

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

The Secret of the World Remains Hidden: Roberto Bolaño as an Antiliterary Author

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The celebrated image of the Chilean author Roberto Bolaño is that of an ‘urgent’ writer. The prose fiction for which Bolaño is best known was written and released at an astounding rate in the decade before the author’s death in 2003. Because English translations continue to emerge with rapid-fire consistency, Bolaño seems to have an uncanny excess of life. His prolificacy, and the often frenetic pace of his novels, suggests that there is a truth for which Bolaño sought expression, which remains hidden because his ambitious literary project was interrupted – Bolaño’s magnum opus, *2666* (2004), was unfinished at the time of his death. Alternatively, Bolaño’s novels can be considered postmodern explorations of multiplicity that disengage from the quest for truth in favour of somewhat cynical literary experimentation. This article explores how certain truths do find successful expression in Bolaño’s literary form, and how these are missed when his oeuvre is considered either an unfinished quest for philosophical truth, or a postmodern critique of the concept of truth. It will address how truth is the cause, not the product, of Bolaño’s writing by discussing what I will call his ‘antiliterature’. Bolaño’s writing sheds light on existence while reflecting a suspicion that literature and philosophy conceal the contingent truths that coordinate their meaningfulness.

The Bolaño who was marketed to Western audiences with the release of Natasha Wimmer’s translation of *The Savage Detectives* in 2007 was the Bolaño who lived fast and died young. The slew of favourable reviews of the novel stressed its autobiographical nature. A blurb for *The Savage Detectives* in the *New York Times* describes ‘a craftily autobiographical novel about a band of literary guerrillas’.¹ In the *New Yorker*, Daniel Zalewski says Bolaño’s fiction is largely ‘an ironic mythologization of his personal history, and *The Savage Detectives* hews closest to what Latin-American writers call the Bolaño legend’.² In no uncertain terms, Zalewski pinpoints Bolaño’s alter ego in *The Savage Detectives*, suggesting the author ‘could have titled [his] novel “Self-Portrait in Fifty-three Convex Mirrors”’.³ Benjamin Kunkel, writing for the *London Review of Books*, also identifies Bolaño’s alter ego, and suggests ‘Bolaño’s desperado image is a large part of his appeal’.⁴ In her article ‘Latin America Translated (Again): Roberto Bolaño’s *The Savage Detectives* in the United States’, Sarah Pollack describes how an exotic reading of Latin America, buoyed by the figure of Bolaño as a drug-taking bohemian-cum-literary Che Guevara, emerged to replace the equally reductive translation of Latin America as the ontologically wonderful setting of magical realist novels like Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1970). Pollack writes:

Never mind that *The Savage Detectives* and all his major prose works were written when Bolaño was a sober family man, during the intensive seven-year comedown to his

¹ ‘The 10 Best Books of 2007,’ *The New York Times* 9 December 2007
http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/09/books/review/10-best-2007.html?_r=0.

² Daniel Zalewski, ‘Vagabonds’, *New Yorker* 26 March 2007
http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/atlarge/2007/03/26/070326crat_atlarge_zalewski.

³ Zalewski.

⁴ Benjamin Kunkel, ‘In the Sonora’, *London Review of Books* 29.17 (2007) 5.

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impending death. In effect, Bolaño becomes ... a cross between the beats and Arthur Rimbaud ..., his life already the stuff of legend.⁵

Indeed, the sobriety of Bolaño's writing is sacrificed when the one confuses Bolaño the author with his characters, especially the hopelessly romantic experimental poets and avant-gardists.

If one reads *The Savage Detectives* as autobiographical, the implication is that Bolaño's prose is a response to the youthful exuberance and ultimate failure of his poetry to express his philosophy. Reviews of the book inevitably connect Bolaño's narration of the destruction of 'visceral realism' with '[Bolaño's] formation in Mexico City of the infrarealist poetry "movement"'.⁶ In *The Savage Detectives*, there are no examples of visceral realist poetry, just as in 2666 there are no examples of the work of Benno von Archimboldi, the German writer who fascinates the young literary critics whose story the first part of the novel narrates. Hermann Herlinghaus writes that these omissions '[are] not a kind of creative "mistreatment" of artistic matter by a self-conscious writer (which is fairly common in modern and postmodern prose)'; rather, 'Bolaño is skeptical about a presumed transcendence of literary representation.'⁷ Herlinghaus's *Narcoepics* (2013) and Peter Boxall's *Twenty-First-Century Fiction* (2013) argue against reading Bolaño as a postmodern writer. Boxall writes that 'with the new century, we have seen a large scale waning of the explanatory power of postmodern critical languages, a thoroughgoing dismantling of the postmodern architecture.'⁸ Emerging instead are 'new kinds of realism, a new set of formal mechanisms with which to capture the real, as it offers itself as the material substrate of our being in the world.'⁹ Boxall includes Bolaño in the ranks of those with a decidedly un-postmodern 'commitment to the materiality of history, a fresh awareness of the reality of the past, and of our ethical obligation to bear witness to it'.¹⁰ Bolaño's aim, however, is not to return to an all-encompassing philosophy or literary form, but to acknowledge the inaccessible truth that assures the failure of philosophy and literature through the formal mechanism of antiliterature.

Works by Bolaño and other contemporary writers of world fictions 'exhibit at once a tendency towards complete seeing, towards an expanded form in which we might see the world whole, and an opposite tendency towards fragmentation, towards a kind of broken failure of collective sight.'¹¹ Bolaño errs on the side of the latter tendency; Boxall's utopian assertion that the fragmentation reflects our inability 'to imagine democratic freedom under contemporary conditions' is valuable, although I am inclined to see it, in Bolaño's case, as an unwillingness to offer a worldview.¹² Bolaño's elliptical narratives reflect an immediate concern: 'Any literary universe with the powers to satisfy an inherent craving, or even hunger for gratification in the reader and, in the given case, the scholar, can turn, under circumstances, into a "placebo text," working as a drug.'¹³ This fear of a placebo text, inherent in Bolaño's antiliterature, can be seen

⁵ Sarah Pollack, 'Latin America Translated (Again): Roberto Bolaño's *The Savage Detectives* in the United States,' *Comparative Literature* 61.3 (2009) 358-9.

⁶ Pollack 357-8.

⁷ Hermann Herlinghaus, *Narcoepics* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2013) 181.

⁸ Peter Boxall, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013) 15-16.

⁹ Boxall 10.

¹⁰ Boxall 12.

¹¹ Boxall 191.

¹² Boxall 191.

¹³ Herlinghaus 183.

in the same light as Jacques Lacan's term 'antiphilosophy,' describing the French psychoanalyst's position against his twentieth-century understanding of philosophy.

Lacan's antiphilosophy is a notoriously ambiguous concept and Lacan has come to be 'thought of as a kind of "slant" philosopher developing a paraphilosophy' by Adrian Johnston, who has written about the ways antiphilosophy has been used by more recent theorists influenced by Lacanian psychoanalysis.¹⁴ The crucial difference between Lacan's antiphilosophy and philosophy is not that there is no truth, which would suggest listening to or reading his esoteric seminars as an exorbitant, postmodern deferral of meaning in the same way that Bolaño's novels have been read. Slavoj Žižek describes the postmodern "'anti-essentialist" refusal of universal Foundation, the dissolving of "Truth" into an effect of plural language-games' and argues that 'Lacan accepts the "deconstructionist" motif of radical contingency, but turns this motif against itself, using it to assert his commitment to Truth *as contingent*.'¹⁵ Johnston paraphrases Alain Badiou to contrast psychoanalytic and philosophical truth, writing that 'the analytic concept of truth-as-cause [is] situated as the originary catalyst of the subject's trajectory in analysis, [while] the philosophical idea of truth-as-end [is] situated as the ultimate *telos* of the inquirer's quest.'¹⁶ The Real is the foundation of Lacanian psychoanalysis, though the practice does not deal directly with it; instead, analysis incorporates the truths that refer contingently to the register of the Real, which inaugurates subjectivity and the field of intersubjective relations – the Imaginary and Symbolic orders – while guaranteeing their (traumatic) inconsistency. Rex Butler and Scott Stephens write about the procedure of the Lacanian clinic, 'It is in ... distortions and exaggerations, in the contingencies and inadequacies of expression, that the truth is to be found and relayed. In a sense these distortions *are* the truth.'¹⁷ Analysis deals with the effects of the Real; neither literature nor philosophy can capture and represent the Real, save perhaps as a void or a space awaiting fulfilment.

Johnston writes that 'philosophy errs in that it seeks to stabilize this groundless ground of contingency by slipping under it the imagined depth of a supposedly solid bedrock of final, irreducible meaning/sense.'¹⁸ Any such 'imagined depth' is indicative of a placebo text, which Žižek describes in *The Metastases of Enjoyment* (1994):

Suffice it to recall the rhetorical figures that abound in theoretical texts: 'The constraints of the present book do not allow for a more detailed account ...'; 'Here, we can only delineate the contours of what must be fully substantiated in a more thorough conceptual development ...'; and so on – in all such cases one can rest assured that this reference to external, empirical limitations is an excuse concealing the inherent impossibility: the 'more detailed account' is a priori impossible.¹⁹

Bolaño and Lacan make no excuses for their abstention from the search for some final meaning. Far from receiving a placebo, the subject of psychoanalysis shares in the knowledge, or at least

¹⁴ Adrian Johnston, 'This Philosophy Which Is Not One: Jean-Claude Milner, Alain Badiou, and Lacanian Antiphilosophy,' *S 3* (2010) 158.

¹⁵ Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993) 4, quoted in Johnston 155; italics in original.

¹⁶ Johnston 148; italics in original.

¹⁷ Rex Butler and Scott Stephens, 'Editors' Introduction,' *Interrogating the Real* ed. Rex Butler and Scott Stephens (London: Continuum, 2006) 3; italics in original.

¹⁸ Johnston 147.

¹⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Women and Causality* (London: Verso, 1994) 167; ellipses in original.

the recognition, of truth-as-cause, ostensibly relieved of waiting for the more detailed account, or the metaphysical truth, to emerge. Žižek writes that ‘the subject has ... to recognize success in what appears to be his failure.’²⁰ The same aversion to excusing the failure of epistemology is evident in the new realism that has emerged, into which category Boxall and Herlinghaus have placed Bolaño’s writing. This aversion, however, is manifested in more than postmodern language-games. A commitment to the Lacanian real, to which I would argue Boxall is referring when he describes ‘the material substrate of our being in the world’,²¹ saves new realism from the abyss of cynicism. The rest of this paper will discuss how Bolaño’s antiliterature developed with the publication of *Between Parentheses* (2012) – a collection of his articles, various prefaces, and the transcripts of talks or speeches he gave – and how *2666* subverts literary genres, chiefly crime fiction, to critique what often amount to literary placebo texts.

A clearer image of Bolaño the author emerged when, in *Between Parentheses*, he cultivated a contentious (and contradictory) anti-literary approach, believing that literature conceals the fear and self-interest that coordinates its meaningfulness. Bolaño writes, ‘Prizes, seats (in the Academy), tables, beds, even golden chamber pots belong, of course, to those who are successful or to those who play the part of loyal and obedient clerks’ (*BP* 112)²². This statement has to be read not only as an attack on a handful of Bolaño’s literary adversaries (which it is as well) but as an allusion to Bolaño’s antiliterature. The above quote is an attack on the cultural establishment and its literati, but even writers who might more appropriately be described as countercultural can be accused of literary obedience. For the latter writers, the dream of literature is ‘a nightmare that’s often honest, loyal, brave, a nightmare that operates without a safety net, but a nightmare in the end’ (*BP* 21). However, Bolaño goes on to write that ‘with the passage of years it’s fair to ask whether the nightmare, or the skin of the nightmare, is really as radical as its proponents exclaimed’ (*BP* 21). Bolaño responds cynically to the belief that the discourse of either literature or philosophy is truly revolutionary and not a regressive attempt to return to, or reimpose, some form of mastery.

Bolaño raised concerns about how radical contemporary Argentine literature (the contemporary Argentine literary nightmare) really was, just as Lacan questioned whether the May 1968 uprising in Paris was really as radical as its proponents exclaimed. Although Lacan was generally left-leaning, anti-capitalist or at least anti-authoritarian, he criticised the students protesting in Paris for being ‘structured’; that is, bound to cycle through the same four discourses that he introduced in Seminar XVIII, presented 1969-70. Lacan’s four discourses are the discourse of the master, the university, the hysteric, and the analyst. It is beyond the scope of this article to develop each in great detail, suffice it to say that ‘they are a way of understanding major social and political phenomena: *educating* in the case of the university; *governing* in the case of the master; *protesting* in the case of the hysteric; and *revolutionizing* in the case of the analyst.’²³ Saul Newman undertakes the difficult task of attributing a certain revolutionary potential to Lacan in spite of what appears to be the interminable cynicism of antiphilosophy that focuses on the contingent resonances of an a priori impossibility – the non-ontological but nonetheless ‘essential’ Real. Before collapsing psychoanalysis and the political, Newman describes analysis:

²⁰ Žižek, *Metastases of Enjoyment* 167.

²¹ Boxall 10.

²² Roberto Bolaño, *Between Parentheses* ed. Ignacio Echevarria trans. Natasha Wimmer (London: Picador, 2012) 112.

²³ Saul Newman, ‘Interrogating the Master: Lacan and Radical Politics,’ *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society* 9 (2004) 304; italics in original.

Briefly, the role of analysis is to allow the subject to own his or her alienation and desire, by confronting him with his own unconscious fantasy – producing a gap between the subject and the ego ideal – and to accept that the other, which supports this fantasy structure, is itself deficient, lacking and ungrounded.²⁴

There is evidence of Bolaño producing the same gap in his novels: a gap between mimetic realism and surrealism or magical realism, sustained by the fact that Bolaño cannot be said to commit to the latter two fantasy structures.

Traditional realism fits the mould of philosophical enquiry described above: truth is its end; its progress is conditional on there being a ground from which to represent the way things really are. There is a euphoria associated with approaching, even claiming to occupy, this ground that matches the Lacanian suspicion that ‘philosophy ... remains completely wedded to its archaic roots in a pre-modern ethos concerned with the enrichment of the soul ... through the acquisition of meaningful wisdom.’²⁵ Avoiding the staidness of traditional realism is a fixture of the postmodern landscape. ‘When introductory textbooks on postmodernism do allude specifically to realism they tend to impugn the concept for both its ingenuousness and for its disingenuousness.’²⁶ The realist author is both ‘simple-minded’, attempting to render reality truthfully, and ‘duplicitous’ for even suggesting the possibility of such total representation.²⁷ Instead, the assertion that there is no truth is implied by the proliferation of postmodern language-games. Short-circuiting this representational deadlock is the antiphilosophical assertion that the non-ontological Real cannot be represented, though its contingent effects should be addressed as truths. Žižek, apropos of this short-circuit, describes the form new realism should take with an assertion that cannot but corroborate the commitment Boxall has found in the work of Bolaño and others. Žižek writes, ‘The horror of the Holocaust cannot be represented; but this excess of represented content over its aesthetic representation has to infect the aesthetic form itself. What cannot be *described* should be *inscribed* into the artistic form as its uncanny distortion.’²⁸ The newer genocide at the heart of *2666* is an unsettled, unredeemed symbolic debt and the mutilated bodies of its victims are exposed fragments of the Real. Scholars have sought to explain this genocide, but Bolaño never describes it.

2666 is a nonlinear, discontinuous narrative divided into parts. The bulk of it takes place during the mid to late nineties, in and around the U.S.-Mexico border city Santa Teresa, Bolaño’s fictionalised stand-in for Ciudad Juárez, the largest city in the State of Chihuahua. Europe lies at either end of the Mexican odyssey, and the fifth and final part of the novel occurs during the Second World War, across much of the Eastern Front. The fourth part of Bolaño’s novel is ‘The Part about the Crimes’. The eponymous crimes are the killings of women in Santa Teresa, Bolaño’s unambiguous reference to an actual phenomenon now called ‘femicide’: the 494 women and girls killed in Ciudad Juárez between 1993 and 2007. In *2666*, the femicide is catalogued in sections that hew closely to the police procedural subgenre of detective fiction. Readers follow the Santa Teresa police as they discover the bodies of women and girls, registering particulars like the condition of the victim’s clothing, the presence of ligature marks

²⁴ Newman 307.

²⁵ Johnston 143.

²⁶ Matthew Beaumont, ‘Introduction: Reclaiming Realism,’ *Adventures in Realism* ed. Matthew Beaumont (Malden: Blackwell, 2007) 3-4.

²⁷ Beaumont 4.

²⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2012) 25; italics in original.

and/or various signs of torture, and details from autopsy reports. The visceral quality of the text is striking; its effect is described by Tram Nguyen:

The scope and range of these femicides are mind-numbing. They pummel the reader. They suck all the air out of her. Told in the cold, detached tone of a forensics report, these reports commit a form of violence that is slow and accretive. They steadily gain power and horror with accumulation and repeating, reminding us of the pervasiveness and ubiquity of violence against the female sex.²⁹

The reader is willing to be pummelled because they expect the pieces to fit together and the noose to tighten around a neck or necks. However, with all that is collected, the truth of *2666* recedes against what seemed like the promise of certitude.

This promise is all but made by the protagonist of the third part of *2666*, who remembers discussing the killings in Santa Teresa and hearing that ‘the secret of the world is hidden in them’ – a cause for anticipation located only one page away from the beginning of ‘The Part about the Crimes’ (*2666* 348).³⁰ Moreover, it is a promise implicit in the form of the detective story. In *Marx and Freud in Latin America*, Bruno Bosteels describes two ‘principles that underpin the structural possibility of the detective story’.³¹ The first principal is that the detective story ‘recall[s] the alleged origins of the social contract’.³² Bosteels writes, ‘The detective’s genre obeys a properly metaphysical ... principle according to which, even before the creation of the world itself, there exists an insurmountable share of criminal evil.’³³ This a priori evil is evident in *2666*: the femicide in Santa Teresa is followed by the liquidation of a trainload of Greek Jews during the Second World War in the last part of the novel. In the first part of *2666*, two literary critics beat a Pakistani taxi driver so badly that they check the next day’s newspaper for the report of a homicide. Immediately after the act, however, the critics both feel as though they had reached climax in a ménage à trois. There is no connection between these and other violent acts in the novel save for that violence which is the mainspring of the social contract.

Bosteels writes, ‘At the origins of society, a crime has always already happened. Violence is the repressed but originary truth of every social bond.’³⁴ Keeping this in mind, Bosteels writes that each detective story is principled on ‘pointing to its hoped-for ends’.³⁵ With this gesture, the detective story reveals its philosophical bent. Indeed, Bosteels writes that ‘the detective genre has often come to rival the high discourse of philosophy.’³⁶ Bosteels suggests, in ways Bolaño seems to have been aware of, that even in radical iterations of the genre – those books in which the society depicted is barely able to contain the nightmare of ubiquitous violence, and where protagonists can and should debase themselves and partake in the atavistic rituals of crime – some semblance of order must prevail. For this to occur, the first principle must be contradicted: the writer has to stabilise the groundless ground of the social contract by imagining that a crime is solved, suggesting the possibility of resolving the a priori antagonistic contradiction, and

²⁹ Tram Nguyen, ‘Traveling Sovereignty: Counter-crossing Bolaño with Derrida,’ *The Comparatist* 36 (2012) 36.

³⁰ Roberto Bolaño, *2666* trans. Natasha Wimmer (London: Picador, 2009) 348.

³¹ Bruno Bosteels, *Marx and Freud in Latin America: Politics, Psychoanalysis, and Religion in Times of Terror* (London: Verso, 2012) 263.

³² Bosteels 263.

³³ Bosteels 263.

³⁴ Bosteels 263-264.

³⁵ Bosteels 263.

³⁶ Bosteels 263.

engendering ‘the enrichment of the soul ... through the acquisition of meaningful wisdom.’³⁷ The details of each woman’s or girl’s body discovered in and around Santa Teresa point to the Real in its capacity as the domain beyond (beneath) the social bond, but the hoped-for end never eventuates.

The structure of the detective story is short-circuited by acknowledging the first principle – the way that contingent social contracts conceal their berth in antagonism and, as such, await transgression – but rejecting the second, cathartic principle. Such a gesture is accomplished, Bosteels argues, by ‘turn[ing] this originary violence into the abyssal foundation of a whole new cosmology, of which the best-known variant can be found in one of the great antiphilosophers of our time, Slavoj Žižek’.³⁸ A variant of this violent cosmology can also be found in Bolaño’s antiliterature. *2666* collects information and relays it in ways that range from artless testimony to sequences that flow through dreamlike, psychosomatic states. An extraordinarily descriptive sequence from the second section of *2666*, ‘The Part about Amalfitano’, conjures a violent, atavistic perspective that seems to bring forth the image of a victim only to obfuscate the crime, to relegate it to another dimension. The character Oscar Amalfitano, losing his mind, is addressed by the voice of an ancestor, which recedes with this warning about Santa Teresa:

The voice said: be careful, but it said it as if it were very far away, at the bottom of a ravine revealing glimpses of volcanic rock, rhyolites, andesites, streaks of silver and gold, petrified puddles covered with tiny little eggs, white red-tailed hawks soared above in the sky, which was purple like the skin of an Indian woman beaten to death. (*2666* 210)

This passage suggests the abyssal foundation of violence. The Santa Teresa/Ciudad Juárez femicide – otherwise contextualised as genocide ‘that is in the making (in Central America)’;³⁹ an unfolding ‘neoliberal holocaust’⁴⁰ – is interleaved with the abyssal image of primordial Earth: lava flows and the obscene evolutionary struggle of the planet’s earliest arthropods.

Bolaño’s concern that the nightmare proposed by certain radical literary figures is in fact the skin of a nightmare – one that has been eviscerated at some point during its translation, which is perhaps inevitable – matches Bosteels’s concern for the authenticity of the detective story. Again, Bosteels writes, ‘The first organizing principle behind the philosophy of the detective story consists in recovering this impossible point of the real.’⁴¹ Reacting to this contradiction – the recovery of the Real, in its Lacanian sense, is impossible – the detective story, even the modern noir version Bosteels suggests revised the classic form of the detective story, is not willing to accept what appears to be failure. Instead, detective stories slip under what is initially recognised as the originary truth of violence an artificial supplement that appears to ground society:

A semblance of justice is what allows society, otherwise on the brink of cynicism, to hide what needs to be hidden, and to show only what it wants to show. After seemingly

³⁷ Johnston 143.

³⁸ Bosteels 263.

³⁹ Grant Farred, ‘The Impossible Closing: Death, Neoliberalism, and the Postcolonial in Bolaño’s *2666*,’ *Modern Fiction Studies* 56.4 (2010) 706.

⁴⁰ Sharae Deckard, ‘Peripheral Realism, Millennial Capitalism, and Roberto Bolaño’s *2666*,’ *Modern Language Quarterly* 73.3 (2012) 267.

⁴¹ Bosteels 264.

embracing the passion of the real as a violent antagonistic origin, the *noir* detective genre thus proposes the power of semblance as its tentative utopian end.⁴²

I have argued that a certain commitment to the truth-as-cause keeps Bolaño from the abyss of cynicism; although it is neither a philosophical nor a literary commitment, it is, in a precise sense, ethical.

Žižek writes that ‘the only true ethical stance is to assume fully the impossible task of symbolizing the Real, inclusive of its necessary failure.’⁴³ In agreement with this antiphilosophical ethos, Bolaño describes ‘top-notch writing’ as ‘the ability to peer into the darkness, to leap into the void, to know that literature is basically a dangerous undertaking’ (*BP* 34). In *2666*, the semblance of justice is absent, the secret of the world remains hidden, but the bodies of women and girls continue to multiply. As they do, details about the bodies that were once shocking become somniferous, as inconsequential to us as they are to the Santa Teresa police. This is arguably the worst form of violence that Bolaño commits against his readers, although the presence of corpses and the absence of a competent detective play a particular role in Bolaño’s antiliterary aversion to placebo texts. Indirectly implying the danger that one must be willing to face when reading a novel like *2666*, Žižek writes regarding detective stories:

What is of crucial importance here is the *intersubjective* dimension of the murder, more properly, of the *corpse*. The corpse as object works to bind a group of individuals together: the corpse constitutes them as a group (a group of suspects), it brings and keeps them together through their shared feelings of guilt – any one of them *could have been* the murderer, each had motive and opportunity. The role of the detective is, again, precisely to dissolve the impasse of this universalized, free floating guilt by localizing it in a single subject and thus exculpating all others.⁴⁴

A localised counter-narrative emerges during ‘The Part about the Crimes,’ organised by hapless agents of law enforcement, apathetic journalists, and the very suspects designed to exculpate us; it fails to dissolve the impasse of universalised, free floating guilt, which, I would argue, is Bolaño’s intention.

The insoluble femicide (the groundless ground of contingency) points to the absent centre of *2666* (truth-as-cause; Real originary violence) not to the process of forensic investigation, which is a markedly philosophical one inasmuch as it represents the quest for truth-as-end. During ‘The Part about the Crimes’ a journalist from *La Razón*, a Mexico City newspaper, finds himself at the house of Florita Almada, a television psychic who claims that the killings of women are all she can see in her visions, and that she can see the killers’ faces: ‘They’re ordinary faces’ (*2666* 571). Florita discusses her visions with the journalist, Sergio González:

Well, when these figments of mine speak among themselves, even though I don’t understand their words, I can tell for a fact that their joys and sorrows are *big*, said Florita. How big? asked Sergio. Florita fixed him with her gaze. She opened the door. He could feel the Sonora night brushing his back like a ghost. *Huge*, said Florita. As if they know they’re beyond the law? No, no, no, said Florita, it has nothing to do with the law. (*2666* 572; italics in original)

⁴² Bosteels 264-265; italics in original.

⁴³ Žižek, *Metastases of Enjoyment* 200.

⁴⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991) 59; italics in original.

Although Florita is powerless to affect change, one gets the sense that she is a medium between the Real story, the secret of the world, and the story being compiled by the law. The former is grounded in the libidinal economy – the otherwise ordinary faces of killers are betrayed by excessive joy and sorrow – whereas ‘the detective’s act consists in annihilating the libidinal possibility, the “inner” truth that each one in the group might have been the murderer.’⁴⁵ The way that the detective, as opposed specifically to the psychoanalyst, reacts to the libidinal economy justifies Bolaño’s antiliterary scrutiny of placebo texts.

In the literary universe of the detective story, the detective is empowered ‘to satisfy an inherent craving ... in the reader’, able to construct an elaborate but particular truth to cover up the infinitely larger one.⁴⁶ His or her solution brings about ‘immense pleasure’, turning the story into a placebo text. Alternatively, Žižek writes that ‘psychoanalysis confronts us precisely with the price we have to pay for the access to our desire, with an irredeemable loss (the “symbolic castration”).’⁴⁷ Referring to the femicide, Grant Farred writes that ‘the place of discovery is not the place ... of death’; therefore, ‘The unknowable place is the place of violence, the place that may be near or far away, the place that is everywhere, that makes every place the no place of violence.’⁴⁸ In *2666*, the character Albert Kessler appears to be about to assume the role of the detective, to establish a crime scene and, in doing so, fix the place of violence, freeze the free-floating guilt, and free us from complicity. In other words, Kessler’s official story will be one ‘where the culprit singled out *is* the murderer and thus the guarantee of *our* innocence’.⁴⁹ Kessler is Bolaño’s none-too-subtle stand in for the real-life former FBI agent Robert K. Ressler, who found fame working certain notorious cases of serial murder with the FBI, and as a private practice consultant. Ressler travelled to Juárez at the behest of the Mexican authorities in 1998 to investigate the femicide and the event is mirrored by Kessler in *2666*.

The final mention of Kessler in *2666* regards a lecture he gave at the University of Santa Teresa: apparently ‘a popular success like few in memory’, during which an audience of ‘anybody who was anybody in Santa Teresa’ filled the fifteen-hundred-seat university hall (for the first time) ‘to wait for the scientific miracle, the miracle of the human mind set in motion by that modern-day Sherlock Holmes’ (*2666* 610). It is worth recalling here Lacan’s discourse of the university: ‘Lacan tends to closely associate philosophy with university discourse’; the latter discourse ‘is proximate to that of the master’ inasmuch as ‘the knowledge of university discourse ultimately rests upon and serves the arbitrary anchors ... of power.’⁵⁰ No more mention is made of the lecture. Instead, Bolaño buries the conclusion of Kessler’s ‘investigation’ in the third part of *2666*, ‘The Part about Fate’, 343 pages before the modern-day Sherlock Holmes disappears from ‘The Part about the Crimes’. Oscar Fate, protagonist of ‘The Part about Fate’, overhears a conversation between two men, one young and the other older, in a restaurant at a gas station south of Tucson, Arizona. The older man is Kessler, leaving Mexico for home after a second, unofficial visit to Santa Teresa. His opinion on the killings suggests the absent centre of irreducible violence that threatens the cohesiveness of the social bond.

The real-life Robert K. Ressler was an agent of the university discourse. He worked for the FBI’s Behavioural Science Unit: ‘Lacan characterizes the reign of (neo-)liberal capitalism as

⁴⁵ Žižek, *Looking Awry* 59.

⁴⁶ Herlinghaus 183.

⁴⁷ Žižek, *Looking Awry* 59.

⁴⁸ Farred 698

⁴⁹ Žižek, *Looking Awry* 59; italics in original.

⁵⁰ Johnston 139.

ushering in the dominance of “science” qua the authority of the university discourse.⁵¹ Ressler’s two co-authored text books, *Sexual Homicide: Patterns and Motives* (1988) and the *Crime Classification Manual* (1992), are committed to the quest for truth-as-end, to advancing the knowledge base of professionals. However, Bolaño’s Kessler is more metaphysician than forensic scientist, registering the constituent elements of a crime scene less as clues than as ripples emanating from an ineffable source. Kessler is doubly aware that the crimes in *2666*, in accordance with Bolaño’s antiliterary aversion to placebo texts, will not be solved, and that what has happened to the victims cannot be written without avoiding rather than revealing the truth.

Prompted by the younger man in the Tucson diner to give his ‘unofficial opinion about what’s going on there’ – Santa Teresa – Kessler replies thusly:

‘All right then,’ said the white-haired man. ‘I’ll tell you three things I’m sure of: (a) everyone living in that city is outside of society, and everyone, I mean everyone, is like the ancient Christians in the Roman circus; (b) the crimes have different signatures; (c) the city seems to be booming, it seems to be moving ahead in some ineffable way, but the best thing would be for every last one of the people there to head out into the desert some night and cross the border.’ (*2666* 267)

Kessler’s opinion is telling, although not typical of a criminologist: the killings have nothing to do with the law. His suggestion that everyone living in Santa Teresa is outside of society is, on the one hand, contextual: ‘It is Bolaño’s ability to make us deal directly ... with death in its intimate relation to neoliberalism, that lends his work its critical salience.’⁵² On the other hand, Bolaño is able to make us deal directly with the Real of desire as the ceaseless discovery of the bodies of women and girls overwhelms us. The corpses in *2666* are contingencies referring to the excessive, monstrous nature of human desire; reading it we are ‘grounded in a constitutive surplus – that is to say, in the excessive presence of some Thing that is inherently “impossible” and should not be here, in our present reality.’⁵³ The receptive reader of *2666* understands that the detective’s quick fix comes at the expense of an intimate realisation. Once Bolaño has stripped any features of the placebo text from *2666*, the conclusion aligns with and sheds light on what happens when desire is subjectively assumed. Paraphrasing Žižek, the conclusion of *2666* ‘is this very withdrawal, this pulling away from the Thing that I myself am, this realization that *the Monster out there is myself*.’⁵⁴ As an antiliterary exemplar, *2666* is a nightmare, rather than the skin of one.

Back in the Tucson diner, Kessler tells his companion that, during the late nineteenth century, ‘We didn’t want death in the home, or in our dreams and fantasies, and yet it was a fact that terrible crimes were committed, mutilations, all kinds of rape, even serial killings’ (*2666* 266). Kessler says, ‘Everything was passed through the filter of words, everything trimmed to fit our fear’ (*2666* 266). Bolaño has refused to pass the femicide through the filter of words. Kessler makes a distinction between the historical reception of crimes against those who were not part of society and those who were; concerning the latter victims, Kessler says, ‘What happened to them could be written, you might say, it was legible’ (*2666* 267). Johnston writes that ‘Lacan’s specific brand of antiphilosophy requires passing through philosophy,’ just as Bolaño’s antiliterature requires passing through literature – a passage highlighted by Kessler, who, in the

⁵¹ Johnston 139.

⁵² Farred 692.

⁵³ Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 1999) 304; italics in original.

⁵⁴ Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject* 305; italics in original.

above examples, seems to be describing literary placebo texts.⁵⁵ Johnston describes ‘[Lacan’s] determinate negations of given philosophies rendering possible the birth of novel philosophical trajectories’; I would argue that Bolaño’s negation of the detective story renders possible a novel literary trajectory. Specifically, the way that a crime – illegible, though nonetheless essential – has been inscribed in the very form of violence that 2666 commits reinstates universalised guilt and renders possible analysis. Perhaps it is best to let Bolaño explain the difference between literature and what I have called his antiliterature: ‘Remember,’ Bolaño writes, ‘that in literature you always lose, but the difference, the enormous difference, lies in losing while standing tall, with eyes open, not kneeling in a corner praying to Jude the Apostle with chattering teeth’ (*BP* 112). We should recognise success in the way that antiliterature loses without declaring itself a contribution to the quest for truth-as-end.

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⁵⁵ Johnston 157.