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## Urban Pessimism and the Optimism between the Lines: Literary Latin American Cities and Roberto Bolaño's 2666

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Independence is often considered a shared commonality for the countries of Latin America. However, it sometimes seems that the historical events which led to moving beyond European colonialism and the societal evolutions which have occurred as a consequence reflect more the differences between the region's countries rather than the similarities. Even with this understood, one space where Latin Americans have almost unanimously come together is the city. So much so that today four of the world's ten biggest cities are located in Latin America. Of these four, the largest, Mexico City, contains some 22 million inhabitants; an urban center whose own growth reflects an increase in urbanization which has seen the percentage of Latin Americans living in cities go from 41.1% in 1950 to 75% in the present day. It is therefore unsurprising that since independence cities have increasingly become the subjects of Latin American authors. While some optimistic exceptions do exist, representations of Latin American cities as corrupt and dehumanizing spaces seem to be increasing and it is therefore unsurprising to see Amanda Holmes use terminology like "linguistic chaos" and "ruptured phrases" to generalize about the language needed by authors who wanted to depict these urban spaces in the last thirty years of the twentieth century (Holmes 13). *2666* continues this trend with Roberto Bolaño's creation of Santa Teresa as not just the geographic place where Mexico and the United States end, but also the location which serves as the setting for more than its share of deaths as well as the finalization of multiple quests undertaken by the novel's characters. Lives, searches, and geographies find the end of the road in Santa Teresa and, as one critic has argued, Bolaño's city is the place to meet "el mal absoluto" (Galdo 23). However, hidden within this apocalyptic air is a possibility of change colored by criticism of the capitalist system. While it is true that Bolaño's characters find the end of the road in Santa Teresa, the novel's opening section also suggests that lifestyle changes could have pushed them towards happiness.

During the twentieth century, Latin American authors increasingly turned to the city as their focus and more and more represented urban centers as the locations of the lost dreams of young countries entering maturity. Alejo Carpentier set out a challenge in regard to the literary image of the Latin American city in his 1967 essay “Problemática de la actual novela latinoamericana”. Writing that literature from his part of the world had reached certain heights, it had yet to really put its finger on the pulse of Latin American issues: “nos ha dado una novelística regional y pintoresca que en muy pocos casos ha llegado a lo hondo –lo realmente trascendental- de las cosas” (Carpentier 14). The challenge, according to Carpentier, was to move beyond representations of the jungle and mountains and confront a manmade feature that had been largely ignored: “creo que ciertas realidades literarias americanas, por no haber sido explotados literariamente, por no haber sido *nominadas*, exigen un largo, vasto, paciente proceso de observación. Y que acaso nuestras ciudades, por no haber entrado aún en la literatura, son más difíciles de manejar que las selvas o las montañas” (Carpentier 15). In order to represent those cities, Carpentier argued, it was essential to find those points where Latin American urbanity met the universal: “me convengo de que la gran tarea del novelista americano de hoy está en inscribir la fisonomía de sus ciudades en la literatura universal” and to “establecer sus relaciones posibles –por afinidades o contrastes- con lo universal” (Carpentier 15, 19). Conscious of Carpentier’s words or not, many of the novelists’ responses were to produce narrations which depicted Latin American cities’ connection with the universal not as concentrations of power and knowledge, but instead locations where the self-interested compete and fortresses from which nature and the weak are controlled and dominated. Indeed it seemed that, although not quite universal, a common aspect of these representations was the Latin American city as corrupt and dehumanizing. Urban masterpieces like Julio Cortázar’s *Rayuela* seem to suggest primacy for Paris and Carlos Fuentes’s *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* and Mario Vargas Llosa’s *La casa verde* give at least equal importance if not preference to the rural over urban settings. Early novels like Roberto Arlt’s *El juguete rabioso*, *Los siete locos*, and *Los lanzallamas* depicted the city as a dark, alienating place where criminality existed naturally. Uruguayan Juan Carlos Onetti followed Arlt’s depressing disaffecting view of the city in *El pozo* which was then given a more political, but equally stifling turn in Mario Benedetti’s *Primavera con una esquina rota*. It seems the literature is suggesting the dreams which came with independence and revolution in the minds of people born in villages and countrysides found maddening injustices and contradictions in the urban centers of power. Holmes argues that there is “an image of the city as diseased” in Latin American literature and that this reflects “a loss of faith in the civilizing and modernizing potential of urban space” (Holmes 27). Confirmation of this pessimistic vision appears in Mario Vargas Llosa’s *La ciudad y los perros* and most of all in *Conversación en la Catedral* where almost all attempts at optimism are drown by the depiction of Lima as a hole of corruption, vice, and decay. Beginning before Carpentier issued his challenge and continuing after, Latin American authors represented their cities as places which reflected realities that were far from the utopian social organization that had been present at their inception.

The geometric perfection of an urban grid is a notion familiar to most people. One need only imagine the right-angled streets and avenues of New York to conjure

this simple and flexible element of city planning. Perhaps less well-known is the Greek philosopher and architect Hippodamus of Miletus who is credited with contrasting the grid's ordered approach with the more chaotic street plans of 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Indeed, today's urban planners often honor their Greek predecessor by referring to this design as the Hippodamian Plan. Hippodamus went beyond merely organizing streets. He also distributed the inhabitants of his city in such a way that the urban plan was a reflection of his idealized social order. This creation of a Greek Utopia led Aristotle to write about Hippodamus in the first book of his *Treatise on Government*. Claiming he "contrived the art of laying out towns," Aristotle dedicated a large part of Chapter VIII to criticizing both Hippodamus's ideas and the man himself; even going so far as to accuse him of being self-centered or "too eager after notice" (Aristotle).<sup>1</sup> Examining the Greek "father" of city planning's legacy in the twentieth century, the American historian and philosopher Lewis Mumford wrote that Hippodamus's "true innovation consisted in realizing that the form of the city was the form of its social order" (Mumford 172). Comprehending the nuances of Mumford's position in the context of Latin America and the theories of Michel Foucault, Ángel Rama argued that the European construction of cities in this part of the world took place at exactly the moment when signs ceased to depend on similitude and began to function not only within the world of knowledge, but were also born from it. In Rama's reading, the city itself becomes the sign; a product of a society that does not necessarily mean the city is a mirror of the society, but more that the city's utopian distribution is the result of the society's idealized social order. Thus permitting a situation where, in Rama's words, "leamos la sociedad al leer el plano de una ciudad" (Rama 4). The question was one of form. A society that considered itself organized would create a city that, at least on a map, would project the appearance of order. Aristotle objected to what he considered the impracticality and misunderstandings about human nature which sat at the base of Hippodamus's ideas. This objection, however, has not stopped people from creating cities that, at least from an outsider's view, project a sense of order.

The idea that one can look at a city's map and see a society's order raises an interesting question: is it also possible to zoom out and look at a region's map or perhaps a world map and perceive or "read" some sort of order through which we can decipher lessons? Employing economic and social analysis, Saskia Sassen has achieved something akin to interpreting the world map in her book *The Global City*. Focusing her analysis on the second half of the twentieth century, Sassen describes shifts in the world's economic order which have contributed to "the development of specific geographic control sites," or Global Cities, that are increasingly becoming indispensable and powerful components of societal organization (Sassen 5). Sassen points to New York, London, Frankfurt, and Paris as examples of these urban focal points of control and while her book is centered on examining three of these cities, she is also interested in "the consequences" of the development of Global Cities, particularly the "large number of other major cities [that] have lost their role as leading export

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis Mumford points out that while many, including Aristotle, believed that Hippodamos was the first to propose a city plan according to a grid, he was not actually the innovator: "for though he may have popularized the gridiron type of layout, hitherto unfashionable in conservative Attica, this form had been common in Ionia since the seventh century" (Mumford 172).

centers for industrial manufacturing” (Sassen 7). As examples of urban centers which have suffered because of the trend towards Global Cities, Sassen cites Detroit, Liverpool, Manchester, Nagoya, and Osaka. At the risk of overly reducing Sassen’s analysis, it is possible to summarize her vision of Global Cities by stating that while some places have become essential components of the global economy, others have replaced any previous essentialness that they may have enjoyed with the role of either being regional echoes of their larger international neighbors or decaying warnings to not focus too much of an economy on a single industry. In other words, in reading a world map through the veil of Sassen’s theories, we can perceive a globalized world where control and power is increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few urban centers at the expense of considerably more.

Criteria vary for inclusion in an index of Global Cities depending on which study is used. Agreement, however, can be found in the fact that along with Africa, Latin America is one of the world’s regions which consistently has few or none. The Mori Memorial Foundation’s Institute for Urban Strategies, for example, considers São Paulo to be the only Latin America city that could be part of its 2009 list of urban centers that have the “comprehensive power” to “attract creative people and excellent companies from around the world” (Global Power City Index 1). Although measured in different ways, economic power is always an important component of these lists. Considering this, it is unsurprising that Latin American cities remain largely uncouncted. While economically, geographically, and culturally distant from being considered a Global City, Mexico’s Ciudad Juárez is often depicted in articles related to economic issues as an ideal result of globalization. In one example, subtitled “The Ciudad Juárez - El Paso Borderplex: The U.S./Mexico Border Done Right,” *Industry Today* praises Mexico’s eighth biggest city as “exploding with possibilities and potential” largely thanks to it being “the birthplace of the maquiladora industry” which has brought “over 70 Fortune 500 companies” including “heavy hitters Delphi, Visteon, Johnson Controls, Lear, Boeing, Cardinal Health, Yazaki, Sumitomo and Siemens” (Ochoa). *fDi Magazine* echoes this enthusiasm in noting Ciudad Juárez’s “growing importance as a regional industrial and logistics centre” and, after “more than six months [of] research,” awarding the city the title of “top large City of the Future” (Piggott). Stated in the simplest of terms, Ciudad Juárez is an attractive place for business because of cheap labor and geographic proximity to the important consumer market of the United States. Returning to the idea of reading maps and seeing social order, Ciudad Juárez in this context appears as a key transfer point for the service-industry orientated economic order upon which Global Cities depend.

These glowing reviews, however, contrast sharply with the drug-related violence that has recently brought Ciudad Juárez to the headlines and, of course, the unresolved sexual violence or femicide that has plagued the city since, according to Diana Washington Valdez, the early 1990s. Washington Valdez’s book *The Killing Fields Harvest of Women: The truth about Mexico’s bloody border legacy* links Ciudad Juárez’s economic success with its darker side. Indeed it seems that the same cheap production and access to the US that attracts Fortune 500 companies also draws drug smugglers and Washington Valdez suggests that the murder of women is another point

they have in common: writing that “powerful men were involved in the femicides” Washington Valdez’s book points to political, economic, judicial and social corruption to such a degree that drugs, femicide, and economic success seem synonymous with each other (Washington Valdez 238). Jessica Livingston also connects the maquiladora industry with the killing of women in Ciudad Juárez by placing:

[t]hese murders in their socioeconomic and ideological context in order to analyze the gendering of production, the gendering of violence, and the relationship between the two. The murders of the young women result from the displacement of economic frustration onto the bodies of women who work in the *maquiladoras*. The construction of working women as “cheap labor” and disposable within the system makes it possible, and perhaps acceptable, to kill them with impunity. (Livingston 60)

Ciudad Juárez has reached headlines for its economic success and terrible violence. Washington Valdez and Livingston argue that these seemingly contrasting subjects are the same. It is this link between Ciudad Juárez as distant from any Global City, but a key to the success of the Global City system and the murder of women that forms the setting for Bolaño’s 2666.

Titled “La parte de los críticos,” the novel’s opening section focuses on a group of four university professors and literary scholars who share both a common research subject in the character of the elusive and famous author Benno von Archimboldi and a bond which Bolaño paints in terms which seem to suggest the quasi-incestuous. The narration represents the academic careers of Frenchman Jean-Claude Pelletier, Italian Piero Morini, Spaniard Manuel Espinoza, and Englishwoman Liz Norton as interrelated and even interdependent as all four appear together in conferences, peer-reviewed journals, and push the subject of their work towards a Nobel Prize and thus their own careers to new heights. Indeed, “no sólo se leían mutuamente en las revistas especializadas sino que también se hicieron amigos o que creció entre ellos algo similar a una relación de amistad” (Bolaño 2009: 24). They celebrated together as something that was good for all when one of them published “el gran libro archimboldiano, el pez guía que iba a nadar durante mucho tiempo al lado del gran tiburón negro que era la obra del alemán” (Bolaño 2009: 25). Their careers grew with one citing the other, confirming and thus authorizing the theories of each other to such a degree that they slowly became the centerpieces of the ever-increasing academic world which grew around the writing of Archimboldi. This influence naturally attracted scholars eager to share in their success, but the importance of their work and line of scholarly inquiry was underlined by the fact that the group’s newest member, Liz Norton, was only respected and accepted once they realized that her research “alineaba con las tesis del francés, del español, y del italiano, a quienes citaba en varias ocasiones, demostrando que conocía perfectamente bien sus trabajos y monografías” (Bolaño 2009: 26). Their work on Archimboldi was the center of their lives, the source of their prestige in the academic world, and the bond which linked what were otherwise empty existences hidden by the veil of academic success: “Los cuatro eran solteros [...] Los cuatro vivían solos [...] Los cuatro estaban dedicados a sus carreras” (Bolaño 2009: 28). The narration metaphorically intensifies the interrelation of their academic work in a sexualized multidirectional relationship between the critics which eventually includes

them all. However, despite the passionate experiences they share between the sheets, Bolaño nevertheless includes dialog such as the following between two of the characters which emphasizes that the crux of their relationship is work and not love: “Norton le miró a los ojos y le preguntó si él pensaba que la conocía. Espinoza dijo que no lo sabía, tal vez en algunos aspectos sí y en otros no, pero que sentía un gran respeto por ella, además de admiración por su trabajo como estudiosa y crítica de la obra archiboldiana” (Bolaño 2009: 52). An effort to actually locate the elusive Archiboldi which would undoubtedly propel their already successful careers to new heights, brings the empty lives of the critics to Bolaño’s literary manifestation of Ciudad Juárez in the form of Santa Teresa, the space where their relationship and participation in the novel end as well as the location which sheds some light on the optimism hidden in Bolaño’s writing.

From its earliest mentions in the novel, Santa Teresa is depicted as large and uninviting. Pointing out that “[e]s grande [...] hay fábricas, y también problemas. No creo que sea un lugar bonito,” the character who provides the clues which lead the critics to the U.S. / Mexican border sets the tone which will eventually see the city repeatedly referred to as “Santa Teresa, esa horrible ciudad” (Bolaño 2009: 141, 187, 189). Considering their international prestige, the Europeans envision themselves as separate from the city which “les pareció un enorme campamento de gitanos o de refugiados” and upon observing that it was “caótica” the critics “se pusieron a reír” (Bolaño 2009: 149, 150). This laughter is a relief to them as it marks them as outsiders, people who are just visiting a city they do not like. To the European critics, the Mexican border city feels like “un medio cuyo lenguaje se negaban a reconocer, un medio que transcurría paralelo a ellos y en el cual sólo podían imponer” (Bolaño 2009 150). This distance the critics felt existed between “Europa y aquel rincón trashumante” was emphasized in more laughter provoked by an invitation sent to them by a dean from the local Mexican university which displayed the provincial audacity to refer to the esteemed European scholars as “colega” (Bolaño 2009: 150). Upon meeting Amalfitano, a professor from the aforementioned university, the Europeans have a bad first impression which was “perfectamente acorde con la mediocridad del lugar” (Bolaño 2009: 152). For the critics, Santa Teresa is a place where they have come to increase their prestige by finding Archiboldi. It is a sort of unpleasant obstacle to which they do not belong, but must overcome to reach their goal. They look down upon the city and feel abhorrence towards it and those who live there. However, as their quest slowly proves itself fruitless, at least one of the critics creates a connection with the city and it is through this connection that Bolaño suggests another relationship with the world.

Not long after their common lover Liz Norton abandoned them in Santa Teresa, the Spaniard Espinoza is provoked into action by Pelletier’s declaration “Quiero enterarme de qué está pasando en esta ciudad” (Bolaño 2009: 181). Ostensibly wandering the city in search of Archiboldi, it is not long before Espinoza is forced to admit to himself that “había olvidado los libros de Archiboldi que ocultaba en su maleta” (Bolaño 2009: 196). This disconnection with the centerpiece of his life was the result of a relationship he had developed with a local woman named Rebeca from who he had previously purchased a blanket. Upon reencountering the street vendor,

Espinoza opened the conversation with an existential “¿Quién soy?” that marks the beginning of his transformation into someone new (Bolaño 2009: 184). Instead of answering that he is a prestigious scholar, Rebeca responds with an honest “Un español que me compró una alfombra” (Bolaño 2009: 184). In a short period, the narration intensifies the relationship between the Spaniard and the Mexican and Rebeca asks her new lover whether he planned to return to Europe and his life. In response Espinoza “sonrió y le dijo que no sabía” (Bolaño 2009: 186). This exchange occurs in several different forms suggesting that Espinoza has the power to decide between his life in Europe and the possibility of a radical departure and a relationship in Santa Teresa. While certainly not that of an important scholar, one thing about Espinoza’s identity in Santa Teresa is clear: “Cuando volvió a sentarse junto a Rebeca se sentía bien. De hecho, se sentía pletórico” (Bolaño 2009: 190). Neither a successful career nor his previous relationship with Liz Norton had produced any indication of happiness. Instead, Espinoza had found that feeling unexpectedly in Santa Teresa and, in case there was any doubt about its authenticity, the Spaniard realizes in a moments of self-reflection that a result of his relationship with Rebeca was “Parezco un señor, se decía a veces. Parezco más joven. Parezco otro” (Bolaño 2009: 196). However, this transformation from dissatisfied university professor to happy lover is short lived as the two scholars decide to return to Europe when the Frenchman declares “No vamos a encontrar a Archiboldi” and Espinosa responds “Hace días que lo sé” (Bolaño 2009: 206). Despite this and the fact they have no evidence that indicates his presence, the two scholars are certain that the object of their lifelong quest is in the city, but that they will never get any closer than they have: “Archiboldi está aquí [...] y nosotros estamos aquí, y esto es lo más cerca que jamás estaremos de él” (Bolaño 2009: 207). The extraordinarily tall German author in this context seems like Ahab’s white whale; an obsessive goal within whose quest the seeker becomes lost and distanced from happiness. Nevertheless, the brief departure from his life and intimate contact with the inhabitants of Santa Teresa demonstrate that happiness is a possibility for Espinoza if he is willing to embrace the city and change his way of being. The fact that he ultimately chooses to return to Europe does not diminish the message that another life and the happiness that comes with it is possible.

When asked by *Playboy Magazine* to describe “el infierno,” Bolaño responded by stating that it is “[c]omo Ciudad Juárez, que es nuestra maldición y nuestro espejo, el espejo desasosegado de nuestras frustraciones y de nuestra infame interpretación de la libertad y de nuestros deseos” (Bolaño 2004: 339). In the city’s fictionalized double, Bolaño’s character Espinoza discovered a frustrated quest and unexpected happiness. He had the freedom to decide between lives and chose to return to a world that did not seem likely to bring him satisfaction. Newspaper and magazine articles depict Ciudad Juárez as a land of economic opportunity or location of drug violence and femicide. Scholarship suggests that it is both and one is related to the other. 2666 is one of the more recent of a long list of Latin American fiction that seem to indicate frustration with what the city has become since independence. However, it is not a uniquely Latin American issues because, like it or not, Ciudad Juárez is a product of the globalized economy to which all of us pertain and the first part of Bolaño’s novel seems to be saying that in embracing our relationship with that city we might find happiness if we are



braver than Espinoza and prepared to sacrifice success and prestige and accept love and humanity.

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