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## Roberto Bolaño's 2666: Serial Murder and Narrative Necrosis

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### ABSTRACT

This article explores the representation of serial murder in Roberto Bolaño's *2666*, focusing in particular on Part Four, "The Part About the Crimes," which provides a thinly fictionalized account of the notorious femicides that have afflicted the Mexican city of Ciudad Juárez over the last two and a half decades. What impact does this extensive litany of dead bodies have on the novel's plot trajectory, its production of meaning, and its proairetic qualities? What, precisely, does the recitation of such atrocities *do* to the fictional discourse it generates? In the following article, I argue that the unrelenting seriality of this section induces what we might call a "narrative necrosis," whereby the tissue of the narrative itself undergoes a process of decomposition. More specifically, I would like to suggest that such repetition serves to undermine the narrativity of the novel and, in so doing, emphasizes the collective, systemic, and interminable nature of these appalling crimes.

### KEYWORDS

Roberto Bolaño; *2666*;  
femicide; narrativity

This story is very simple, although it could have been very complicated. Also, it's incomplete, because stories like this don't have an ending.

—Roberto Bolaño, "The Secret of Evil," 2007

Since 1993, the Mexican border city of Ciudad Juárez has become notorious for its "femicides"—a term used to describe the misogynistic killing of a woman by a man that is now closely associated with this part of the world. Although the precise number of women who have been murdered over the last two and a half decades has not been officially recorded, and accurate statistics are therefore elusive, estimates tend to range between 800 and 1,500 (or sometimes more).<sup>1</sup> Many of these women come from poor families, and they are often abducted while making their way to and from the *maquiladoras*, the factories that have been constructed in areas of limited infrastructure in order to provide cheap labor for multinational companies such as Ford, General Electric, General Motors, RCA, and Chrysler (Barberán Reinales 141). The women use public buses known as *las rutas*, but they are frequently obliged to walk long distances, through poorly lit and unpopulated areas, in order to do so. In most cases, following their abduction, the victims' bodies are discovered dumped in refuse piles, alongside highways, or in the desert that encircles Juárez. More often than not, their bodies also show clear evidence of rape and prolonged torture. "When we found her, my daughter's body told of everything that had been done to her," said the mother of one victim, aged seventeen, whose mutilated body was discovered on a stretch of wasteland not far from the *maquiladora* in which she worked (qtd. in *Amnesty* 2).

The vast majority of these murders remain unsolved, and the authorities have done little to prevent them from recurring. In fact, according to one Amnesty International report published in 2003, inaction on the part of the local authorities has created a culture of impunity and discrimination against women that merely perpetuates the violence:

The failure of the competent authorities to take action to investigate these crimes, whether through indifference, lack of will, negligence or inability, has been blatant over the last ten years. Amnesty International has documented unjustifiable delays in the initial investigations, the period when there is a greater chance of finding the woman alive and identifying those responsible, and a failure to follow up evidence and witness statements which could be crucial. In other cases, the forensic examinations carried out have been inadequate, with contradictory and incorrect information being given to families about the identity of bodies, thereby causing further distress to them and disrupting their grieving process. (3)

“Meanwhile,” the report concludes, “year after year, the crimes continue” (4); and it is precisely this recursive, interminable quality that Roberto Bolaño has chosen to foreground in his posthumously published novel *2666* (2004). The novel itself is notable for its length (in my edition, 893 pages) and has been divided into five very loosely connected narratives. To quote from a geometry treatise belonging to the protagonist of Part Two, these narratives are “each independent, but functionally correlated by the sweep of the whole” (186). In all but one, we are introduced to characters who eventually make their way to Santa Teresa (a thinly fictionalized version of Juárez), where they learn of the femicides that are afflicting the city. My focus in this article, however, will be on the remaining section, Part Four (entitled “The Part About the Crimes”), which concentrates almost exclusively on the murders themselves and on the authorities’ inability to put an end to these atrocities. Spanning the years 1993 to 1997, this section is dominated by clinical descriptions of the women’s bodies that replicate the forensic discourse one might associate with an autopsy or police report. The following examples, which have been randomly selected, could be considered typical:

In the middle of November, Andrea Pacheco Martínez, thirteen, was kidnapped on her way out of Vocational School 16 [...] That afternoon Andrea didn’t come home and her parents filed a police report a few hours later [...] The city police and the judicial police took charge of the case. When she was found, two days later, her body showed unmistakable signs of strangulation, with a fracture of the hyoid bone. She had been anally and vaginally raped. There was tumefaction of the wrists, as if they had been bound. Both ankles presented lacerations, by which it was deduced that her feet had also been tied. A Salvadorean immigrant found the body behind the Francisco I School, on Madero, near Colonia Álamos. (392)

In February María de la Luz Romero died. She was fourteen, and five foot three, with long hair down to her waist, although she planned to cut it someday soon, as she had revealed to one of her sisters [...] Her body appeared two days [after her abduction], by the Casas Negras highway. She had been raped and hit multiple times in the face. A few of the blows were particularly violent, and she also exhibited a fracture of the palatine bone, which was highly unusual for a beating [...] The cause of death was stab wounds to the torso and neck, which had pierced both lungs and multiple arteries. (450–51)

Early in September, the body of a girl later identified as Marisa Hernández Silva appeared. She was seventeen and had vanished at the beginning of July on her way to the Vasconcelos Preparatory School [...] According to the forensic report, she had been raped and strangled. One of her breasts was almost completely severed and the other was missing the nipple, which had been bitten off. The body was found at the entrance to the illegal dump El Chile [...] Marisa Hernández Silva was sprawled between two big gray plastic bags full of scraps of synthetic fiber. She was wearing the same clothes she’d had on when she disappeared: denim pants, yellow blouse, and sneakers. (463–64)

Over the course of 280 pages, we are subjected to descriptions such as these a total of 110 times, precisely reflecting the actual number of bodies found in Juárez between 1993 and 1997 (as recorded by the investigative reporter Sergio González Rodríguez, with whom Bolaño corresponded while writing *2666*).<sup>2</sup> The effect on the reader can be easily imagined. One body is discovered, followed by another, and then another, until we begin to feel suffocated by this steady accretion of horrific—yet scrupulously objective—images. A young girl found half-buried in an industrial plastic bag near some old railroad warehouses (583). An eleven-year-old girl, who has been raped and strangled, discovered in a drainage pipe beneath the city (404). A dead girl, in an advanced state of decomposition, found to be still clutching a handful of grass known as *zacate* (513). Another girl, equally decomposed, found with her hand resting on some guaco leaves (which are said to be “good for mosquito bites” [375]). And then, of course, there is the terrible reiteration of the same forensic phrases: “vaginally and anally raped” (354), “massive craniocerebral trauma” (400), “a fracture of the hyoid bone” (411), “multiple fractures of the skull” (524), “massive cerebral contusion” (564),

“bruises to the gluteal region” (591), “a fracture of the cervical vertebrae” (616), and so on. For any reader, even the most desensitized, these are 280 pages to be endured, and when the section finally concludes, one experiences a genuine feeling of release.

Needless to say, our experience as readers is worth considering—particularly with regard to a novel that creates so many aesthetic and affective challenges for the reader. In this article, however, I shall be focusing primarily on the various ways in which the section described above influences the narrative itself.<sup>3</sup> What impact does this extensive litany of dead bodies have on the novel’s plot trajectory, its production of meaning, and its proairetic qualities? What, precisely, does the recitation of such atrocities *do* to the fictional discourse it generates? In what follows, I shall be arguing that the unrelenting seriality of this section induces what we might call a “narrative necrosis,” whereby the tissue of the narrative itself undergoes a process of decomposition. More specifically, I would like to suggest that such repetition serves to undermine the narrativity of the novel and, in so doing, emphasizes the collective, systemic, and interminable nature of these appalling crimes. In the field of narrative theory, “narrativity” is a term that is used to designate “the quality of *being* narrative, the set of properties characterizing narratives and distinguishing them from non-narratives.” It also refers to “the set of optional features that make narratives more prototypically narrative-like, more immediately identified, processed, and interpreted as narratives.” In the latter case, narrativity becomes “a matter of degree”—that is to say, “some narratives are more narrative than others” (Prince 387). I would like to argue, then, that the repetition we encounter in “The Part About the Crimes,” which serves as a structural correlative for the seriality of the actual murders, profoundly diminishes the narrativity of *2666*, inducing a kind of narrative necrosis that also serves as a *discursive* correlative for the decomposing corpses it describes.<sup>4</sup>

I begin by discussing the way in which the novel deindividualizes the culpability for these crimes, thus removing the possibility of a “satisfying” conclusion, one that would bestow retrospective significance and coherence on all that has gone before. In other words, this genre-defying refusal to identify a specific individual or a group of people as being responsible for the crimes ultimately deprives the novel of the closure that is one of the distinguishing features of a readerly narrative (and, indeed, of narrativity itself). I then go on to suggest that the sheer volume of corpses we encounter in Part Four of *2666* creates an overabundance of proairetic sequences (or potential plotlines), far more than can be sufficiently rendered as narrative within a single novel. In crime fiction, the appearance of a corpse typically initiates a new plotline, if not the narrative itself; yet in this case, as we shall see, there are simply too many corpses, too many potential stories, for any one plotline to be pursued. Finally, I explore in more detail the precise nature of the repetition found in this section. With reference to Gérard Genette, I argue that these passages occur in a “pseudo-singulative” mode—one that does irreparable damage to the dialectic between resemblance and difference that makes narrative possible in the first place. Here, too, the discourse assumes a necrotic quality, for as Roland Barthes has argued, “to repeat excessively is to enter into loss, into the zero of the signified” (*Pleasure* 41). Granted, *2666* does not quite achieve the zero degree of narrativity that Barthes is describing in this instance; but in “The Part About the Crimes,” it does move repeatedly, implacably, toward a state of unnarratable horror.

## II

In the traditional detective novel, by solving the crime and identifying the criminal, the narrative serves to “quarantine” criminality and reestablish a sense of social order. This stability may have been momentarily threatened by the discovery of the crime itself, but by locating (and ultimately punishing) the criminal, the narrative restores the social status quo and reassures us that such disruptive forces can be easily contained. According to Franco Moretti, the perfect crime, which constitutes the “nightmare of detective fiction,” is the “featureless, deindividualized crime that anyone could have committed because at this point everyone is the same.” Classic detective fiction, however, serves to “dispel the doubt that guilt might be impersonal, and therefore collective and

social” (135). Or to put it another way, by demonstrating that crime is “always *voluntary*, always *individualized*” (137), by concentrating criminality within the figure of the criminal, detective fiction absolves society of all responsibility for the crime—it produces or reinforces a sense of social innocence. In *The Novel and the Police*, D. A. Miller makes a similar point with reference to the production of meaning within such narratives. At the beginning of a detective novel, the discourse is saturated with potential significance; anything and everything may carry investigatory value, may constitute a “clue.” Moreover, any character (even the narrator in rare cases) may be guilty of the crime that is being investigated. At the end of the novel, though, when the detective offers his or her final summation, all of these “hypothetical significances [...] are simultaneously dissolved,” and we discover that only a fraction of the narrative’s signifiers carry any real value. Everything and everyone else lapses into a state of irrelevance (which is also, of course, a state of innocence). “It is often argued,” Miller writes,

that the detective story seeks to totalize its signifiers in a complete and all-encompassing order. On the contrary, it is concerned to restrict and localize the province of meaning; to guarantee large areas of irrelevance. One easily sees, moreover, what else is guaranteed in such a form. For as the fantasy of total relevance yields to the reality of a more selective meaningfulness, the universality of suspicion gives way to a highly specific guilt. (34)

Yet in 2666 we are offered no such assurances. For one thing, the discourse refuses to distinguish between those signifiers (or clues) that contribute something of value to the narrative and those that are merely inessential catalyzers.<sup>5</sup> Is it significant that one of the dead women was carrying an ID card belonging to someone else (391)? Does the fact that another victim was wearing a gold ring inscribed with the name of a local English academy mean anything (423)? What are we to make of the fact that a third was found “in a place where it wasn’t unusual to see small drug planes land” (507)? These “clues,” along with so many others, remain unresolved; they could mean something, or they could mean nothing at all. It is simply impossible for the reader, or the various detective figures within the novel, to ascertain one way or the other. And as Miller notes, this inability to “localize the province of meaning” also makes it impossible for us to “individualize” the crimes. Although the culprit occasionally turns out to be a husband or boyfriend, ninety percent of the murders in 2666 remain unsolved—meaning that anyone (or, worse still, everyone) could be responsible for these atrocities.

Unfortunately, in Juárez, this is indeed the case. The crimes cannot be solved, or individualized, because they are, in many ways, collective—a consequence of a quite specific combination of social, historical, and economic forces. Sergio González Rodríguez has described this collective entity as a “femicide machine,” one that fatally combines the misogyny and machismo embedded within Mexican society, the criminality and violence of the various drug cartels, the complicity and indifference of the authorities, and the economic, social, and infrastructural conditions created by the *maquiladoras* (following the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement [NAFTA] in 1994). According to González Rodríguez, the femicides in Juárez are ultimately a consequence of a “misogynistic furor that escalated from an isolated crime to a collective ravaging” (72). And it is this very quality—the collective, systemic nature of the crimes—that Bolaño emphasizes in Part Four of 2666. Why else would there be so many corpses in this section, so many “clues,” so many crime scenes, and yet no one in particular to blame for what has been happening, no specific individual (or even group of people) who can assume responsibility for the femicides?

As suggested earlier, this inability to individualize the crimes also has narratological consequences, as it significantly undermines the novel’s narrativity. If you remember, the term “narrativity” not only designates “the quality of *being* narrative,” the various properties that distinguish narratives from non-narratives, but also describes “the set of optional features that make narratives more prototypically narrative-like, more immediately identified, processed, and interpreted as narratives” (Prince 387; my italics). And one of these optional features, one of the discursive qualities that determines a story’s narrativity, is the degree of closure we are offered as it concludes. Does the discourse simply terminate, without illuminating any of the foregoing, or does it provide the kind of

closure—the kind of immediately recognizable “ending”—that we would typically associate with a readerly or “classic” narrative? As readers of such narratives, Peter Brooks argues, citing Barthes, we are motivated by “*la passion du sens*,” which he translates as both “the passion *for* meaning and the passion *of* meaning: the active quest of the reader for those shaping ends that, terminating the dynamic process of reading, promise to bestow meaning and significance on the beginning and the middle” (19). In 2666, however, we are denied the sense of unity and plenitude that the termination of (readerly) discourse ordinarily provides. If a single culprit were to be identified, everything we have been reading—all the disparate particles of meaning—would suddenly converge and cohere; but instead the termination of the discourse on page 633 of “The Part About the Crimes” precedes (and thus precludes) closure, creating a strong sense of potential interminability. As we arrive at the end of the section, that is to say, we become aware that the conclusion we have been offered is largely arbitrary and that the narrative we have been reading is simply incapable of achieving genuine closure. The bodies will continue to be discovered, the “clues” will continue to accumulate, but the “story” itself will never come to an end—for as González Rodríguez observes, the collective nature of the “femicide machine” ensures its continued dominance and guarantees its “unending reproducibility” (11).

The sheer abundance of corpses we encounter in 2666 also induces another form of narrative necrosis. Not only does it preclude the possibility of narrative closure (and, in so doing, raise the specter of interminability and non-meaning), but it also serves to stifle the novel’s proairetic code, leaving us with very little in the way of genuine narrativity. The “proairetic” is a term that Barthes uses to describe the “logico-temporal” (*S/Z* 204) sequences of action and behavior that structure literary narratives. Such sequences, he argues, can be easily categorized under certain generic titles. In the case of the detective novel, for instance, we typically find sequences that could be labeled “abduction,” “murder,” or “investigation”; and at the intersection of all of these, we often discover a dead body—one that either initiates or concludes a proairetic sequence that is, in some way, essential to the diachronic unfolding of the narrative. For this reason, to use Barthes’ terminology once more, we might describe the corpses we encounter in detective fiction as embodied “nuclei.” In his classic essay “Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives,” Barthes distinguishes between two different types of narrative function. On the one hand, we have plot nuclei (those occurrences that “constitute [the] real hinge points of [a] narrative”), while on the other hand, we have catalyzers (those occurrences that “merely ‘fill in’ the narrative space separating the [nuclei]”) (265). As the discovery of the corpse in a detective novel is an indispensable feature of the narrative itself and determines much of what follows, it clearly qualifies as a nucleus. For a function to be described in this way, Barthes writes, “it is enough that the action to which it refers open (or continue, or close) an alternative that is of direct consequence for the subsequent development of the story, in short that it *inaugurate or conclude an uncertainty*” (265; my italics). And, of course, this is precisely the function a dead body serves in a detective novel: it initiates a proairetic sequence (one that might be labeled “investigation”), which in turn creates multiple “sub-sequences” (“autopsy,” “inquiry,” “interrogation,” etc.); it inaugurates an uncertainty that will itself generate much of the novel’s narrativity; and it creates a center of gravity around which the various catalyzers (or clues), genuine or false, are obliged to revolve.

In 2666, however, things are not quite so simple. Whereas in a typical detective novel we might have one body (or even several if the culprit is a serial killer), in “The Part About the Crimes,” as mentioned above, we have a grand total of 110—which also means that we have 110 plot nuclei, 110 proairetic sequences, 110 potential plotlines, 110 “uncertainties,” and 110 centers of narrative gravity. On the face of it, this would seem to guarantee an abundance of narrativity; but, in fact, the reverse is true. With so many corpses, and thus so many proairetic sequences, it becomes impossible for all of them to be resolved (or even investigated) adequately. Instead, the overwhelming majority of the novel’s proairetic sequences dissolve into a welter of inessential catalyzers or “clues,” whose functionality, with regard to the “nucleus” of the corpse itself, is “attenuated, unilateral, [and] parasitic” (Barthes, “Introduction” 266). On almost every page, another dead body is discovered, another



proairetic sequence initiated, but only one or two of these “uncertainties” are ever resolved—thereby depriving the corpses themselves of any real functionality as nuclei and ensuring that the minimal degree of narrativity they do produce ultimately comes to nothing.

The consequences of this narrative necrosis are, in fact, even more severe than might appear to be the case, for as Tzvetan Todorov has argued, every detective novel is composed of not one but two narratives. We have the story of the crime and the story of the investigation, with the former obviously preceding the latter as it is the first narrative that makes the second one possible—or necessary—and the second narrative that makes the first one legible. Indeed, the sole purpose of the second narrative is to uncover the first one, the story of the crime, which is revealed only by following the various clues (the “traces” left behind by the first narrative) back to their original source. Or to put it another way, as Todorov does, we might characterize “these two stories by saying that the first—the story of the crime—tells ‘what really happened,’ whereas the second—the story of the investigation—explains ‘how the reader (or the [detective]) has come to know about it’” (“Typology” 44–45). In many such narratives, the corpse of the murder victim provides the point of intersection between the two stories, for it is typically the dead body itself that both concludes the first narrative and inaugurates the second. As the reader may have anticipated, however, *2666* does not conform to this particular generic convention. On the contrary, as almost none of the proairetic sequences initiated by the discovery of the bodies are allowed to accrue any real substance, we are consistently denied the possibility of uncovering the first narrative (the story of the crime). Instead, we find ourselves confronting the same dispiriting phrases over and over again: “the case was soon closed” (390), “both cases soon hit a wall” (455), “[t]he case remained unsolved” (462), “[the investigation] was soon neglected and forgotten” (501), “[t]he case was soon shelved” (526), and so on. With each of these terminal phrases, then, not one but two narratives are killed off; and over the course of the entire section, this necrosis ultimately eliminates around two hundred proairetic sequences, two hundred potential plotlines, leaving only the dead tissue of inessential catalyzers in their place.

### III

Repetition is, of course, an integral component of all narratives—and, as we have seen, it is particularly pronounced in Part Four of *2666*, which is structured around the horrific seriality of the femicides in Santa Teresa (Juárez). But precisely what kind of repetition do we encounter here, and how does it contribute to the narrative necrosis we have been discussing thus far? In *Narrative Discourse*, Gérard Genette has drawn a useful distinction between the type of repetition that involves “narrating *n* times what happened *n* times” (e.g., “Monday I went to bed early, Tuesday I went to bed early, Wednesday I went to bed early, etc.”) (115) and the type that narrates at one time “what happened *n* times,” thus providing a more economical alternative to the former. When “repeating phenomena” occur in a story, Genette writes, “the narrative is not by any means condemned to reproduce them in its discourse as if it were incapable of the slightest effort to abstract and synthesize; in fact, [it] will in this case find a sylleptic [i.e., combinatory] formulation such as [...] ‘every day of the week I went to bed early’” (116). The first of these techniques he defines as “singulative anaphoric,” while the latter—whereby “a single narrative utterance takes upon itself *several occurrences together*” (116; my italics)—is labeled “iterative.” With reference to Proust, however, Genette also describes a variation of the latter technique, which he refers to as “pseudo-iterative” narration. In *In Search of Lost Time*, he observes,

the singulative scene itself is not immune to a sort of contamination by the iterative. The importance of this mode [...] is further accentuated by the very characteristic presence of what I will call the *pseudo-iterative*—that is, scenes presented, particularly by their wording in the imperfect, as iterative, whereas their richness and precision of detail ensure that no reader can seriously believe they occur and reoccur in that manner, several times, without any variation. (121)

Yet once again 2666 demonstrates a reverse tendency. Rather than contaminating the singulative with the iterative (so that something obviously unique is presented as recursive), it narrates a series of near-identical occurrences (i.e., the discovery of the bodies) in a singulative form—thus generating a mode of narration we might refer to as *pseudo-singulative*. Allow me to explain in more detail what I mean by this, and to do so, in the first instance, by offering an example from *Don Quixote*.<sup>6</sup> In Chapter 20 of *Quixote*, Sancho narrates the story of a goatherd who is obliged to ferry three hundred goats across the Guadiana River in a small fishing boat that can accommodate only one goat at a time:

“The fisherman got into the boat and ferried across a goat; he came back, and ferried another one; he came back again, and again he ferried one across. Your grace has to keep count of the goats the fisherman ferries across, because if you miss one the story will be over and it won’t be possible to say another word. And so I’ll go on and say that the landing on the other side was very muddy and slippery, and it took the fisherman a long time to go back and forth. Even so, he came back for another goat, and another, and another—”

“Just say he ferried them all,” said Don Quixote. “If you keep going back and forth like that, it will take you a year to get them across.”

“How many have gone across so far?” said Sancho.

“How the devil should I know?” responded Don Quixote.

“That’s just what I told your grace to do: to keep a good count. Well, by God, the story’s over, and there’s no way to go on.” [...]

“Do you mean to say that the story is finished?” said Don Quixote.

“As finished as my mother,” [replied] Sancho. (146–47)

Although a passage of this kind could be said to fall under the category of the “singulative anaphoric,” as Sancho is clearly determined to narrate  $n$  times what happened  $n$  times, one could also argue that it constitutes an example of the “pseudo-singulative,” whereby the iterative is contaminated by the singulative (so that something obviously recursive is presented as unique—in this case, three hundred times). Halfway through the story, Don Quixote proposes that his squire employ a form of iterative synthesis or syllepsis (“Just say he ferried them all”), but Sancho refuses to do so, insisting that the iterative be narrated in the manner of the singulative, as if each individual crossing were somehow unique and irreducible (“if you miss [even] one the story will be over”). Returning to 2666, I would like to suggest that the majority of “The Part About the Crimes” is also narrated in a pseudo-singulative mode, one that consistently abnegates the “responsibilities” of iterative synthesis. On page 501, for instance, we encounter what would appear to be an obvious case of syllepsis: “The next dead girl was found between the Casas Negras highway and the bottom of a valley without a name, full of brush and wildflowers. She was the first dead girl or woman found in March 1996, *a terrible month in which five more bodies would be discovered*” (my italics). The narrator then describes in considerable forensic detail the circumstances surrounding the discovery of the first dead girl, creating the impression that she will serve as a representative figure, standing in for or “synthesizing” the other five bodies. But this proves to be deceptive. Instead, the narrator goes on to record, with the same exhaustive attention to detail, the discovery and condition of each individual body—concluding, in every case, with the following (largely interchangeable) phrases: “No one admitted to the murder” (503); “All attempts to identify [the dead girl] were in vain and the case was closed” (503); “The case was [...] soon filed as unsolved” (504); “The case was handled by Inspector Lino Rivera, who [quickly] initiated and exhausted his inquiries” (504); “[The dead girl] wasn’t carrying identification and no one came forward to claim the body, so she was buried, after a reasonable waiting period, in the public grave” (504). Each of these utterances clearly serves as an epistrophic repetition of the simple “case closed” we discussed earlier, but once again the discourse refuses to “economize” by relying on iterative synthesis (e.g., *All five of the cases were soon closed*). To do so would abbreviate or obscure the interminable, recursive nature of the femicides; it would collapse, in this particular instance, five dead bodies into one. And so instead the discourse



consistently operates in the pseudo-singulative mode, repeating the same thing over and over again in order to emphasize both the singularity of each murder, each discovery, each dead girl, and the true scale, the appalling seriality, of these crimes.

I do, however, use the term “pseudo” here quite deliberately, for although each of the dead bodies demonstrates certain individual characteristics (one girl may have had four of her fingers removed [411], another may have been carrying a *maquiladora* ID card when she was found [507]), the iterative ultimately dominates. And it is this repetition, this profound sense of déjà vu, that most severely undermines the novel’s proairetic qualities.<sup>7</sup> As suggested above, repetition is a defining feature of all narratives. This is true even at the most basic level, where we find discourse “repeating” story, or in the case of the detective novel, the investigation retracing the crime.<sup>8</sup> But in order for a fragment of discourse to assume the status of a narrative, this repetition must also accommodate difference, transformation, change, without which we would have little more than a self-replicating, tautological echo. As Todorov argues in a 1969 essay,

Narrative is constituted in the tension of two formal categories, difference and resemblance; the exclusive presence of one of them brings us into a type of discourse which is not narrative. *If the predicates do not change, we are not yet within narrative, but in the immobility of psittacism*; yet if the predicates do not resemble each other, we find ourselves beyond narrative, in an ideal reportage entirely consisting of differences. The simple relation of successive facts does not constitute a narrative: these facts must be organized, which is to say, ultimately, that they must have elements in common. *But if all the elements are in common, there is no longer a narrative, for there is no longer anything to recount.* (“Narrative” 233; my italics)

According to Todorov, then, the very existence of narrative relies on a dialectical interplay between continuity and change, resemblance and difference—the story we are told emerging out of a sequence of events that are connected (but not identical) and discrete (but not unrelated).<sup>9</sup> If you remove either one of these poles, you enter the realm of the non-narrative, where there is simply no story left to tell. As Barthes writes of the haiku, such a “narrative” would be reduced to a state of “pure and sole designation. *It’s that, it’s thus [...] it’s so*” (*Empire* 83). I am not suggesting, of course, that *2666* loses all semblance of narrativity, but the recursive nature of the femicides does bring the novel perilously close, in places, to a non-narrative state, to being a mere recitation of largely identical crimes. Under such circumstances, it becomes increasingly difficult for the reader to distinguish one dead body or crime scene from another—and almost impossible to convert these austere denotative gestures (*it’s that, it’s thus, it’s so*) into something resembling a narrative.

This interplay between identity and difference also characterizes the relationship between the first and last pages of any story. The beginning of a narrative is, after all, intimately related to its conclusion, since each presupposes, enables, and enhances the other. But the beginning is not simply a mirror image of the conclusion; it typically undergoes a process of transformation that is confirmed or “consecrated” by the ending, and this process, this trajectory of change, constitutes the narrative itself. In his discussion of the fantastic as a literary genre, Todorov argues that “[a]ll narrative is a movement between two equilibriums which are similar but not identical.” “Let us say,” he writes by way of example, “that a child lives with his family,” participating in a “microsociety which has its own laws,” but then “something occurs which introduces a disequilibrium [and] thus for one reason or another the child leaves his house.” At the end of this story, “after having overcome many obstacles, the child—who has grown up in the meantime—returns to the family house. The equilibrium is then re-established, but it is no longer that of the beginning: the child is no longer a child, but has become an adult among the others” (*Fantastic* 163). It is this dialectical interplay between continuity and change, framed by “two equilibriums which are similar but not identical,” that constitutes a novel’s narrativity and produces much of its coherence *as a narrative*. When we read a novel, as Jonathan Culler observes, we are required “to organize [and understand] the plot as a passage from one state to another [...] The end must be made a transformation of the beginning so that meaning can be drawn from the perception of resemblance and difference” (259). In “The Part About the Crimes,” however, we are ultimately denied this perception, and denied the sense of

narrativity that such an understanding provides; for the discovery with which Part Four concludes (in 1997) does not differ in any significant way from the discovery that inaugurates the section 280 pages earlier. This scene, from 1993, is described as follows:

The girl's body turned up in a vacant lot in Colonia Las Flores. She was dressed in a white long-sleeved T-shirt and a yellow knee-length skirt, a size too big [...] [Her] name was Esperanza Gómez Saldaña and she was thirteen [...] According to the autopsy, [she] had been strangled to death. There was bruising on her chin and around her left eye. Severe bruising on her legs and rib cage. She had been vaginally and anally raped, probably more than once [...] At two in the morning the examiner concluded the autopsy and left. A black orderly, who had moved north from Veracruz years ago, put the body away in a freezer. (353–54)

And here is the discovery with which the section concludes:

The last case of 1997 was fairly similar to the second to last, except that the [plastic] bag containing the body wasn't found on the western edge of the city but on the eastern edge, by the dirt road that runs along the border [...] The victim, according to the medical examiners, had been dead for a long time. She was about eighteen, five foot two and a half or three. She was naked, but a pair good-quality leather high heels were found in the bag, which led the police to think that she might be a whore [...] Both this case and the previous case were closed after three days of generally halfhearted investigations. (632–33)

It is not uncommon for there to be a certain symmetrical correspondence between the beginning of a narrative and its conclusion; and this symmetry, this quality of resemblance, makes it clear to the reader just how much *has* changed over the course of the narrative. Yet in Part Four of 2666, as you can see, this symmetry is altogether too complete, creating the (perfectly justified) impression that there has been no transformation whatsoever in the intervening four years and 280 pages. At the end of the section, the various detective figures—who scarcely require individuating—are either dead or no closer to solving the crimes than they were at the beginning. The women themselves are still being raped and murdered with the same metronomic regularity. And the numerous social, historical, and economic forces that are ultimately responsible for these crimes (the collective misogyny that permeates the place [cf. 552–54], the criminality and violence of the *narcotráficos*, the complicity of the authorities, etc.) are all unchanged. Earlier, we discussed the significance of the “nucleus,” and the way in which such occurrences are responsible for initiating the various proairetic sequences around which narratives are structured. In Part Four of 2666, however, very few proairetic sequences are able to achieve closure, instead dissolving into a proliferation of descriptive catalyzers, whose functionality or value within the narrative, in many cases, approaches the zero degree. This abundance of catalyzers, I have suggested, induces a kind of narrative necrosis, depriving the discourse of the proairetic substance it requires in order to generate many of the features we would associate with narrativity (“the set of properties characterizing narratives and distinguishing them from non-narratives” [Prince 387]). And this is also why we have an ending that merely replicates the beginning—because the dialectic of resemblance and difference that makes a genuine conclusion possible has been destroyed; because this is a narrative in which closure uncloses and nothing comes to anything; and because both the beginning and the end of Part Four are ultimately arbitrary, neither inaugurating nor concluding the “narrative” they ostensibly frame.<sup>10</sup>

#### IV

In a celebrated essay discussing the relationship between fiction and reality in *Don Quixote*, Jorge Luis Borges refers in passing to an episode from *The Arabian Nights*—one that perfectly demonstrates the unsettling qualities of the *mise-en-abyme*. Roughly halfway through this “fantastic tale that duplicates and reduplicates to the point of vertigo” (Borges 195), the reader encounters a surprising rupture of the narrative frame. “The necessity of completing a thousand and one sections,” Borges writes,

obliged the copyists of the work to make all manner of interpolations. None is more perturbing than that of the six hundred and second night, magical among all nights. On that night, the king hears from the queen his own

story. He hears the beginning of the story, which comprises all the others and also—monstrously—itsself. Does the reader clearly grasp the vast possibility of this interpolation, the curious danger? That the queen may persist and the motionless king hear forever the truncated story of the *Thousand and One Nights*, now infinite and circular. (195)

One could certainly argue that “The Part About the Crimes” creates a similar, equally terrifying, sense of narrative circularity. If there really is nothing to distinguish the beginning from the end, the “first” victim from the “last,” then we do indeed confront the possibility that the narrative may continue indefinitely, tracing and retracing the same horrific circle. But I don’t quite see it that way. I believe that the sense of interminability generated by the discourse emerges out of the recursive and ever-proliferating nature of the femicides themselves—and out of the narrative necrosis that is ultimately induced by these crimes. As I have suggested above, this necrosis fatally compromises the narrativity of Part Four, if not the entire novel, and thus serves as a discursive correlative for the decomposing bodies it describes. In other words, what we have here is not so much a narrative as a catalogue; and it is my understanding that catalogues are not always required to conclude. One entry can follow another indefinitely—forever, if necessary—and Part Four of 2666 creates the impression that it is merely a *fragment* of just such a catalogue, a citation of a much longer litany of appalling crimes. Unfortunately, this feeling is confirmed by the real-world referent of Juárez itself, which is always shimmering just beyond the representational range of Bolaño’s novel. The section we have been discussing, “The Part About the Crimes,” finishes in 1997 with the discovery of an unidentified corpse on the eastern edge of the city; but as I have noted, it could really have concluded anywhere—even yesterday, *my* yesterday, 27 June 2017. For as I was writing this very page, it was reported in *El Diario de Juárez* that a fifteen-year-old girl had gone missing while walking to school in Las Haciendas, a suburb located on the southern edge of the city (“Piden”). And this is not a unique occurrence these days, either; twenty years after the conclusion of “The Part About the Crimes,” women are still disappearing in Juárez, and their dead bodies continue to be discovered. By refusing to provide the satisfaction (and consolation) of closure, then, 2666 gestures toward a future in which such palliatives are simply no longer available—a future in which children are found dead in drainage pipes or half-buried in plastic bags, and the only response literature can offer is a fatalistic “*It’s that, it’s thus, it’s so.*”

## Notes

1. *El Diario*, a local Juárez newspaper, has estimated that 878 women were killed between 1993 and 2010 (qtd. in Gupta), while at the higher end of the scale, Julia Estela Monárrez Fragoso, a social science researcher at El Colegio de la Frontera Norte in Juárez, writes that “[b]etween 1st January 1993, and 15th November 2012, 1,481 feminicides [...] were registered” (qtd. in Driver 5).
2. In *Roberto Bolaño’s Fiction: An Expanding Universe*, Chris Andrews provides a useful comparison between the catalogue of bodies found in 2666 and González Rodríguez’s *Huesos en el Desierto* (Bones in the Desert, 2002), a journalistic account of the femicides that occurred in Juárez during the same period. Andrews identifies 73 correspondences between the real and the fictional cases (in addition to common features such as evidence of sexual abuse). But the most significant detail revealed by his comparison is the fact that “if we include Perla Beatriz Ochoterena among the fictional victims (since her suicide is connected to the murders: she leaves a note referring to ‘all those dead girls’ [2666 517]), their number *exactly* matches that of the real victims in Juárez [during these] years [i.e., 110].” In conclusion, Andrews provides the following summary: “Total murders in 2666: 109 (case 71 is a suicide). Unsolved: 98 (90 percent). Solved: 11 (10 percent [...])” (229). For more on the correspondence between Bolaño and González Rodríguez, see Valdes.
3. By approaching 2666 from a more formal or structural perspective, my discussion in the following pages will differ from much of the existing critical discourse on the subject (although Shaj Mathew’s 2016 essay does contain a passing reference to narratology). In an article published in *Modern Language Quarterly*, for instance, Sharae Deckard uses the novel to explore the way in which Bolaño “reformulates realism to interrogate the ideological nature of art and the limits of realism while encoding the conditions of millennial capitalism in the semiperiphery” (351–52). Elsewhere, Sol Peláez argues that 2666 “destabilizes the position of the reader [and the critic] [...] as an *outsider of violence*” (34; my italics). And in *Modern Fiction Studies*, Grant Farred traces the connection between the novel’s representation of the femicides and the “neoliberal postcolonial state” (693).

Although I have found such essays both illuminating and suggestive, I do feel obliged to disagree—respectfully—with Brett Levinson’s suggestion that “[n]arratology, or models for interpretation that operate by delineating narrative structures, would not serve the Bolaño reader well” (178).

4. To trace these correspondences between the actual murders, their fictional representation, and its discursive consequences, is not, of course, to trivialize the crimes themselves. It is merely to suggest that such atrocities, which ultimately defy accurate representation, are bound to have a powerful (in this case, distorting) influence over any literary discourse they might generate.
5. The “catalyzer,” a term Roland Barthes uses to describe the “subsidiary notations” whose primary function is to “fill in” narrative space (“Introduction” 265), will be discussed in more detail later.
6. I was reminded of this particular passage while reading Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan’s *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (57) and Genette’s *Narrative Discourse Revisited* (40).
7. In his comparison between the femicides in 2666 and those recorded in González Rodríguez’s *Huesos en el Desierto*, for instance, it is significant that Chris Andrews should have chosen not to mention certain obvious similarities. Features such as “evidence of vaginal and anal rape,” he writes, “have not been regarded as sufficient basis for a correspondence [to be registered]” (229). And this is the case not because they are unusual or sporadic, but because they are so common as to make such a comparison unnecessary.
8. The distinction I am drawing here, between story (what is told) and discourse (the way it is told), may well be a familiar one.
9. As Paul Ricoeur has observed, the same dialectical interplay also makes figurative language possible. “[T]he conceptual structure of resemblance,” he writes, “opposes and unites identity and difference [...] [M]etaphor reveals the logical structure of ‘the similar’ because, in the metaphorical statement, ‘the similar’ is perceived *despite* difference, *in spite of* contradiction. Resemblance, therefore, is the logical category corresponding to the predicative operation in which ‘approximation’ (bringing close) meets the resistance of ‘being distant.’ In other words, metaphor displays the work of resemblance because the literal contradiction preserves difference within the metaphorical statement; ‘same’ and ‘different’ are not just mixed together, they also remain opposed. Through this specific trait, enigma lives on in the heart of metaphor. In metaphor, ‘the same’ operates *in spite of* ‘the different’” (232).
10. On the first page of the section, the narrator explicitly acknowledges the arbitrary manner in which both the narrative and the murders themselves have been framed: “[In 1993] the killings of women began to be counted. But it’s likely there had been other deaths before. The name of the first victim was Esperanza Gómez Saldaña and she was thirteen. Maybe for the sake of convenience, maybe because she was the first to be killed in 1993, she heads the list. Although surely there were other girls and women who died in 1992. Other girls or women who didn’t make it onto the list or were never found, who were buried in unmarked graves in the desert or whose ashes were scattered in the middle of the night, when not even the person scattering them knew where he was” (353–54).

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