will argue in the next section of this essay, Santiago's, Arnoldo's, and Lázaro's deaths—and the subsequent display of their dead bodies—serve not only as concrete acts of racialized political violence against those individuals, but also symbolically perpetuate and justify future racialized political violence and dehumanization against other Mexican subjects.

When the Dead Speak For and Against Themselves: The Criminalized Mexican Corpse; the Places Where Violence Cannot Be

In his discussion of Sylvia Wynter and Frantz Fanon, Weheliye elucidates the ways in which racialization functions physiologically and neurologically in order to reinforce the idea that some humans fall under the genre of not-quite-human, while white humans are fully human. He describes this complex racializing mechanism as operating thusly:

Consequently, racialization figures as a master code within the genre of the human represented by western Man, because its law-like operations are yoked to species-sustaining physiological mechanisms in the form of a global color line—instituted by cultural laws so as to register in human neural networks—that clearly distinguishes the good/life/fully-human from the bad/death/not-quite human. This, in turn, authorizes the conflation of racialization with mere biological life, which, on the one hand, enables white subjects to 'see' themselves as transcending racialization due to their full embodiment of this particular genre of the human while responding anti-pathetically to nonwhite subjects as bearers of ontological cum biological lack, and, in those subjects on the other side of the color line, it

creates sociogenically instituted physiological reactions against their own existence and reality. (27-28)

What Weheliye argues is that racialization, operating through cultural laws and the reinforcement of Eurocentric, phallogocentric “master codes,” is not simply a willed activity, but is actually a neurological, physiological mechanism that is embedded in the neural networks of both white and nonwhite subjects. For Weheliye, the association of bad/death/not-quite-human with nonwhite subjects, rather than being an intellectual reaction or process, is a physiological reaction that is continually reinforced by the “law-like operations” that are used to define western “Man”—that is, the fully human. And vital to this racializing neurological/physiological force is the manner by which political violence serves to *create* not-quite-human subjects. As Weheliye posits, “Political violence plays a crucial part in the baroque techniques of modern humanity, since it simultaneously *serves to create not-quite-humans in specific acts of violence and supplies the symbolic source material for racialization*” (28, italics mine). In other words, Weheliye argues that political violence is not only physical (because it causes direct bodily harm to the racialized victim) and ontological (because it renders the racialized victim not-quite-human), but also symbolic because it creates an association of the racially marked subject with “bad/death/not-quite-human,” an association that transfers symbolically to other similarly racially marked subjects, thus sustaining and reinforcing the very neurological “genre” or “master code” that made the original violence possible.

The murders of Santiago, Arnaldo, and Lázaro in Boullosa’s *Texas* illustrate dramatically the manner by which the political violence inflicted upon the Mexican body (particularly the male body in this case), serves to symbolically reinforce the

racialization, criminalization, and dehumanization of Mexicans, which is based in colonial ideologies and justified by crimes committed by subjects, such as Don Nepomuceno and his soldiers, who are similarly racially marked.

The first Mexican victim in the novel whose body is used by the Rangers as a rhetorical instrument for inspiring fear in Bruneville's Mexican residents is Santiago. When Don Nepomuceno rides out of Bruneville's town square after shooting Sheriff Shears, he commandeers a barge on the Río Bravo, which he uses to cross over to the Mexican side of the border. When the Rangers who are tracking Don Nepomuceno find out that Santiago, a Mexican fisherman who lives in Bruneville, saw Nepomuceno escape on the barge, they assume he was trying to cover for Nepomuceno, and kill Santiago by shooting him in the head. Then, hoping to use Santiago's body as a message to anyone who would help Nepomuceno, "The Rangers stick a fishhook into Santiago's ass—one that might have belonged to him. Then they tie a rope around his neck and hang him from the icaco tree, 'Mrs. Big's stick.' 'Leave him there to teach 'em a lesson'" (107).

Later, when Arnolito, an old, blind barge pilot, accidentally lands at the Bruneville dock, which was closed a few hours earlier when Bruneville entered a state of martial law, the Texas Rangers shoot him without even stopping to ask why he docked there or if he was aware of the new law. Then, without hesitation, "They hang him from another branch of Mrs. Big's leafy icaco, stringing him up high next to Santiago: 'So those outlaw Mexicans learn their lesson'" (122). In a matter of hours, the Texas Rangers murder two innocent bystanders and hang their bodies in the same tree in order to make a rhetorical statement to Bruneville's Mexican residents, a message that is evidently intended to "teach them a lesson." Inspired by previous "symbolic source

material,” that is, the previous Mexicans, indigenous Americans, and African-Americans whose dead bodies have been hung as warnings, as well as the *racializing assemblages* that preexisted Bruneville itself and justified its violent colonial founding, Santiago’s and Arnoldo’s deaths are not only examples of specific acts of political violence, but are also used in order to sustain (neurologically, physiologically, ideologically) the very assemblages that made them possible in the first place.

Though, while Santiago’s and Arnoldo’s deaths are shocking and illustrate the mechanisms by which Bruneville’s cultural imaginaries justify racialized political violence, it is Lázaro—whose victimization at the hands of Sheriff Shears begins the novel, and whose lynching in Bruneville’s town square serves as the novel’s climax—whom Boullosa sets up as the novel’s primary tragic figure. Near the end of the novel, a group of Texas Rangers and Anglo mercenaries, dressed as *vaqueros*, raid the Bruneville jail in order to lynch Lázaro, a peaceful *vaquero* who was arrested for his association with Don Nepomuceno and his soldiers. The jailer refuses to give Lázaro a gun with which to defend himself, and when one of the Rangers throws a flaming rag through the window of Lázaro’s cell, Lázaro considers using it, but, instead, enacts a symbolic gesture of peaceful defiance: “He doesn’t lift the rag. It’s futile, and besides, that’s not what he’s made of, he’s no fire-starter, no murderer. Lázaro has never wanted to harm a soul. He throws the rag to the floor and extinguishes it with his boots. . .” (266). Lázaro’s peaceful acceptance of his fate is juxtaposed against the manic fury of his killers. When Lázaro is brought out of the jail, the residents of Bruneville, even children, begin to participate in the lynching, cutting him with knives, hanging him from a tree in the town square, and setting a fire under his feet.

While the scene of Lázaro's lynching certainly serves to illustrate the Bruneville residents' cruelty and hatred for Mexicans, it also repeats, visually and symbolically, the previous murders of Santiago and Arnolde, who are hung from Mrs. Big's icaco tree. As Weheliye suggests is the function of political violence, alongside the previous lynchings in Bruneville and the *racializing assemblages* that preexisted Bruneville, the symbolic aspect of the previous two murders reinforces the neural connection between nonwhite (in this case Mexican) subjects and "bad/death/not-quite-human." Lázaro's lynching is, in some sense, a ritualistic sacrifice. The Bruneville residents do not attribute his racialized body to him, but perceive it as Mexicanness itself, a placeholder for all the colonial and ideological baggages associated with Mexicanness. When they taunt him they do not say his name, instead referring to him by a series of racial epithets: "'Greaser! Greaser! Dark-skinned idiot! Coward! You damn Mexican!'" No one calls him Lázaro. No one attempts the 'R' in Rueda" (267). Then his body is killed, both as a method of alleviating fear (the fear of Mexican sedition, the fear of being victims of Mexican violence) and as a means of perpetuating the neurological/physiological connection between Mexicanness and death, criminality, and the not-quite-human.

Santiago's, Arnolde's, and Lázaro's hung bodies, as representations of pure Mexican criminality, divorced from the individual subjectivity of their previous owners, speak both against their previous owners and against other or future owners of racialized Mexican bodies. And their deaths are soon forgotten as events in their own rights, but are remembered instead as continuations of an unbroken associative chain. As the narrator of *Texas* states, "Nepomuceno's imprisonment shakes the region more than Lázaro's lynching (he was neither the first nor the last Mexican to meet that fate)" (271). This

statement is not meant to suggest that Lázaro's lynching is an unimportant event; rather, what Boullosa points to is the unfortunate fact that such events, due to their regularity and due to the continued association of Mexican subjects with the not-quite-human, have become mundane, regular occurrences. But by making Lázaro's lynching the climax of her novel, by memorializing the death of an old, forgotten *vaquero*, whom history has all but erased, Boullosa gives readers an indication of *Texas*'s larger rhetorical/political project, which is to link the past to the present, to mark the ways in which colonialism's residues ask us to forget (or to never know) not-quite-human subjects such as Lázaro.

For Boullosa, the persistent colonial attitudes toward Mexicans and indigenous Americans, as well as the residues of colonial racialization, have directly contributed to the current crises in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, such as the maquiladora murders and cartel violence. That Boullosa sees a connection between the events in the novel and the present state of the borderlands is particularly evident in a prophecy uttered by one of the novel's Mexican characters, Óscar. When Don Nepomuceno and his soldiers are drafting their proclamation to the Bruneville government, Óscar, upset that Don Nepomuceno does not plan to take back the land south of the Nueces River, delivers a prophetic statement:

If we don't get rid of them, before we know it they'll pass a law preventing us from working on the other side of the Río Bravo, not just poor folks, but all Mexicans. As for property...you've seen how they respect it, the gringos all have silver tongues. We ain't seen nothing yet, the worst is still to come. They'll put up a fence or build a wall so we can't cross over to 'their' Texas...as if it were theirs!...and then, you'll see, listen closely, they'll take the water from our river,

they'll divert it for their own purposes, who knows how they'll do it, but you'll see! They'll take everything we have...there won't be a single mustang or plot of land they don't claim as theirs. South of the Río Bravo will become violent.

Mexicans will begin to treat each other with the same contempt...Our women will be raped and butchered and buried in pieces in the desert. (206-7)

Through Óscar's prophecy Boullosa presents a somewhat comic irony (Don Nepomuceno thinks Óscar might be going crazy, and Óscar thinks so too) and refuses to separate the borderlands of the late 1850s from the borderlands of the 21st-century. For her, the colonial ideology that lynches Lázaro and murders Arnoldo and Santiago, as well as hundreds of other Mexican, indigenous American, and African-American subjects, is the same colonial ideology that would build a fence between Mexico and the United States, refuse to let Mexicans cross the Río Bravo into Texas, and create the physiological mechanisms by which Anglos continue to view nonwhite subjects as not-quite-humans, and Mexicans are encouraged to hate even themselves.

Yet, while Boullosa draws a seemingly bleak causal connection between present and past colonial attitudes, her novel ultimately presents a hopeful view of a subject (Lázaro) who, despite being used by the colonial apparatus to speak against himself, nonetheless slips through the cracks of political violence, living in the small places where racialized violence and *bare life* cannot reach him. After Lázaro refuses to harm the Rangers and mercenaries who are planning to kill him, stomping out on the burning rag in the jailhouse, one of the killers enters Lázaro's cell and puts the still smoldering rag down Lázaro's shirt. The narrator then gives readers a glimpse into Lázaro's thoughts: "The rag burns him a little. It's bearable. It's not searing. The pain reminds him: 'You are

Lázaro Rueda, you were born in the south, you have been a *vaquero* forever; you've been in the valley of the Río Bravo since the beginning of time” (266). Lázaro's response to political violence is not anger or terror, but affirmation: he affirms himself, his life, his land, his people. In pointing readers to Lázaro's peaceful, affirming response to political violence, Boullosa's novel reflects Weheliye's assurance that there are “alternate forms of life...beyond the world of Man,” that “the juridical machine can never exhaust the plentitude of our world” (131). Though his body is used against him and his people as a symbol of death and criminality, Lázaro nonetheless reaches into the interstices where violence cannot be; Lázaro “unearth[s] the freedom that exists within the hieroglyphics of the flesh” (Weheliye 138).

Hanging from the tree in the town square, Lázaro's final thoughts are thoughts of beauty and song:

In Lázaro's head, in his last trace of consciousness, a violin plays, and he hears his own voice, singing what was perhaps his last song:

You can't hear his hooves anymore,

clip clop,

poor dead little horse,

clip clop clip clop. (270)

Fifteen days later, a young Mexican boy in Matasánchez plays the violin, singing, inexplicably, “*You can't hear his hooves anymore...*” (271). Boullosa, narrating what cannot be heard or listened for (Lázaro's final thoughts, the stories and people history forgets), asks us to listen and hear anyway.

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CHAPTER III
The Ethics of Stepping into the Abyss: “Feeling One’s Way in the Dark” in Roberto Bolaño’s 2666

I would much rather have been a homicide detective than a writer. That’s one thing I’m absolutely sure of. A homicide cop, someone who returns alone at night to the scene of the crime and isn’t afraid of ghosts.

- Roberto Bolaño, “The End: ‘Distant Star’ (Interview with Mónica Maristain)”

Between 1993 and 2005, more than 370 women were murdered in or near the Mexican border city, Ciudad Juárez, their (often mutilated) bodies dumped in the desert (“Mexico: Justice fails”). In 2004, Editorial Anagrama published Roberto Bolaño’s posthumous novel, *2666*, a large portion of which is a fictionalized account of the murders, to wide critical acclaim. In 2008, again to critical acclaim, Picador published Natasha Wimmer’s English translation of the novel, which claimed, among other things, The National Book Critics Circle Award, *Time* magazine’s Best Fiction Book of 2008, and a place on *The New York Times Book Review*’s list of the “10 Best Books of 2008” (Rich; Grossman; “The 10 Best”).¹

Given the novel’s critical reputation and Bolaño’s posthumous surge into literary stardom in America, it comes as no surprise that *2666* has already been the subject of a substantial amount of literary and cultural criticism, particularly of the postcolonial and economically-oriented strands. In view of the novel’s globalized setting and of Bolaño’s cosmopolitan lifestyle and self-identification as “*latinoamericano*” (qtd. in Pollack 360) rather than as specifically Chilean, Mexican, or Spanish, *2666* lends itself especially well to discussions of cosmopolitanism, transnationalism, neoliberalism, and globalization.

¹ Portions of this essay were initially developed in “International Illegalities, Postmodern Geography, and ‘Violent Masculine Spaces’ in Roberto Bolaño’s *2666*”, an essay written for the seminar of Professor Jason Helms.

Readings of *2666* as a critique of neoliberalism prevail in recent criticism by Patrick Dove, Grant Farred, Jeffrey Grey, Laura Barberán Reinares, and Hermann Herlinghaus, among others. Reinares, especially, notes a causal connection between the North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), implemented on January 1, 1994, and “widespread migration to the [U.S./Mexico] border, especially female,” as U.S. businesses set up maquiladoras on the border to take advantage of low labor costs (52). She argues, further, that *2666* illustrates the indifference with which the global North regards subaltern women, claiming, “the worn out mantra that ‘at least these plants offer third-world women jobs’ assuages Western consciences and obliterates any consciousness of complicity” (65). Of course, as Reinares shows, the murders of women in the maquiladoras of Ciudad Juárez (Santa Teresa in the novel) are only a part of the more general exploitation generated and supported by Northern business-owners and consumers. When the hierarchical powers and social systems refuse to recognize subaltern women’s agency and humanity, viewing them instead as disposable, it only follows that they may soon be literally disposed of, be it by the maquiladoras themselves (when the women have outgrown their economic usefulness), or by the murderers and rapists who dump their bodies in the desert. Economic readings of *2666*, such as Reinares’s, tend to highlight the novel’s rhetorical impulse, implicitly asking the question: Can a novel such as *2666*, an artistic object, have any role in solving or preventing the maquiladora murders?

Critic Grant Farred also moves in the direction of this question when he remarks on the precarious economic and ethical situation of the maquiladoras, particularly the

way in which neoliberal ideology refuses to speak to its own failings and to its culpability in the deaths of hundreds of women. Farred argues:

Writing neoliberalism, Bolaño's work insists that if the postcolonial will not speak directly, (un)ethically, its relation to the neoliberal, then all that there is left to do is dramatize, in a horrible fashion (in its Kurtzian articulation) the constitutive presence of death in the everyday functioning of the maquiladoras.

(693)

Farred posits both that a dramatization of death is the last resort in the face of postcolonialism's silence and that Bolaño's dramatization of the murders serves to present a microcosm of the global capitalist system wherein everyone is in some way culpable for the death and exploitation that takes place. He argues, in addition, that *2666* critiques postcolonialism itself by seeking a politics that allows us to remember the agency of the murdered maquiladora workers not simply by giving testimony to the profanity of their deaths or by attempting to restore something to them, but by showing us the faces of their killers, by making their unintelligible deaths intelligible. Both Reinares and Farred, then, acknowledge that *2666* is, in some sense, an exposé, but they also assert that the novel aims not only to portray the maquiladora murders, but also to somehow ameliorate them.

In the two previous chapters I have suggested that both Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* and Carmen Boullosa's *Texas: The Great Theft* use fiction as a tool for illustrating the cultural and political mechanisms by which certain lives are rendered ungrievable (or "not-quite-human") or are otherwise subjected to permitted violence. I have also suggested that both novels serve as literary memorials for groups or individuals

who have been lost or cut out of the frame by colonial violence, presenting historically ungrievable subjects in such a way as to recognize them as human and to render their deaths grievable. Perhaps not surprisingly, I will make a similar argument in this chapter with regard to Bolaño's *2666*, positing that Bolaño's depiction of subaltern lives, particularly those of the female maquiladora workers who are portrayed in the novel's fourth and most oft-discussed chapter, "The Part About the Crimes," both illustrates the sociopolitical mechanisms at work in the U.S./Mexico borderlands at the turn of the 21st-century and serves a memorializing function.

Alongside the above argument, which ties my three chapters together thematically, I will also argue that Bolaño's novel, read as the answer to the question it poses, provides a conceptual framework for combatting ungrievability, racialized violence, as well as the sociopolitical mechanisms that support ungrievability and violence. Said differently, through its often cold narration of the maquiladora murders, which resembles a police report more than a novel, and its digressive narrative technique, which frames the novel as a detective story wherein every line of inquiry ultimately reaches a dead end, *2666* seems to pose an insurmountable problem, a question without an answer, a series of murders (or copycat crimes) with no discernable culprit, few clues, and no sign of ceasing. And yet the novel, bleak as it may seem, perhaps offers an escape from politicized violence. I posit that in *2666*, through exemplary characters who face the danger and mystery of the void, standing up against 20th- and 21st-century injustices, Bolaño offers readers a set of attitudes for facing up to the sociopolitical mechanisms of oppression that often seem so ominously complex and overpowering as to be invulnerable. It can be said, then, that in much the same way that McCarthy's novel

points to a series of erasures, but also to the ways (however few) those erasures can be resisted; and in the same way Boullosa's novel illustrates how violence and dehumanization perpetuate themselves over the course of history, but also shows that there are places within human action and emotion that cannot be subject to political violence (such as Lázaro Rueda's final thoughts of beauty and song); Bolaño's novel offers a solution to the problem it portrays, depicting an insidious 21st century genocide with no discernable culprit or clear solution, but also simultaneously providing readers with an ethic for confronting politicized violence.

The Unassailable *Femicide Machine*

In *The Femicide Machine*, the most recent of Sergio González Rodríguez's several books on the maquiladora murders, González Rodríguez (a journalist who is fictionalized in *2666* as Sergio González) describes the factories of Ciudad Juárez through Giorgio Agamben's concepts of *bare life* and the "camp." He claims that the factories are "the femicide machine's antechamber, an exceptional 'camp,'" a space where "life—stripped of all rights—becomes the object of exploitation and death experiments" (31-2). In order to trace the increasingly complex apparatus of violence at work in Ciudad Juárez, González Rodríguez theorizes what he calls the *femicide machine*, an apparatus which he distinguishes from the State it dwells in (Mexico in this case), and which he defines as a "parasite" of the neo-Fordist structure that "is composed of hatred and misogynistic violence, *machismo*, power and patriarchal reaffirmations that take place at the margins of the law or within a law of complicity between criminals, police, military, government officials, and citizens who constitute an a-legal old-boy

network” (11). By being interconnected with the economy and the legal apparatus, but not being easily identifiable with either, this “parasite,” according to González Rodríguez, is elusory, fluid, and self-perpetuating. Fueled by impunity, misogyny, apathy, and what González Rodríguez terms “negative inertia,” the *femicide machine* (of which the maquiladora murders are the primary side-effect) has seemingly expanded beyond the reach of the judicial apparatus (97).

While the factors contributing to the perpetuation of the *femicide machine* and the unsolved maquiladora murders are myriad, institutional misogyny is one of their most obvious and oft-referenced causes. And misogyny and *machismo* constitute two of the perennial thematic concerns of Bolaño’s oeuvre. To give just a few examples, the protagonists of *The Savage Detectives*, young poets in Mexico City, spend much of their time bragging about their numerous sexual exploits. Another of Bolaño’s novels, *Distant Star* (based on the final encyclopedic entry in his Borgesian *Nazi Literature in the Americas*) narrates the artistic career of the poet, Carlos Weider, who is suspected of having murdered countless women while serving in Augusto Pinochet’s military following the 1976 Chilean coup. And his posthumously published novel, *Woes of the True Policeman*, begins with a recollection of a long homophobic tirade originally spoken by Padilla, a student of the literature professor Óscar Amalfitano.

Of course, misogyny and *machismo* are also central concerns for Bolaño throughout *2666*. In the fourth part of *2666*, “The Part About the Crimes,” Bolaño even draws a causal connection between institutional misogyny and the maquiladora murders. On one occasion in the novel, the psychiatrist Elvira Campos theorizes to the detective Juan de Dios Martínez that most Mexican men suffer from gynophobia, that is, fear of

women. On another occasion, a group of Santa Teresa police officers pass the time in a café by telling misogynistic jokes. The deeply ironic scene spans over two pages.

In other sections of *2666*, American and European characters far removed from Mexico reveal a surprising indifference to the fate of Mexican women. In “The Part About the Critics,” for example, when the fictional critic Piero Morini learns of the maquiladora murders, he first thinks that the news is horrible, but promptly forgets about the murders completely. Later, Bolaño satirizes the hypocrisy and racism of many European academics when two literature professors, Manuel Espinoza and Jean-Claude Pelletier, frustrated by their relationship with Liz Norton, beat up a Pakistani cab driver until he is unconscious, shouting insults such as, “this one is for Salman Rushdie” and “this one is for the feminists of Paris” (74).

Although Bolaño does not frame every example of misogyny, *machismo*, or racism in *2666* as contributing directly to the maquiladora murders themselves, such events’ narrative proximity to Santa Teresa nonetheless serves to highlight them as problems with concrete, local consequences. The murders in Santa Teresa (the fictional border city based on Ciudad Juárez) are not the only focus of *2666* but they do, in a sense, exert a gravitational force on the rest of Bolaño’s fictional universe. While the other sections and events portrayed throughout *2666* do not always refer directly to the murders in Santa Teresa, they nonetheless revolve around them. And by situating the maquiladora murders as a small, often publicly unmourned series of events within the framework of a larger fictional universe, Bolaño illustrates that although racism, misogyny, and exploitative labor practices converge upon Santa Teresa/Ciudad Juárez in a particularly destructive way, they are not simply a local problem. The culpability for the

murders in Santa Teresa thus extends beyond the city's borders, and Bolaño shows that the "negative inertia" and racism that prevails in Santa Teresa is qualitatively no different from the indifference of Piero Morini or the racism of Manuel Espinoza and Jean-Claude Pelletier.

Aside from culturally embedded misogyny and racism, González Rodríguez also cites the porous U.S.-Mexico border as one of the reasons the *femicide machine* is able to remain fluid and elusory. To begin with, so many migrant-workers and immigrants travel through the state of Chihuahua that it would be impossible to track them all. And 2666, reflecting the political situation of the Ciudad Juárez, via the fictional Santa Teresa, illustrates these complex societal mechanisms. Throughout the novel, the Santa Teresa police continually fail to track suspects and identify victims when investigating the maquiladora murders. In one of the many crime scenes of the novel, some workers for a farm cooperative discover a woman's body buried in a field. The narrator describes the Santa Teresa police's interrogation of the farmers and their ultimate response to the crime:

...they asked whether any worker was missing, whether there had been fights lately, whether there had been a change in anyone's behavior in recent days. As might be expected, two young men had left the cooperative, like every year, for Santa Teresa or Nogales or the United States...The Santa Teresa police issued a public statement in which it ultimately and vaguely evaded any responsibility. The killer might easily have been a driver headed to Chihuahua from Baja California, and the dead woman might have been a hitchhiker picked up in Tijuana, killed in Saric, and randomly buried here. (449)

Mexican citizens (and non-citizens) in the borderlands often move so frequently and so erratically that the police (their indifference notwithstanding) simply do not know where to begin. The possibility for victims and suspects alike to move across states and cities, weaving in and out of vast unsurveilled spaces, has far outstripped the judicial powers' ability to track them. Not only the living, but the dead can be difficult to track; bodies are regularly found without identification, either because it has been removed by the perpetrators or because the victims never had identification to begin with. Migrant women, living near and working for the maquiladoras, are often identified solely by their maquiladora employee identification cards, and, on one occasion in the novel, a dead woman is misidentified because her body was carrying a stolen maquiladora card that belonged to a still-living woman. While the technology for movement across space has accelerated to the speed of the developed world, the communications and identification technology in use by the Santa Teresa police is still operating at the speed of the developing world. This imbalance creates the possibility of spaces where perpetrators are so far removed from the judicial powers' gaze that the law effectively ceases to operate.

Further, the U.S./Mexico border passes through these unsurveilled spaces, further complicating issues of surveillance. In the first place, the spatial barrier of the U.S./Mexico privileges the movements of some individuals at the expense of others. In *2666*, several characters are seen crossing freely into Mexico, either for business or for recreation: this includes the four European Benno von Archimboldi critics, several American maquiladora owners, Harry Magaña (the Huntsville, Arizona sheriff), Lucy Anne Sander (an American tourist who is murdered in Santa Teresa), Oscar Fate (an American news reporter), and Albert Kessler (a former police detective turned university

lecturer). Magaña even operates as an unofficial police officer during his trips to Santa Teresa and Tijuana without facing any opposition from the Mexican authorities. And many characters are seen crossing into the United States from Mexico: Fate and Rosa Amalfitano (who is an EU citizen), scores of arms- and drug-traffickers, wealthy Mexican women (such as Congresswoman Azucena Esquivel Plata and her childhood friend, Kelly), countless Mexican and Central American immigrants (some of whom die or are turned back in the process). In the novel, the border is open to American and EU citizens, as well as wealthy or powerful Mexicans and Central Americans, but is, in effect, closed to poor Mexicans and Central Americans. Thus, the victims of the maquiladora murders, usually migrant workers from Central America or other parts of Mexico, are drawn to the place of their deaths by economic opportunity, but are subsequently hemmed into a perilous space (Ciudad Juárez/Santa Teresa—a space where their lives are not grievable and their deaths are not punishable) by the U.S./Mexico border, which is itself dangerous to cross. The border is open to the wealthy, to American and EU citizens, to manufactured goods; it filters out a portion of arms- and drug-traffickers, but the poor can only cross at great expense and great peril.

As González Rodríguez points out, U.S. policies regarding drugs and firearms also contribute to severe inequality and violence in the borderlands. First, the United States is the largest consumer of drugs in the world. Further, González Rodríguez notes that U.S. pressure on Mexico to militarize police and take a stricter stance against drug trafficking has only led to more violence. According to him, “Mexico’s war on drug trafficking, sponsored by the U.S....began in 2006 and resulted in more than 30,000 deaths by 2011” (40). Additionally, lax regulations on firearms in the United States,

alongside a failed attempt by the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms to track illegal arms-trafficking, has led to thousands of firearms being trafficked into Mexico for use by drug cartels (58). As González Rodríguez shows, the *femicide machine* is the product not only of Mexican governmental policies, but also of the uneven binational relationship between Mexico and the United States.

Police, too, are constricted by the U.S.-Mexico border. While the Santa Teresa police in 2666 are capable of obtaining American police records on suspects such as Klaus Haas (the chief suspect of the murders in the novel) from contacts across the border, they are often forced to close cases when they discover that unnamed suspects or witnesses have crossed into the United States. This complex organization of spatial filters and porous borders makes solving the maquiladora murders a near-impossible task. The Santa Teresa police, misogynist and indifferent though they may be, are strategically outmatched due to the spatial organization of the borderlands combined with the imbalance of power between them and the well-funded cartels.

Of course, the current conflict between the Mexican government and the drug cartels near the U.S. border renders Ciudad Juárez, along with several other Mexican border towns, one of the most dangerous places in the world. The cartels' military-level armament coupled with the international scope of drug trafficking complicates any analysis of their relation to the police, as the cartels' financial and military powers allow them to intimidate and bribe police officers and government officials. In *The Femicide Machine*, González Rodríguez traces the complex relationship between cartels and the police in Latin America:

The problem of drug trafficking and violence cannot be reduced to a myth: the old-fashioned struggle between cops and robbers. Drug trafficking concerns the economy, politics, society, and culture. Above all, it reflects the grave institutional crisis in Latin American nations. The urgency of the problem plays out between the search for a democratic future, the gravitational pull of the global economy, and the weight of inertia and historic inequalities. Inefficiency, ineptitude, and corruption have prospered between these cracks. An economic scheme has been implanted wherein a privileged few benefit from the business of illegality and its lacerating dangers: impunity for violent and criminal activity, the fragmentation of law enforcement and justice administration. (67)

For González Rodríguez, the illegality of drug trafficking, profitable as it is for both cartels and corrupt police officers and government officials is a cyclical, self-perpetuating problem that encourages violence through impunity.

The prevalence of police corruption in the borderlands further confounds any search for a solution to drug violence and the maquiladora murders, and examples of police corruption are ubiquitous in *2666*. Early in “The Part About the Crimes,” when a woman’s body is found in a dump near an industrial park containing four maquiladoras, some executives from one of the maquiladoras accompany the police to see the body and one of the executives hands a police officer some cash, saying, “Well...you’ll take care of everything, won’t you?” (359). While the narrator does not describe the scene much further, readers have reason to assume that the executives are somehow responsible for the woman’s death. On another occasion, blood samples from a crime scene, meant to prove the guilt of Klaus Haas, are mysteriously lost in transit to a testing lab (479). And

later, when Efrain Bustelo, a Santa Teresa detective in search of information about one of the victims, asks the maquiladora File-Sis for records of their employees, he is given an envelope full of cash and told that the records were lost. Bustelo rationalizes accepting the bribe: “Even if the lists did exist, even if no one had burned them, he thought, he probably wouldn’t find any trace of Evodio Cifuentes, [the victim]” (495). The examples are not restricted to minor cases, either. When readers are introduced to Enrique Hernandez, a powerful drug trafficker serving a prison sentence, we learn that his rival drug trafficker, Estanislao Campuzano, helped the police put him in prison by notifying the attorney general’s office of his crimes and providing them with money and clues. Strangely, Enrique Hernandez is more powerful while in prison than he was outside it, and when Klaus Haas is allowed to hold a press conference from within prison, the Santa Teresa police (who can do nothing to prevent Haas from speaking) assume Hernandez is responsible (492-3).

In another scene in the novel, the distinction between the police and the cartels is shown to be virtually nonexistent. Pedro Negrete, the Santa Teresa Police Chief, hires a young boy, Lalo Cura, to work for his friend, the drug trafficker, Pedro Rengifo. Soon after, while working as a bodyguard for Rengifo’s wife, Cura kills a state police inspector who is trying to assassinate Mrs. Rengifo. Then, after scolding Rengifo for putting Cura in danger, Negrete offers Cura a job with the Santa Teresa police (399). It is only much later that Cura learns that Rengifo is a cartel boss, and when he admits to his previous ignorance, his new partner chides him for his naivety (473). In Santa Teresa, corruption is widespread and undisguised.

As critic Chris Andrews notes in his book-length study of Bolaño's fiction, *Roberto Bolaño: An Expanding Universe*, some police officers and detectives in the novel do resist corruption, but these figures are few and far between, and the consequences they face in the process often far outweigh the good they are capable of doing (181). One such detective, Lalo Cura decries the misogynist views of his peers and makes a concerted effort to track down the perpetrators of the maquiladora murders, but frequently faces censure for his methods of policing. On one occasion, after Lalo Cura discovers a woman's body in the Podestá ravine, his partner Epifanio Gallindo chides him for sticking his nose where it doesn't belong:

When Epifanio asked why he'd gone to the Podestá ravine, Lalo Cura answered that it was because he was a cop...I thought it was strange, that in all this time a dead woman had never turned up in the Podestá ravine. And how did you know that, ass wipe? asked Epifanio. Because I read the papers, said Lalo Cura (526).

While Epifanio's censure seems cruel, the novel makes it clear that he is merely attempting to protect his young partner from the dangers of serious detective work in a corrupt system. 2666 illustrates the process by which police participate in corruption not only through a desire for material gain, but also through simple inaction, which is often motivated by a pragmatic desire for self-preservation.

Ultimately, by the combination of police corruption, institutional misogyny, and vast desert spaces, and despite their involvement in multiple organized delinquencies, the Ciudad Juárez/Santa Teresa police are unable to enact the requisite surveillance that would enable them to catch the maquiladora murderers. We may also hypothesize that it is not only police corruption and a latent disregard for poor women (although both are

certainly present), but an opposing over-regard for the power of the cartels that prevents the police from taking firmer action against the maquiladora murderers. In recent years, as Patrick Dove recounts, the conflict between the Mexican government and the drug cartels has escalated into something resembling a war, the Mexican army and police virtually powerless to control the well-funded and well-equipped cartels (qtd. in Dove 143). According to Dove, “One of the consequences of the dramatic increase in narco violence in northern Mexico during the first decade of the twenty-first century is that the distinctions between law and illegality, order and insecurity, are becoming less clear and less stable” (142-3). Due to this unprecedented instability, it is no surprise that, by comparison, the judicial powers seem to care little for the fates of subaltern women in northern Mexico. After all, the maquiladora murders present only a small threat to the judicial powers themselves. And while the lack of convictions may be construed as a sign of incompetence, corruption, indifference, misogyny, and even direct involvement by the police, neither the murders themselves nor any societal backlash they might incur presents any real threat to the powers’ continued existence. The Ciudad Juárez/Santa Teresa police may face ridicule and outrage, but they will not face revolution. To engage the cartels, on the other hand, would present a danger to the social order. Yet, as a strategic move, this is surely a poor position for the Mexican authorities to be in, and it suggests a much wider problem. Whether the above hypothesis is the case or not, it would seem that crime in Ciudad Juárez/Santa Teresa has evolved beyond the reach of the judicial powers.

The political situation of Ciudad Juárez/Santa Teresa 2666 illustrates is, as we have seen, a bleak one. The murders continue to occur and show few signs of ceasing.

Further, while the genre expectations of the detective novel lead readers to expect that *2666* ought to provide us with solutions to the maquiladora murders, Bolaño's novel, for the most part, frustrates those genre expectations. But although Bolaño's novel gives the impression of presenting a problem that can never be solved, it nonetheless serves a memorializing function for the victims of the maquiladora murders. Andrews, in the appendix to his book-length study of Bolaño's fiction, shows that many of the murders narrated in *2666* correspond to the real-life murders described in González Rodríguez's *Huesos in el Desierto*, and that the number of victims depicted in *2666* "exactly matches that of the real victims in Juárez in the years 1995-1998" (229). As Andrews rightly perceives, the numerous correspondences between *2666* and *Huesos en el Desierto* (which Bolaño used as a source for his novel) are not coincidences. In fact, they demonstrate an intentional effort on Bolaño's part to memorialize, through fiction, the real-life victims of the maquiladora murders.

Yet, while this memorializing impulse of the novel certainly presents a move toward positive political change—insofar as it renders grievable those lives which were otherwise ungrievable—in the face of an ongoing genocide, memorialization is ultimately insufficient on its own. As a rhetorical and historical novel that fictionalizes a series of real-life murders, *2666* encourages readers to seek solutions to the problems it poses, and although the novel re-presents women whose lives and stories were once unknown or forgotten, such a move would be unsatisfying if it did not also attempt to point to positive ameliorative action. Thus, it is necessary to ask whether the novel does, in fact, offer readers an avenue for combatting the unjust social and political systems it illustrates. In answer to this question, I propose that Bolaño, through characters who courageously

struggle against various political injustices, presents readers with an ethic for opposing the seemingly insurmountable structures that support and encourage politicized violence.

Courage, Responsibility, and the Abyss

In *Roberto Bolaño's Fiction: An Expanding Universe*, Chris Andrews outlines a theory of Bolaño's ethics, as illustrated in his fiction. Andrews argues that, among other things, Bolaño's fiction values courage, generosity, openness to ethical demands, and the duty to rescue. Drawing Bolaño's various ethical demands together, Andrews analyzes a scene in *The Savage Detectives*, wherein Xosé Lendoiro, a poet who claims to be a "man of action" fails to take action to rescue a boy who has fallen into a chasm in Spain. In the scene, Arturo Belano (Bolaño's alter-ego) ultimately descends into the chasm instead, saving the boy despite having been told by another young man that the devil is in the chasm (127). Andrews parallels the story to the parable of the Good Samaritan and argues that, from Bolaño's point of view, Lendoiro's failure to save the boy is the failure to meet an ethical demand. While Andrews notes that "Good Samaritan laws" do not require rescuers to "expose [themselves] to unreasonable risk," he argues that Bolaño's ethic does not accept that limitation (128). For Andrews:

Xosé Lendoiro's story shows that however such a limitation is formulated, there are situations in which it is impossible to know, before acting, whether or not it applies. The blackness of the chasm figures that impossibility. Although for Belano, the metaphysical threat of the devil's presence is no doubt groundless, the chasm may harbor real physical dangers, which cannot be precisely gauged without confronting them. From the point of view of normative ethics, what

Belano does may be supererogatory, beyond the call of duty, praiseworthy but not required...But in Bolaño's fiction, standing by, as Lendoiro does, is clearly a failing. (128)

The duty to rescue in Bolaño's fiction is continually characterized as a movement into a void or an abyss; and to descend into the chasm, not knowing beforehand what danger one faces is the model act of courage for Bolaño.

Alongside Bolaño's valuation of courage and the duty to rescue, Andrews also focuses on the potential for meaningful failure in Bolaño's fiction, a potential that is important for the study of *2666*, a novel wherein, as we have seen, the social and political situation of the borderlands is shown to be virtually unassailable, and even admirable characters often fail to right wrongs despite their best efforts. While Andrews suggests that Bolaño ultimately holds that failure can be meaningful and draws several examples of meaningful failure from *2666*, Andrews's ultimate goal is to provide a reading of Bolaño's entire oeuvre rather than of *2666* itself. For this reason, Andrews only suggests an overarching theme of *2666*, but does not offer a cohesive reading of the novel, especially with regard to the mysterious, unsolved maquiladora murders and the novel's seemingly bleak, cliffhanger ending. In order to reconcile a cohesive reading of the novel's ending with Bolaño's ethics and to posit the ameliorative potential of the novel, I argue that the handful of admirable characters in *2666* who embody Bolaño's ideals of courage and responsibility provide the answers to the sociopolitical problems the novel poses.

For example, one of these admirable figures portrayed in the novel is Sergio González Rodríguez himself, a journalist in the novel (as in real-life) who writes about

the maquiladora murders despite the danger such an undertaking entails. Though he remains a sympathetic character throughout the novel, early in “The Part About the Crimes,” when he first learns of the maquiladora murders, Sergio González is guilty of many misconceptions, such as assuming that the victims are prostitutes or are sexually promiscuous, that he will later discover lead to the perpetuation of the crimes. Later in the novel, however, Sergio González meets with the Mexican congresswoman, Azucena Esquivel Plata, who herself has taken an interest in the crimes and who uses her position of power as a platform for combatting them. Plata, in her meeting with Sergio González, urges him to speak out against the crimes in his journalism:

What is it I want you to do? asked the congresswoman. I want you to write about this, keep writing about this. I’ve read your articles. They’re good, but too often you pull your punches. I want you to strike hard, strike human flesh, unassailable flesh, not shadows. I want you to go to Santa Teresa and sniff around. I want you to sink in your teeth. (631)

Plata describes the kind of journalism she wants Sergio González to write in terms of physical violence. It is visceral and unpleasant. It is also a losing battle. Conscious, no doubt, of the insurmountable scope and complexity of violence in Ciudad Juárez, Plata refers to the people responsible for the maquiladora murders as “unassailable flesh,” and yet she urges Sergio González to strike them nonetheless. Plata is cognizant, too, of the dangers of striking out at the maquiladora murderers as well as the political mechanisms that sustain them. Her call to action is also a call to danger and sacrifice, as Sergio González surely knows; it is a call to step into the abyss.

According to González Rodríguez, “At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Mexico became the most dangerous nation in the world to be a journalist” (51). In *The Femicide Machine*, he cites a study from Mexico’s National Human Rights Commission, which found that, as of 2010, 65 journalists had been murdered in Mexico since 2000 (51). For González Rodríguez, the danger of speaking out against the maquiladora murders is not merely an abstract possibility, but something he experienced first-hand. As Bolaño describes in a column he wrote for the Chilean newspaper *Las Últimas Noticias* entitled “Sergio González Rodríguez in the Eye of the Storm,” González Rodríguez experienced several dangerous situations as a result of his journalism, “Among them, an assassination attempt that Sergio escaped by a hair. And various stalkings. And threats and tapped phones” (231). Despite the dangers inherent in confronting the drug cartels and the Mexican authorities, González Rodríguez continues to speak out in defense of the victims of the maquiladora murders.

As González Rodríguez also notes in *The Femicide Machine*, human rights activism is a similarly dangerous practice in the state of Chihuahua. As of 2011, González Rodríguez claims, “Seventeen human rights activists and defenders have been murdered in Chihuahua since 2009” (86). Non-fictional human rights groups such as Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa A.C., Ni Una Mas, Justicia para Nuestras Hijas, and Casa Amiga, as well as other activists, journalists, and the victims’ families have also spoken out against the murders despite the dangers of doing so. In addition, in 2010, more than 100 police officers and federal officials were killed in Ciudad Juárez (“More Than 100 Police”). Judges, too, face the possibility of retributive violence from cartel members. Just to give one example, in 2001 two federal judges, Benito Andrade Ibarra

and Jesus Alberto Ayala were assassinated in Mazatlán (Sullivan). And persevering in activism and law enforcement despite the dangers involved is a vital aspect of the struggle against politicized violence in Ciudad Juárez.

Yet, while figures such as Sergio González, Azucena Esquivel Plata, Lalo Cura, and the various human rights groups in Santa Teresa all contribute a small measure of hopefulness to an otherwise grim novel, it is the reclusive writer, Benno von Archimboldi, the most mysterious and elusive figure in the novel, who Bolaño sets up (metaphorically and literally) as the potential ultimate solution to the maquiladora murders. When the Santa Teresa police arrest Klaus Haas (whom readers later learn is Archimboldi's nephew), Haas taunts one of his fellow prisoners by prophesying the coming of a terrible giant who will rescue him from his captors:

Don't cover your head, he [Klaus Haas] said aloud and in a booming voice, you're still going to die. And who's going to kill me, you gringo son of a bitch? You? Not me, motherfucker, said Haas, a giant is coming and the giant is going to kill you. A giant? asked the rancher. You heard me right, motherfucker, said Haas. A giant. A big man, very big, and he's going to kill you and everybody else...A little while later, however, Haas called out to say he heard footsteps. The giant was coming. He was covered in blood from head to toe and he was coming now. (481-2)

Not surprisingly, some critics, such as Martín Camps, view Haas's description of the giant as a bad omen and a terrifying portent for Santa Teresa. For Camps, "This is the most terrifying part of the novel, the premonition of a giant of death, maybe a foretelling of the more than 10,000 people killed in the following years as victims of the drug wars"

(116-7). And this ominous prophecy echoes throughout the entire novel, most obviously paralleled, first, in the scene wherein Oscar Fate, Rosa Amalfitano, and Guadalupe Roncal interview Haas in the Santa Teresa prison. As Haas stomps down the prison corridor to meet them, the group of interviewers hear him singing in German: “I’m a giant lost in the middle of a burned forest. But someone will come to rescue me” (349). Near the end of the novel, too, the giant returns through Haas’s mother, Lotte Haas, who remembers her older brother, Hans Reiter (also known by his pen-name, Benno von Archimboldi), as a giant in the forest: “Sometimes she heard him in her dreams. The footsteps of a giant” (864). Lotte conceives of her brother in mythical proportions, and while he is away fighting for the Nazis in World War II, her figuration of him as a giant gives her hope that he will return safely: “But Lotte knew her brother hadn’t died, because giants never die, she thought, or they die only when they’re very old...” (865). By the end of the novel, attentive readers will have made the connection between Klaus Haas’s murderous giant and his mother’s giant, Hans Reiter/Benno von Archimboldi, who readers know is not a mass murderer, but a reclusive writer who may someday win the Nobel Prize. Of course, Archimboldi is not really a mythological giant, but a human, and Haas’s prophecy that his uncle will come to rescue him by killing his captors and cell mates seems a bit misguided. While both Klaus Haas’s and Lotte’s visions of the giant are often terrifying, as Camps suggests, it seems more likely that both Klaus and Lotte have simply misinterpreted Archimboldi. While the novel does end with Archimboldi embarking to Mexico in an attempt to rescue his nephew, readers can be certain that his aim is not to kill everyone in Santa Teresa or to literally cover himself in “blood from head to toe.”

Until the final section of the novel, “The Part About Archimboldi,” Archimboldi is a mysterious, almost supernatural figure. Early in the novel, the four European literary critics travel to Santa Teresa in an attempt to track him down, but ultimately give up despite being sure he is somewhere in the city. As the section ends, two of the critics, Pelletier and Espinosa, discuss their inability to locate Archimboldi and seem to accept their failure: “‘Archimboldi is here,’ said Pelletier, ‘and we’re here, and this is the closest we’ll ever be to him’” (159). The critics are content to mythologize Archimboldi, and he remains mythologized for readers until the final section of the novel (over 450 pages later in the English edition).

Although readers ultimately learn that Archimboldi is a human being with human limitations, his journey to Mexico at the end of the novel can be read as a hopeful continuation of the larger challenge against the social and political structures that make the maquiladora murders possible. And though readers are left to speculate about whether Archimboldi’s journey to Mexico to rescue his nephew will be successful, it will not be the first time Archimboldi has stood up against oppression at his own personal risk. Earlier in “The Part About Archimboldi,” Archimboldi meets a German bureaucrat in a U.S.-run P.O.W. camp. When the bureaucrat, named Leo Sammer, confesses to Archimboldi that he is responsible for the deaths of several hundred Jewish people who were left in his care, Archimboldi, whose motivations the novel never makes explicitly clear, strangles him to death. While the U.S. soldiers never charge Archimboldi with the murder, he changes his name from Hans Reiter to Benno von Archimboldi and lives a nomadic lifestyle in order to ensure that he will not be found. This fact would lend some validity to Klaus Haas’s vision of Archimboldi coming toward Mexico “covered in blood

from head to toe,” except that Archimboldi’s age at the end of the novel—he is over eighty years old—suggests he is unlikely to rescue Klaus Haas through actual physical violence. It seems more likely that Archimboldi intends to rescue his nephew through legal channels or, perhaps, through writing.

When the four Archimboldi critics first learn that Archimboldi is in Santa Teresa, they speculate about why he might have chosen to move there, and while they initially hypothesize that he is there to research his next novel, they ultimately write off that hypothesis because they believe (baselessly) that he has already written his last novel. Although there is only circumstantial evidence in *2666* to suggest that Archimboldi might write a novel or an exposé about the maquiladora murders, the possibility is an interesting one given Archimboldi’s reputation as a writer and the large potential audience of such a book, which would far outreach his capacity for physical violence. Perhaps, as Azucena Esquivel Plata suggests to Sergio González, writing is another way of striking flesh. But while we can only speculate about Archimboldi’s future projects in Santa Teresa, we know with certainty that Bolaño, like González Rodríguez, chose to use writing as a tool for resisting the seemingly invulnerable *femicide machine*. Bolaño’s novel, like González Rodríguez’s work, is an exposé that serves a rhetorical, or ameliorative purpose. And it can be said, then, that in writing *2666*, Bolaño practices the same ethics of rescue and courage he portrays in his novels and stories. To expose the maquiladora murders, even in the face of danger, is to step into the abyss, to accept uncertainty and possible violence as consequences of responding to an ethical responsibility toward those individuals whose lives are not grievable and whose deaths are not punishable.

2666 depicts the maquiladora murders as taking place within an ominously complex and seemingly insuperable matrix of police corruption, drug and human-trafficking, institutional misogyny and racism, and state-sanctioned violence. Yet, characters in the novel who risk their own safety by battling the oppressive power structures, such as the budding police detective, Lalo Cura; the feminist congresswoman, Azucena Esquivel Plata; the courageous journalist, Sergio González; the reclusive novelist, Benno von Archimboldi, whose gigantic footsteps echo at the end of the novel; and even, as I have suggested, non-fictional people such as Sergio González Rodríguez, Roberto Bolaño himself, and the members of real-life activist groups like Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa A.C., Ni Una Mas, Justicia para Nuestras Hijas, and Casa Amiga, among many others, all suggest a possible escape from oppression and violence. Ultimately, Bolaño's novel posits the uncomfortable ethical demand that readers accept the risk of responsibility for the vulnerable in the face of politicized violence, and highlights the necessity and ultimate hopefulness of writing and social activism that subverts and unmask the violent matrix of power working in the borderlands.

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CONCLUSION

Throughout this thesis, I have aimed to synthesize an understanding of the complex relationship between political violence and the geopolitical mechanisms of the borderlands. Additionally, I have posited fiction's capacity to memorialize and render grievable those subjects who—due to race, gender, nationality, religion, and/or geography—have been cast out of the frame of who is to be mourned when lost. Developing new frames, insofar doing so enables a subject (or subjects) to claim the ontological status of “a life that will have been lived” (*Frames* 15), constitutes a vital strategic move in any struggle against politicized violence. In this belief, I follow Judith Butler, who argues that in order for non-violence to make a claim upon us, we must first apprehend and recognize the “you” who would be the potential recipient of that violence. Butler argues, then, that “we do not need to know in advance what ‘a life’ will be, but only to find and support those modes of representation and appearance that allow the claim of life to be made and heard (in this way, media and survival are linked)” (*Frames* 181). Reframing the ungrievable through art or media, then, makes the “you” recognizable in the other and thus makes possible the claim of non-violence.

Here, I would like to return to the activist poetry of Marjorie Agosín, particularly the poem, “I will tell you about them,” in which Agosín celebrates the lives of the maquiladora murder victims and criticizes the press for refusing to acknowledge them. As Agosín suggests in the poem, the victims' dark skin and their status as migrant, working-class women renders them “invisible” to the media:

They are slender and young
And don't have porcelain faces.

No one knows their names:

Lozano, Pérez, Hernández

No one wants to commemorate their deaths.

The missing señoritas of Juárez

Don't have money

It's better not to talk about them. (49)

While Agosín ironically repeats the phrase “It’s better not to talk about them,” merely by writing poetry that highlights the fact of the maquiladora murder victims’ lives and exposes the reality of how these women’s voices have been silenced, she opens up a space for the victims’ lives to be recognized as lost. In the same way that Carmen Boullosa memorializes and names otherwise historically forgotten figures, such as Lázaro Rueda, Agosín mourns and gives name to otherwise “invisible” women who have not yet been publicly mourned or named.

And the importance of mourning the unmourned and naming the unnamed cannot be overstated. If Alexander G. Weheliye is correct in interpreting *racializing assemblages* as physiological/neurological processes that are sustained, in part, by politicized violence, it follows that art and media portrayals of victims of politicized violence play an integral role in either perpetuating or interrupting those processes. For this reason, to ignore politicized violence is, in a sense, to participate in it. Conversely, to attempt to listen within the silences politicized violence leaves behind, to contest the colonial narratives and erasures that would frame indigenous American and Mexican lives in the borderlands as something “not-quite-human,” is (to borrow a motif from Roberto Bolaño) to step, hopefully, courageously, into the abyss.

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After the University of Dallas, Preston served as an AmeriCorps member with the Dallas Area Habitat for Humanity for two years before joining the English graduate program at Texas Christian University. While completing his M.A. at Texas Christian University, Preston was appointed as a teaching assistant (2014-2016) and worked as a graduate proctor for AddRan College. He also received the Betsy Colquitt Graduate Poetry Award in 2015. Preston will be continuing his graduate studies at the University of California, Riverside.

ABSTRACT

MEMORIALS FOR THE UNMOURNED: REPRESENTATIONS OF POLITICIZED VIOLENCE IN CONTEMPORARY U.S.-MEXICO BORDER FICTION

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Utilizing theoretical frameworks from Giorgio Agamben, Judith Butler, Alexander G. Weheliye, and Achille Mbembe, *Memorials for the Unmourned* analyzes fictional depictions of racialized, gendered, and state-sanctioned violence in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. Through readings of Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, Carmen Boullosa's *Texas: The Great Theft*, and Roberto Bolaño's *2666*, this thesis explores fiction's capacity to memorialize unmourned victims of borderlands violence and to provide conceptual blueprints for combating the insidious biopolitical mechanisms that make such violence possible. In the face of historical and contemporary narratives that continue to devalue Latina/o and indigenous American lives, fiction that memorializes the ungrievable interrupts the ontological violence inherent in the racial, cultural, gendered, and national differentiation between various bodies in the borderlands, and enables readers to contest the colonial narratives and erasures that would frame indigenous American and Latina/o lives as "not-quite-human."