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Meaning Out of Nothing: A Penta-Dimensional Framework to Understand the Femicides of
Roberto Bolaño's *2666* as Evidence for the (Non-)Existence of God

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“I could never know to what degree I was the perpetrator,
configuring the configurations around me.”

--Witold Gombrowicz, *Cosmos*

I. Introduction

At the heart of Roberto Bolaño's conceptual vocabulary is the void. Scott Esposito interprets the void as taking "as many forms as humans can find ways to be evil, or forgotten." Ryan Williams suggests that the void represents "the fundamental human fear of death, extinction, and oblivion." Beyond these, interpretations of the void are limited and the means by which existing interpretations have been reached lack delineation. Studies of Bolaño tend to focalize other aspects of his work—for instance, its political or economic dimensions—in evasion of what one could call its conceptual center. Esposito recognizes this center when he writes, "There is a void at the center of all of Roberto Bolaño's work." This center could also be the "hidden center" to which Ignacio Echevarría refers in "Note to the First Edition" of *2666* when he writes, "In one of his many notes for *2666*, Bolaño indicates the existence in the work of a 'hidden center,' concealed beneath what might be considered the novel's 'physical center'" (896). This essay fills an exegetical lacuna by providing an interpretation of the void and suggesting that the void functions as the "hidden center" of the novel. Using an understanding of its ideological bent, I argue that *2666* construes Santa Teresa as a void and that this void stands for five things: nothingness, no-God (the non-existence of God), evil, coincidence, and chaos. Based on a paradox inherent to the claim that Santa Teresa is a void, I argue that the novel also suggests an alternative paradigm, in which the void represents thing-ness (or a state of being opposed to the void), the existence of God, goodness, fate, and order.

Moreover, I use my interpretation of the void to center a five-part analysis of the novel in order to understand the feminicides of Santa Teresa as an ideological apocalypse, and to ground a discussion of what I argue is a major ideological concern of *2666*—the existence of God. Using the opposing paradigms that the novel offers, I suggest that nothingness, no-God, evil,

coincidence, and chaos form a penta-dimensional framework through which to understand the feminicides of Santa Teresa as the products of coincidence, which, in turn, evidences the non-existence of God, evil, and a chaotic world, and justifies the conception of Santa Teresa as a void. By contrast, I suggest that the paradigm of thing-ness, the existence of God, goodness, fate, and order allows for an understanding of the feminicides as the products of fate, which supposes the existence of God, is good by association with God, suggests an ordered world, and suggests that Santa Teresa is not a void. By drawing a comparison between the novel's portrayal of the feminicides of Santa Teresa and the Apocalypse of the Book of Revelation, I suggest that the latter acts as an ideological precedent for the former and thus that the novel favors an understanding of the feminicides in accordance with the paradigm of thing-ness, God, goodness, fate, and order. However, I also note the fluidity between coincidence and causality (fate), in which the former in great quantity (as 109 deaths are) can appear to be the result of the latter. Given that coincidences can appear to be fate and that fate can be the appearance of many coincidences, I ask whether God is a semblance, the product of a large set of coincidences disguised as fate. I end by discussing Bolaño's use of religious symbols to understand modern catastrophe and by claiming that Bolaño diagnoses the totality of the modern condition as manifesting a dissonance between being and knowing.

II. The Void

Leucippus provides a useful definition of the void as not-being. He believes that "The void is a *not-being*, and no part of what *is* is a *not-being*; for what *is* in the strict sense of the term is an

absolute plenum” (emphasis original; Aristotle 21).¹ Discussing the impossibility of motion in a plenum, given that there is no void, Leucippus contends that the void exists on the basis that it is necessary for motion; matter, or that which is, cannot move if there is no void (that which is not) through which it can move. By reasoning that, for matter to move, the void (or empty space²) must exist through which it can move, Leucippus rejects a conception of matter as everything and suggests the existence of nothingness.³ In his view, matter can be every thing but it cannot be a no-thing, though no-things exist. Leucippus’s definition of the void as “not-being” emphasizes existence and non-existence and serves as a launching point for a consideration of the existence of God and, paired with an understanding of 2666’s ideological tenor, a qualitative assessment of what God’s existence or non-existence means. In this section, I ground an interpretation of the void in a discussion of its theological and philosophical significance and argue that the void serves as the conceptual center of the novel. I end by formulating two pentadimensional frameworks, based on my interpretation of the void, which I use to frame an understanding of the feminicides of Santa Teresa.

The novel complicates the notion of the void by linking it to the concepts of coincidence and God, which, in conjunction with the idea of the void, form the base of an interpretive framework to understand the femnicides of Santa Teresa. A single line from a conversation

¹ None of Leucippus’s texts survive; the quote comes from Aristotle, who attributes it to Leucippus.

² My use of the term “empty space” is problematic as certain definitions of “empty space” distinguish it from the void. For the lack of a better term, I use it advisedly.

³ “‘Thing,’ in its most general sense, is interchangeable with ‘entity’ or ‘being’ and is applicable to any item whose existence is acknowledged by a system of ontology, whether that item be particular, universal, abstract, or concrete” (Honderich 915). The interchangeability of thing and being, and the contingency of a thing on its existence shows that Leucippus’s definition of the void as not-being is compatible with an understanding of the void as not-thing-ness, or nothingness, inasmuch as the being or thing-ness of matter requires non-being or nothingness to move; being is equated with things and non-being is equated with nothingness.

between Piero Morini and Edwin Johns reveals this interpretive construction, suggesting an understanding of God as an everything-ness. It reads, “Coincidence, if you’ll permit me the simile, is like the manifestation of God at every moment on our planet” (90). The word “manifestation” is key because it denotes material (visible⁴) presence, which suggests that God is a something-ness (the materiality of God indicates His thing-ness or being) at every moment on our planet, which is a temporal everything-ness. Moreover, one of God’s attributes is omnipresence.⁵ If God is omnipresent and He is manifested in every moment, which is to say He is given material presence everywhere in every moment, then the novel characterizes God by His spatio-temporal everything-ness; God exists as something-ness everywhere in every moment. By occupying all of space and time, God is everything. If we presume that God is everything and that God is good, then we must also presume that nothingness or not-being is evil on the grounds that goodness and evil are antitheses. Because evil is antithetical to good, which is an attribute of God, and because God is everything, evil must, by opposition to good, be nothingness by opposition to God. The everything-ness that the excerpted line makes of God suggests that God is good and also establishes the antithetical relationship between the everything-ness of God (and goodness) and the nothingness of evil.

The novel pairs an understanding of the void as nothingness or not-being with the belief that God is everything and that therefore the opposite of God (no-God) is nothing. It thereby suggests that goodness, being an attribute of God, is everything and that evil, being the antithesis of goodness, is nothing. By creating these alliances, the novel cultivates an understanding of the

⁴ The Oxford English Dictionary defines “manifest” as “To make (a quality, fact, etc.) evident to the eye or to the understanding; to show plainly, disclose, reveal. Also *refl.*, esp. of supernatural beings.”

⁵ The Oxford English Dictionary defines “omnipresent” as “Present in all places at the same time.”

void as a representation of nothingness, no-God, and evil. Put to Leucippus's model of everything (being) and nothingness (not-being), everything becomes God and nothingness becomes evil.⁶ The equation of evil to nothingness allows the reader to interpret the void as the manifestation of evil.⁷

The novel suggests that Santa Teresa is a void, evil in nature and without God, through the invocation of the void/abyss⁸ in image and narrative structure, and through the foregrounding of absences of information. Images of people on the edge of the abyss recur throughout the novel. For instance, in "The Part about the Critics," Morini has a dream in which "He rolled the wheelchair to the edge of the pool. Only then did he realize how enormous it was. It must have been at least a thousand feet wide and more than two miles long, calculated Morini. The water was dark and in some places there were oily patches, the kind you see in harbors" (46). The abyss goes unnamed in this section, which continues for another page; however, while it is not named, its invocation is clear. The dimensions of the pool, "a thousand feet wide and more than two miles long," resemble an abyss more than anything else. It is also important to note that the Abyss of biblical imagination serves as the vessel for the primordial waters.⁹ The fact that Morini stares into an abyss filled with water suggests a connection between the Abyss and the pool. The pool of Morini's dream invokes the abyss through its physical resemblance to it, in terms of size

⁶ This model is troublesome as it presumes that God has a material form and that evil has no material form, which is a notion that the novel contradicts. The novel later corrects this idea through paradox.

⁷ I recognize the contradiction.

⁸ Later in this essay, I argue that the abyss is an iteration of the void, representing the same things: nothingness, evil, no-God, coincidence, and chaos.

⁹ "And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters" (*King James Version*, Gen. 1:2).

and function as a vessel for water. Later in his dream, when the pool drains,¹⁰ Morini encounters an “evil” Liz Norton, who tells him, “There’s no turning back” (47). The shared association of evil (attributed to Norton) with the abyss and evil with the void anticipates my argument that the void is the abyss.

The above instance of the abyss is not isolated; the abyss recurs in image throughout the novel. However, the instances are linked by a descriptive consonance, suggesting that, though abysses appear multiple times, each one represents a single, common abyss. In one such recurrence, Klaus Haas dreams that he is on the edge of an abyss. The passage reads:

In his dreams he saw himself walking the corridors of the prison, the different cell blocks, and he could see his eyes like a hawk’s as he strode that labyrinth of snores and nightmares, aware of what was going on in each cell, until suddenly he could go no farther and he came to a stop at the edge of an abyss (since the prison of his dreams was like a castle built on the edge of a bottomless abyss). There, unable to retreat, he lifted his arms, as if beseeching the heavens (which were as dark as the abyss), and tried to say something to a legion of miniature Klaus Haases, speak to them, warn them, impart advice, but he realized, or for an instant he had the impression, that someone had sewn his lips shut.... Then he felt very tired and curled up on the edge of the abyss and fell asleep. (488)

The passage situates Haas at the edge of “a bottomless abyss,” this time naming it. As in Morini’s dream, the text indicates that moving away from the abyss is impossible (Haas is “unable to retreat”; Norton tells Morini “There’s no turning back”), which further connects the

¹⁰ An omen in itself; the emptying of the abyss suggests a catastrophe such as the Flood, an apocalyptic event, in and of itself: “In the six hundredth year of Noah’s life, in the second month, the seventeenth day of the month, the same day were all the fountains of the great deep broken up, and the windows of heaven were opened” (Gen. 7:11).

pool of Morini's dream to the abyss of Klaus's. The similarity of description between the two instances of the abyss suggests that, though multiple abysses occur throughout the novel, a single abyss, which recurs in description, symbolically unifies the narratives of the disparate characters and conceptually centers the novel.¹¹

By repeatedly depicting scenes with characters on the edge of the abyss, the novel hints at its greater investment in conceiving of Santa Teresa as the void. It also invokes this conception formally. An analysis of narrative structure demonstrates the ways in which the novel structurally embodies the image of the person on the edge of the abyss and creates the impression of a void at the center of the text. The novel has no protagonist(s), or, as Grant Farred suggests in "The Impossible Closing: Death, Neoliberalism, and the Postcolonial in Bolaño's *2666*," it has "hundreds of protagonists" (702); yet it lacks a consistent cast of characters whose desires motivate the plot to its end. As Catherine Grall notes in "2666 by Roberto Bolaño: fiction as an attempt to travel between worlds," "most of the characters do not really have a story" (484). Rather, the characters act as satellites, converging on the geographic site of Santa Teresa. The endings of each of the parts of the novel attest to this notion. Part I ends with Jean-Claude Pelletier and Manuel Espinoza next to the pool (a pool that recalls the pool of Morini's dream) of

¹¹ The passage also recalls the concluding scene of *Amulet*, in which Auxilio Lacouture watches a crusade of children as they march into an abyss. It reads:

And I realized that the shadow sweeping the broad field was a multitude of young people, an interminable legion of young people on the march to somewhere.... I held out both hands, as if imploring the sky to let me embrace them, and I shouted, but my shout was lost among the heights and did not reach down into the valley. (181-2)

In the scene, which is non-literal, Lacouture tries to stop the "legion of young people"—in the way that Haas attempts to "speak to" and "warn" the "legion of miniature Klaus Haases"—but finds herself unable to reach them, effectively mute, as Haas is rendered by his sewn-lips. The repetition of the word "legion" and the stances of the characters (both stand with their arms outstretched) mirror the two narratives. The recurrence of the images across novels suggests that the abyss forms a conceptual center for Bolaño's oeuvre.

a hotel in Santa Teresa. Part II ends with Óscar Amalfitano in Santa Teresa and describes a dream of his, in which he talks to Boris Yeltsin on the edge of a giant “crater “ or “latrine,” a thinly disguised abyss (228). Narratively, Part III ends with an encounter between Oscar Fate, Rosa Amalfitano, Guadalupe Roncal, and Haas, in a Santa Teresa prison. Part IV ends and takes place almost entirely in Santa Teresa. After detailing Hans Reiter’s life, Part V ends, and thus ends the novel, with the words “the next morning he was on his way to Mexico” (893). The fact that each of the narratives of the book ends with its characters in or on their way to Santa Teresa, and in some cases next to an image of the abyss, lends itself to the notion that the characters are drawn to the void, the “immense abyss” “to where the way and all effort has led,” a destiny to which they are bound and from which they often cannot remove (432). The narrative structure of the novel manifests the image of a person standing on the edge of the abyss/void by bringing its characters to the edge of Santa Teresa. Like Haas and Morini who find themselves on the edges of real abysses, the characters of the novel find themselves on the edge of the void of Santa Teresa or on their way there.

2666’s system of self-reference also reveals the nothingness that centers the narrative. In “Peripheral Realism, Millennial Capitalism, and Roberto Bolaño’s *2666*,” Sharae Deckard notes how the novel’s formal composition suggests a structural void at the heart of the text. She writes:

Each of *2666*’s semiautonomous books corresponds to a social or cultural formation in a different geography, but they are not welded into a coherent whole by a plot that resolves the mysteries of the successive sections. Rather, the disparate parts are bound by a web of recurring spectral motifs—voids, rats, hells, cannibals, zombies, dreams—that function like the outward-rippling signs of a black hole, which, though invisible, can be perceived through its distortions of

space time. [i.e., the black hole can be perceived negatively, in difference to others]. Totality can emerge only if each section is understood as a relation catalyzed by the reader's apprehension of how the effects of the Santa Teresa crimes radiate through the rest of the books: the formal corollary of the displacements effected by the structure of a whole on its parts. (369)

The structural comparison to a black hole is intentional and invokes the void by virtue of the black hole's gravitational pull, which draws everything to it (like the abyss/void in the novel), and by its ability to only be apprehended in difference to others ("distortions of space time"). The black hole also recalls the passage that ends "The Part about the Crimes," which reads, "Some of these streets were completely dark, like black holes, and the laughter that came from who knows where was the only sign, the only beacon that kept residents and strangers from getting lost" (633). Here, the black hole serves as a figuration of Santa Teresa and the crimes that it represents. Deckard also notes the repetition of the void as a motif throughout the novel, which, along with the other motifs that she notes, outlines the black hole at its center. The novel achieves this structural impression through a system of symbolic self-reference that requires an apprehension of the totality of the novel in order to perceive the underlying void. Deckard's suggestion to read for "totality" requires a method of reading similar to one espoused by Joseph Frank in "Spatial Form in Modern Literature: An Essay in Two Parts," in which "references must be connected by the reader and viewed as a whole" in order to discern the governing narrative structure (232). In the case of *2666*, mapping the novel's system of reference, which includes voids and abysses, reveals its empty center, the nothingness that forms its core. Deckard suggests that the text employs a novelistic-mode less contingent upon narrative and more contingent upon an understanding of the intricate metaphorical system that constitutes and manifests itself

through the form of the text, and which, once apprehended, reveals the centrality of the void to the novel.

The lack of explanation for the feminicides points to another void, this one a void of information. Nothingness, or the absence of anything out of which to make meaning, governs the novel in the sense that the cause of the feminicides, in general, is never learned. In “666 Twinned and Told Twice: Roberto Bolaño’s Double Time Frame in 2666,” Margaret Boe Birns notes the formal techniques that contribute to this sense, writing, “the relentless, flat affect of the narrative tone, the deadening cumulative power of the mounting murders, and the general passivity of community response all serve to turn the reader away from any expectation that ‘The Part about the Crimes’ will shape itself into a crime novel with a solution as its outcome” (73). The lack of solution to the crimes, especially in the detective fiction style of Part IV, underscores the sense of the void in that, where the genre typically seeks and finds answers, this stretch of detective fiction does not provide them, raising more questions instead. The absence of answers reflects the mystique of nothingness that surrounds the feminicides and, as such, permeates the novel.

The void of Santa Teresa is punctuated by the evil that pervades it. Evil is a major theme in 2666. The feminicides of Santa Teresa form the major connective tissue of the book. The murders link the disparate narratives of the book, from the stories of four academics to those of the reporter who goes to Santa Teresa charged to cover a boxing match. The convergence of the characters, though they do not all meet, on a geographic site, which is the site of evil (insofar as the feminicides of the book represent evil), suggests that Santa Teresa is the embodiment of the void, to which the novel’s characters are drawn. If the void is nothingness and nothingness is evil, then the evil of the feminicides of Santa Teresa construes Santa Teresa as a void. This

interpretation is reinforced by the narrative and structural suggestions of the void in the novel, discussed above.

However, the idea that Santa Teresa is a void represents a logical conundrum. Because the void is nothingness or not-being, the thing-ness or being of the void as Santa Teresa contradicts the nature of nothingness. In other words, the suggestion that Santa Teresa is a void is a paradox because Santa Teresa is something. While Santa Teresa is the nothingness of the void, Santa Teresa is also the something-ness of Santa Teresa. An explanation that accounts for this disparity by claiming the figurative nature of the void is unsatisfying because it posits as unreal or metaphorical (figurative) an evil with real consequences (evil takes the material form of female corpses). Yet the question remains how to reconcile the void of Santa Teresa to the nothingness of the void and how to derive meaning from this paradox.

The novel undermines a clean interpretation of the void by realizing the paradox inherent to any claim that the void is. Instead of accepting the notion that the void represents evil, the novel gives it the form of Santa Teresa in contradiction of its defined non-being. This paradox can be represented grammatically by the verb “to be,” which indicates the existence of a thing or things. If nothingness is evil, then nothingness is something; it is evil. The use of the verb “to be” to define what nothingness is implies that it is something. Were “something” removed, “nothingness is” would still imply that nothingness exists, which, by virtue of existing, makes nothingness something. By imagining Santa Teresa as an embodiment of evil and the void, 2666 makes tangible the otherwise abstract concept of evil.¹² Thus, 2666 contributes a counter-interpretation to this essay’s original interpretation of the void by leveraging the paradox that it manifests. If God is everything and evil is nothingness, but nothingness is something in paradox,

¹² The manifestation of evil is fitting given its concrete consequences in the novel; thus the novel corrects the conception that evil has no material form in the void of Santa Teresa.

then God, being everything and therefore something, is also evil and nothingness and the void. The novel complicates an understanding of everything as God and nothingness as no-God and evil, suggesting through paradox that God is everything as well as nothingness and also, by association, evil.

This paradox reveals the possibility that God, who is at once everything and nothing, exists or does not exist. As the existence of God is associated with His everything-ness and the non-existence of God is associated with nothingness, the simultaneous everything-ness and nothingness of God, who is associated with the everything-ness and nothingness of Santa Teresa, suggests His existence and non-existence. Logically, this paradox makes sense because it assumes that God has an absolute form. A God in everything and a God in nothing, which is to say no-God, are fully saturated states; there exist no others against which to determine philosophical difference.¹³ An absolute state of nothingness is an everything-ness in the sense that nothingness is everything that exists (or does not exist). Likewise, a state of everything-ness is a nothingness in that it represents an absolute state of being with no other state from which to differentiate itself.

Thus, when the novel states that coincidence is like “the manifestation of God at every moment on our planet. A senseless God making senseless gestures at his senseless creatures,” it is also suggesting that God, who is a spatio-temporal everything-ness and commands arbitrarily (without sense), is the same as no-God, in the first sense that God in everything and no-God are absolute states of (non-)being with no other from which to differentiate, and in the second sense

¹³ According to the Identity of Indiscernibles formulated by Wilhelm Gottfried Leibniz in *Discourse on Metaphysics*, difference refers to the distinction between two non-identical entities, or entities whose properties differ; by contrast, identity refers to the sameness between two entities whose properties are the same (Forrest). The idea that an entity is meaningless without an other from which the entity can differentiate is a structuralist innovation.

that the arbitrariness of the acts of God (what the novel calls coincidence: “A senseless God making senseless gestures at his senseless creatures”) is the same as the arbitrariness of actions occurring independently of God, which is to say the arbitrariness of having no God and no supernatural design, or fate. As such, *2666* calls into question the existence of God by representing a paradox of being, which itself represents a tension between nothingness and thingness, goodness and evil, and fate and coincidence.

A more expansive look at the excerpt that has thus far grounded this essay reveals the paradigms that the novel constructs and embodies. The parts of the passage that I provide are spoken by Edwin Johns:

The whole world is a coincidence.... Suffering is accumulated, said my friend, that’s a fact, and the greater the suffering, the smaller the coincidence.... Coincidence [is] the flip side of fate, and something else besides.... Something my friend couldn’t grasp, for a reason that’s simple and easy to understand. My friend believed in humanity, and so he also believed in order, in the order of painting and the order of words, since words are what we paint with. Coincidence, on the other hand, is total freedom, our natural destiny. Coincidence obeys no laws and if it does we don’t know what they are. Coincidence, if you’ll permit me the simile, is like the manifestation of God at every moment on our planet. A senseless God making senseless gestures at his senseless creatures. (90)

The novel grafts the ideas of nothingness, no-God, and evil onto the idea of coincidence, and the ideas of thing-ness, God, and goodness onto that of fate (coincidence and fate are antitheses, each a “flip side” to the same coin), suggesting that coincidence is either a God in everything who commands arbitrarily (without sense) or a no-God (the non-existence of God), which are the

same in essence. Because coincidence and fate are antitheses, it can be inferred that fate is a God in everything that commands with design and sense.¹⁴ Likewise, if order is attributed to fate, as it is in the passage, then one can infer that disorder/chaos (the antithesis of order) is attributed to coincidence. Thus, the novel offers two penta-dimensional paradigms, each consisting of five areas of qualitative assessment to consider in an analysis of the text.

Paradigm A

1. Void, nothingness, not-being
2. No-God, the non-existence of God
3. Evil
4. Coincidence (which supposes the non-existence of God; or its equivalent, a senseless God in everything)
5. Disorder, chaos

Paradigm B

1. Thing-ness, being
2. God, the existence of God
3. Goodness
4. Fate (which supposes the existence of God or another supernatural being, which, for the sake of this essay, I will call God)
5. Order

In the remaining pages of this essay, I use these paradigms to understand the murders of Santa Teresa in one of the two following ways:

1. As coincidence, in which God does not exist or a God who arbitrarily acts (kills) exists, which are the same in essence, which supposes the existence of evil or an evil God, produces chaos, and justifies the notion that Santa Teresa is a void.
2. As fate, in which God does exist and commands with design (kills with design), which suggests an overarching order to the world, supposes the governance of

¹⁴ For this essay, I assume that fate presupposes the existence of God and discount the notion that fate can be a no-God on the basis of illogicality. I do not do the same for coincidence because of the sentence “A senseless God making senseless gestures at his senseless creatures,” in which the novel suggests that coincidence is like God. Coincidence does not necessarily preclude the existence of God, though it does preclude the existence of a sensible God.

fate, and suggests that Santa Teresa is not a void, given the existence of God and God's design (fate), which is necessarily good because it is of God.

I frame my interpretation of the feminicides of Santa Teresa with the ideas of coincidence and fate because the novel suggests the applicability and appropriateness of such paradigms to the murders. The appropriateness of the coincidence/fate reading comes from the lack of explanation for the feminicides; although the murders seem connected, the novel provides no answers or explanations, thus suggesting that they cannot be explained. The murders, however, share certain details (the presence of black Peregrinos, death by strangulation or stabbing, combinations of vaginal and anal rape, bitten nipples and severed breasts) that, in their relation to identical details in other murders, suggest an understanding of the feminicides as sensible or insensible, fatal or coincidental. The recognition of patterns among the murders suggests causal factors to the reader. My reading of the feminicides with these two frames will either reinforce the notion that no meaning can be gained from them and that they are insensible, or it will subvert such a reading in favor of an understanding of the murders as connected and suggest meaning to the patterns. My reading seeks to answer the question that the novel poses of whether to interpret the similarities between the murders as coincidences or evidence of fate.

An anecdote in the novel represents, albeit in small, the thematic question that I seek to answer in this essay. The story describes a soldier who finds himself lost in a network of tunnels. After wandering for some time, the soldier begins to panic. He stops and falls asleep. While he sleeps, "He dream[s] of God in human form. The soldier was asleep under an apple tree, in the Alsatian countryside, and a country squire came up to him and woke him with a gentle knock on the legs with his staff. I'm God, he said, and if you sell me your soul, which already belongs to me anyway, I'll get you out of the tunnels" (675). The soldier agrees, signs a contract with his blood, and is rescued. However, "Four days later, the soldier who had sold his soul to God was

walking along the street when he was hit by a German car and killed” (676). The anecdote begs the question of whether the soldier’s death is a coincidence or the result of fate, the outcome of his being in the wrong place at the wrong time or of his contract with God. The figuration of God in the anecdote reflects the novel’s grander investment in questioning His existence.

The anecdote is also notable for the meta-textual comment it makes on *2666*. It reads, “He [the soldier] noticed the curious neatness of the nearly immaculate passageways, that is their military usefulness, and he came to the conclusion that they were of absolutely no use and there had probably never been soldiers here” (675). The order of the passageways reads as the neat, catalogue-like organization of the novel’s accounts of the feminicides, which allows for the drawing of connections between the murders. The fact that the soldier chucks the order up to uselessness reflects the conclusion that the novel implies—nothing is solved and no meaning is gained. However, the passage suggests that there is something more beneath the text, and punctuates its suggestion by insinuating the possibility that fate killed the soldier.

III. The Abyss

The abyss recurs as an image and an expressed idea throughout the novel.¹⁵ Birns calls the abyss “The one single image that most intensely unites [Nazi Germany of ‘The Part about Archimboldi’ and Santa Teresa of the other four parts]” (76). In so doing, she identifies the role of the abyss in connecting the novel’s disparate narratives. Occurring with regularity and constituting a major unifying symbol, the abyss stands with the void at the conceptual center of the novel. In this section, I argue that the abyss is an iteration of the void, representing the same

¹⁵ In “Intertextuality and Structure in Roberto Bolaño’s *2666*,” Edwin Turner notes that the word “abyss” appears 22 times throughout the novel. I have discussed two images of the abyss above; other instances can be found on pages 79, 122, and 591, as elsewhere.

things: nothingness, no-God, evil, coincidence, and chaos. I then argue that the abyss, paired with textual clues, invokes the Book of Revelation; with this insight, I interpret the sexual violence of Santa Teresa as the novel's version of Apocalypse and suggest that such an understanding of the feminicides points to the existence of God and fate.

The abyss is mythologically and semantically connected to the void. Genesis 1:2 states that the earth is "void" and "darkness is upon the face of the deep." The pairing combines the void and the abyss, which is rendered as "face of the deep"; the original Hebrew "Tehom" translates to Abyss or "the deep" and refers to the "total inchoate earth" of Genesis 1:2 (Elwell). The use of the word "void" to describe the fully submerged state of the earth in the beginning connects the void to the abyss inasmuch as the former describes the latter. In the verse, "void" is used as an adjective to describe the Abyss, but also describes its own noun-form, the void. By describing both the Abyss and the void, the adjective void connects the void and the abyss as entities which share a descriptor and which both represent a state of non-being or nothingness. Thus, the void and the Abyss are equated semantically in the mythology of Christianity.

The novel also connects the void to the abyss in the form of Santa Teresa. By claiming that Santa Teresa is the void, and given the evil of the feminicides that characterizes Santa Teresa, the novel associates the void with evil. The novel also associates the abyss with evil by invoking the Beast 666 in passages with abysses. For instance, the Beast can be read in the passage, "All that was left on the beach was a mass, a dark form projecting from a yellow pit. For an instant, Pelletier wondered whether he should go down to the beach and bury the mass at the bottom of the hole" (79).¹⁶ The "dark form" is vague, but contextual clues situate Pelletier at the top of a precipice, looking into a pit, from which the "dark form" projects. The description

¹⁶ The Beast can also be read in passages on pages 114, 122, 591, and elsewhere.

describes an abyss.¹⁷ The reader familiar with the Book of Revelation will recall that the Beast “ascendeth out of the bottomless pit”; “bottomless pit” translates into *ábyssos* and *Tehom*,¹⁸ in Greek and Hebrew, respectively (Rev. 11:7). The title of the book also invokes the Beast, suggesting the importance of the Beast to the novel. In Revelation, the Beast is aligned with the Dragon, or Satan, and is thus, by this alliance, opposed to God. Because of this antithetical relationship to God and goodness, the Beast represents the opposite of goodness, evil. The invocation of the Beast throughout the novel, in image and the novel’s title, and the knowledge that the Beast represents evil suggests a connection between the evil of the void and the evil of the Beast. The Beast is often invoked in scenes depicting abysses, situated in the abysses described by the text. The knowledge that the Beast emerges from the abyss extends an understanding of the evil of the Beast to one of the evil of the abyss from which it rises. The equivalence of the evil of the void and the evil of the abyss suggests that the void and the abyss are the same and represent the same things (nothingness, no-God, evil, coincidence, chaos). By this logic, a conception of Santa Teresa as a void is also a conception of Santa Teresa as an abyss.¹⁹

The frequency of abysses and invocations of the Beast in *2666* suggests the importance of Revelation to the novel. Yet the novel communes with the biblical book in subtler, more significant ways. By connecting different aspects of the feminicides of Santa Teresa to the

¹⁷ This notion is corroborated by the fact that the bathers on the beach begin to leave (“A few moved toward the cliff and Pelletier couldn’t see them but he knew they were beginning a slow climb” [79]) and by the fact that the scene described takes place in a dream. These details recall Morini’s dream, in which a woman “head[s] toward the slope of a rock” from inside of the abyss, as if to climb out.

¹⁸ *Tehom*, the reader will remember, translates to *Abyss*.

¹⁹ This justifies my use of the abyss as an image of the void on page seven.

description of Apocalypse in Revelation, I argue that the latter serves as an ideological precedent for the former and that this insight enables a reading of the feminicides as Apocalypse.

The most striking connection between 2666 and Revelation appears in a passage with language evocative of the latter. On a television program with a former customer and a ventriloquist, the seer Florita Almada has a vision. The passage reads:

“A city. She [Almada] said that in this city they killed little girls. As she walked, trying to recall her vision as exactly as possible, she realized she was about to go into a trance and she was mortified, since sometimes, not often, her trances could be violent and end with the medium crawling on the ground, which she didn’t want to happen since it was her first time on television.... she was afraid to close her eyes, since it was precisely when they were closed that she saw what the spirit possessing her saw, so Florita kept her eyes open and her mouth shut[...], watching the ventriloquist, who looked back and forth between her and his dummy, as if he had no idea what was going on but he could smell danger, the moment of revelation, unsolicited and uncomprehended, the kind of revelation that flashes past and leaves us only with the certainty of a void, a void that very quickly escapes even the word that contains it. (436)

The mention of the city in which “they killed little girls” alludes to the city of Babylon, which is allegorized as a whore in Revelation and which is punished as such. Revelation reads, “Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen, and is become the habitation of devils, and the hold of every foul spirit, and a cage of every unclean and hateful bird. For all nations have drunk of the wine of the wrath of her fornication, and the kings of the earth have committed fornication with her” (Rev. 18:2-3). The punishment of the Whore of Babylon for her acts of “fornication” resounds with the

femicides of Santa Teresa, in which the women of the city are punished (or assaulted punitively) by acts of violence, including fornication. Thus, the novel parallels the cities of Santa Teresa and Babylon, the (murdered) women and the Whore of Babylon, and the conditions of fornication that lead to the whore's punishment (and which, in 2666, result as a form of it).

The scene also parallels Revelation in its use of visions. The Book of Revelation records the vision of the Christian prophet John, which came to him by divine imposition.²⁰ In 2666, the seer Almada also has a vision, which she describes on television and which includes the mention of the "city." Both Revelation and the vision of Almada are attained through supernatural means, whether those means be the angel who gives the vision to John or "the spirit possessing [Almada]" (spirit and possession indicating supernatural imposition). The linguistic and thematic parallels between the visions of John and Almada, including the use of divine visions, reinforce the notion of a dialogue between Revelation and 2666.²¹

The mention of the "moment of revelation" further connects Almada's vision to the Revelation of Jesus Christ of John's vision. The fact that the ventriloquist "smell[s] danger, the moment of revelation" while Almada is entranced suggests that Almada's vision, like John's, prophesizes the Apocalypse, if only because the Book of Revelation is intoned through the use of the non-capitalized "revelation." The fact that the moment of revelation "leaves us with only the certainty of a void" brings the novel's conception of evil into the passage, which also suggests a certainty of the Beast, given that the void can be read as the abyss. The connections between the

²⁰ "1The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, to shew unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass; and he sent and signified it by his angel unto his servant John: 2Who bare record of the word of God, and of the testimony of Jesus Christ, and of all things that he saw" (Rev. 1:1-2).

²¹ The fact that Almada suffers from trances with physical ramifications recalls Saint Teresa of Ávila (Santa Teresa's namesake), who "often fell into a trance, and at times entered into mystical flights in which she felt as though her soul were lifted out of her body" (Guiley 318).

two books form an intertextual bridge that suggests that *2666* should be read with an eye toward Revelation.

This literary interplay finds expression in a passage from *Woes of the True Policeman*,²² which supports the idea that Santa Teresa is undergoing an ideological Apocalypse parallel to the Apocalypse of Revelation. It reads:

In his [Pablo Negrete's] vision, Amalfitano was riding one of the horses of the Apocalypse through the streets of Santa Teresa. He was naked, his white hair was wild and bloody, and he was shouting in terror or joy, it wasn't clear which.... As the horseman rode by, the dead piled up in the doorways of the old city. The streets were filled with corpses that decomposed rapidly, as if time were dictated by the fiendishly swift passage of horseman and horse. (193)

Because the Four Horsemen serve as harbingers of the Apocalypse and because the consequences of the Horseman Amalfitano's arrival resonate with language from Revelation ("And their dead bodies shall lie in the street of the great city.... and shall not suffer their dead bodies to be put in graves" Rev. 11:8-9) and because of the fact that dead bodies pile up in *2666* (after Pablo Negrete has his vision, two dead women appear, foreshadowing the deaths of *2666*), it stands to reason that Pablo's premonition is accurate, as it corresponds to an ideological series of events that also seem to occur in Santa Teresa. The accuracy of Negrete's premonition in predicting what follows, according to a biblical precedent, indicates that the feminicides of Santa Teresa, all things considered (the title and invocation of the Beast, parallels between Almada's vision and John's vision of Revelation) is the novel's equivalent to Apocalypse.

²² *Woes of the True Policeman* is often read as a companion piece to *2666*. Though the novels do not intersect perfectly, the passage in consideration prefigures *2666* and maintains fidelity to its narrative. The passage can be read as another indication of what Bolaño wanted to do in *2666*.

IV. The Femicides

Birns diagnoses the type of evil afflicting Santa Teresa as metaphysical when she writes, “the suspicion that hidden, horrible, and metaphysical evil resides in Santa Teresa suggests that what happens in the city defies logical explanation” (76). Birns argues that the metaphysical evil of Santa Teresa makes it difficult (or impossible) to rationalize the femicides of Santa Teresa in a logical way. In this section, I argue that the metaphysical evil that Birns describes requires not the application of secular logic (that is, trying to understand the femicides as the acts of human beings), but of the novel’s own metaphysical logic. As such, I attempt to understand the femicides of Santa Teresa through the metaphysics of the void and the abyss and the symbolic system that they constitute. I argue that a conception of the vagina as an abyss/void, an understanding of gynophobia as a metaphysical epidemic, and the knowledge that men in Santa Teresa conceive of all women as whores inform the reading that the sexual violence of Santa Teresa represents a male reaction to a fear of the abyss and the Beast, but which also, paradoxically, summons it. This reading lends itself to an understanding of the femicides as Apocalypse, which suggests the existence of God.

The novel connects the vagina to the abyss in a passage that reads:

“Then Ramírez talked about women. Women with their legs spread. Spread wide. What do you see when a woman spreads her legs? What do you see? For Christ’s sake, this wasn’t dinner conversation. A goddam hole. A goddam hole. A goddam gash, like the crack in the earth’s crust they’ve got in California, the San Bernardino fault, I think it’s called. (441)

The suggestion that a woman's vagina is like a geological formation, "a crack in the earth's crust," or "the San Bernardino fault" brings to mind the other geological gashes that the novel uses to represent the abyss, such as the pool, the precipice overlooking the pit, the ravine, and the abyss, itself. The tendency of the novel to invoke abysses using geological gashes suggests that a vagina that is likened to "a crack in the earth's crust" is an abyss. Thus, the novel conceives of the vagina as an abyss and also as a void, given that it uses the abyss and the void to represent the same things.

A conversation between Hugo Halder and Hans Reiter later in the novel sexualizes the void when read with the idea that the vagina is an abyss. The conversation reads:

[Hugo Halder:] "It's because I don't have a proper grasp of history and I need to brush up."

"What for?" asked Hans Reiter.

"To fill a void."

"Voids can't be filled," said Hans Reiter.

"Yes, they can," said Halder, "with a little effort everything in this world can be filled." (657)

Whether true or not, the novel posits the idea that voids can be filled. Thus, a conception of the vagina as an abyss supposes that the void of the vagina can be filled. The filling of a vagina suggests a sexual act, which comprises a major aspect of the feminicides.²³ Hence, the pairing of these two passages suggests, at least initially, an understanding of the sexual violence of the feminicides as an attempt to fill the void.

²³ It is important to note that the conversation that posits the idea that voids can be filled takes place between two males who anatomically possess phallic weapons (inasmuch as rape is an act of violence).

Gynophobia helps to explain the feminicides of Santa Teresa as the result of a male epidemic. In the novel, Elvira Campos describes gynophobia, saying, “Or gynophobia, which is fear of women, and naturally only afflicts men. Very widespread in Mexico, although it manifests itself in different ways. Isn’t that a slight exaggeration? Not a bit: almost all Mexican men are afraid of women” (382). The description comes from a long-list of phobias that Campos describes after she identifies a church desecrator known as the Penitent as suffering from sacraphobia, what Juan de Dios Martínez calls a “sickness” (378). The language of disease in the passage and in Juan de Dios Martínez’s understanding of gynophobia and the proportions of affliction (“almost all Mexican men”) that Campos identifies establish an understanding of gynophobia as an epidemic, which causes men, like the church desecrator who urinates in churches and destroys sacred objects in order to “vent rage,” to rape and act in sexually violent ways toward the females whom they fear. The sexual violence of the feminicides offers an explanation for this behavior. The rape that characterizes many of the crimes entails the act of penetration, or the filling of the void of the vagina. If males fear females, then it stands to reason that males would also fear one of the anatomical features that distinguish females from males—the vagina. A fear of the vagina translates to a fear of the abyss, which, as we have determined, represents mythological evil in the form of the Beast and which carries with it suggestions of Apocalypse. The sexual violence of the feminicides can be explained by a male fear of vaginas, or a fear of the abysses/voids of vaginas, which compels the males of Santa Teresa to penetrate females in an attempt to fill the void.

In *Roberto Bolaño’s Fiction: An Expanding Universe*, Chris Andrews connects the concepts of evil and disease, writing, “The ending of *Distant Star* is haunted by the faint suggestion that the ‘absolute evil’ embodied by Wieder may not be simply an isolated freak of

nature, an extreme form of sociopathy, but a metaphysical disease that has already spread by contagion, a kind of evil that is diabolical in the archaic sense of the word” (161). Though the novel under consideration is *Distant Star*, Andrews’s observation applies equally well to *2666*, especially in consideration of the novel’s conceptual investment in evil (femicides) and disease (gynophobia). Andrews’s mention of “disease” and “contagion” in *Distant Star* connects to the passage on gynophobia, which, as I have noted, takes the form of a “sickness” of epidemic proportions. What Andrews suggests here is that the metaphysical evil expressed in *Distant Star*, which also appears in *2666* as represented by the void/abyss, is a sickness that spreads by contagion and which, because of its contagiousness, possesses a wide range of affliction. The parallel to gynophobia, which is also a sickness and which afflicts “almost all Mexican men,” suggests that metaphysical evil takes the form of the sickness of gynophobia. Gynophobia, or a fear of the vagina, which is a fear of the abyss and leads to sexual violence against women in an attempt to fill the void, is the metaphysical evil/sickness that plagues Santa Teresa, an evil which the novel invokes through narrative and structural suggestions of the Abyss, the Beast, and Apocalypse, and which Andrews highlights by qualifying the metaphysical evil of the novel as “diabolical” in the “archaic sense,”²⁴ invoking the devil.

A final point is needed to complete the discussion of the vagina and gynophobia and to form an understanding of the importance of Revelation to reading the femicides of Santa Teresa. In the novel, males consider women whores by default. This generalization appears in a conversation between the reporter Sergio González and a whore; it reads:

One night, after making love with the whore, as they lay smoking in bed, he asked her what she thought about all the kidnappings and all the bodies of women found

²⁴ The Oxford English Dictionary defines “diabolical” as “Of or pertaining to the devil; actuated by or proceeding from the devil; of the nature of the devil.”

in the desert, and she said she had only a vague idea what he was talking about.

Then Sergio told her everything he knew about the dead women.... and as he was talking the whore yawned, not because she wasn't interested in what he was saying but because she was tired, which irritated Sergio and made him say, in exasperation, that in Santa Teresa they were killing whores, so why not show a little professional solidarity, to which the whore replied that he was wrong, in the story as he had told it the women dying were factory workers, not whores.

Workers, workers, she said. And then Sergio apologized, and, as if a lightbulb had gone on over his head, he glimpsed an aspect of the situation that until now he'd overlooked. (465-6)

The "aspect of the situation" that Sergio does not recognize is that the women dying are factory workers, not whores, as he assumes. The passage reveals the underlying assumption of Sergio González, and it is not hard to extrapolate of all males, that women are whores, characterized by sexually vicious (read: vice) acts of fornication. As I note above, in Revelation God punishes the Whore of Babylon for her acts of fornication. In Santa Teresa, women, or "whores," are raped and murdered. The comparison between the Whore of Babylon and the "whores" of Santa Teresa suggests that the femicides are acts of punishment. The discussion of metaphysical evil represented as gynophobia suggests an ouroboric relationship between male fear of evil (in the form of the abyss of the vagina) and the evil that conditions this fear (the contagious metaphysical evil of the sickness of gynophobia). The coincidence of these threads offers an explanation for the sexual violence in keeping with Revelation and an understanding of the femicides of Santa Teresa as the ideological equivalent to Apocalypse.

Revelation 17 connects whores to the Beast by describing the Whore of Babylon as sitting on the Beast. If the vagina is an abyss and if the Beast emerges from the Abyss, then women, having vaginas, represent symbolic vessels out of which the Beast can emerge. The epidemic fear of women is also a fear of the female vagina and thus a fear of the abyss with the mythological weight that it carries. The sexual violence against “whores,” or women, represents an attempt to fill the void/abyss and to negate the void and whatever dangers it represents (the coming of the Beast, for instance). In a city characterized by its crimes against “whores,” a parallel can be drawn between the Whore of Babylon who sits atop the Beast and the whores of Santa Teresa. Male gynophobia, or fear of the abyss, manifests itself as sexual violence. God instructs the people to punish the Whore of Babylon: “so much torment and sorrow give her” (Rev. 18:7) Fearing the coming of the Beast, which would signify Apocalypse, the men of Santa Teresa punish “whores” in accordance with God’s command. In doing so, they also fill the void that, in the novel, represents evil and promises the Beast and Apocalypse. Ironically, the sexual violence of Santa Teresa constitutes the very act of fornication that condemns Santa Teresa as a whore of the type of the Whore of Babylon, who rides the Beast as punishment for “fornication.” When Haas says, “But someone worse than me and worse than the killer is coming to this motherfucking city. Do you hear his footsteps getting closer? Do you?” Birns notes that his words invoke “the death-driven beast of Revelations [*sic*], called down and made manifest by the conditions in Santa Teresa” (Bolaño 506; Birns 80). The conditions of misogyny and criminal impunity in Santa Teresa rouse the Beast. In trying to prevent the coming of 666, the criminals summon it. Of course, male fear of the Beast (and the abyss/void) is the result of the metaphysical evil that causes males to recognize abysses in vaginas and to act in fear against the women who possess them. The novel uses an understanding of the void and all that it represents

to frame an understanding of the feminicides as the result of a metaphysical epidemic, which causes the novel's characters to recognize religious symbols, especially in the form of the vagina, which, in turn, causes them to fear Apocalypse. This epidemic results in the feminicides, which the novel, through its own symbolic system, represents as Apocalypse. That is, the novel understands the feminicides as a catastrophe akin to Apocalypse and adopts a biblical symbolic system, including the void, the Abyss, the Beast, and the Whore, to suggest this reading. Moreover, 2666's understanding of the feminicides as Apocalypse supposes the existence of God and suggests to the reader its preference for the paradigm of thing-ness, God, goodness, fate, and order.

The fact that Revelation comes to John in a vision suggests that it is the predetermined design of God. Even the Beast, which opposes God in alignment with the Dragon, is used as a device by God to punish the Whore of Babylon. An excerpt from Revelation reveals God's design; it reads, "And the ten horns [kings] which thou sawest upon the beast, these shall hate the whore, and shall make her desolate and naked, and shall eat her flesh, and burn her with fire. For God hath put it in their hearts to fulfill his will, and to agree, and give their kingdom unto the beast, until the words of God shall be fulfilled" (Rev. 17:16-7).²⁵ The power to punish the Whore of Babylon using the Beast, an entity otherwise opposed to God, or the horns of the Beast, reflects his design in using evil to fulfill His will. God uses the Beast in Revelation to punish the Whore of Babylon. An understanding of the feminicides of Santa Teresa as the Apocalypse, God's punishment of the Whore of Santa Teresa, suggests that, though the feminicides defy secular explanation, they can in fact be understood, as the novel understands them, as the actions

²⁵ The feminicides of Santa Teresa satisfy all of the descriptions of punishment: women are repeatedly found "desolate and naked"; Marisol Camarena is placed in a drum of corrosive acid, which eats her flesh; Emilia Mena Mena and Silvana Pérez Arjona both show evidence of burns.

of God during Apocalypse or the leveraging of evil forces by God in accordance with his design, or fate.

V. Fate and Coincidence

While the novel suggests an understanding of the feminicides as evidence of fate, the fluid relationship between coincidence and fate makes such a conclusion difficult to come to. In this section, I examine the ways in which the novel confounds a clear reading of the feminicides as the products of fate or coincidence. I argue that it does this by invoking a mathematical paradox by which fate and coincidence blend together. I end by looking at what this uncertainty means thematically for the novel and for the novel's ideological investment in the existence of God.

The fluidity between fate and coincidence is suggested in a passage from *The Savage Detectives* that reads:

[T]he heart of the matter is knowing whether evil (or sin or crime or whatever you want to call it) is random or purposeful. If it's purposeful, we can fight it, it's hard to defeat, but we have a chance, like two boxers in the same weight class, more or less. If it's random, on the other hand, we're fucked, and we'll just have to hope that God, if He exists, has mercy on us. (420)

Andrews notes the lexical closeness of *casual* and *causal*, Spanish for random and purposeful, respectively, writing that they “are anagrams of each other, and their similarity here suggests the difficulty of knowing which one indicates the truth” (159). The observation that the similarity of the words confounds an understanding of the nature of evil anticipates the argument I will make that coincidence and fate share a fluid relationship, which makes it difficult to differentiate each from the other. By suggesting the difficulty of separating random and purposeful evil, posed by

an intentional linguistic choice, Andrews suggests the fluid nature between the two, what I have called coincidence and fate.

The fluidity between coincidence and fate is not only linguistically, but also mathematically expressed. Probability theory states that the greater a set of coincidences, the more it appears that causality exists between events. As Arthur Koestler writes:

The paradox consists, loosely speaking, in the fact that probability theory is able to predict with uncanny precision the overall outcome of processes made up out of a large number of individual happenings, each of which in itself is unpredictable. In other words, we observe a large number of uncertainties producing a certainty, a large number of chance events creating a lawful total outcome (*The Roots of Coincidence* 25).

By noting the way in which a series of independently unpredictable events can create a pattern that suggests predictability or certainty, Koestler reveals how a large set of coincidences can assume the appearance of fate.

In *Causes, Coincidences, and Theories*, Thomas Griffiths offers insight into the ways that this illusion is effected. He defines coincidences as “events that provide support for a hypothesis, but not enough support to convince us to accept that hypothesis” (152). In so doing, he identifies the suggestive relationship between coincidence and causality, in which the former suggests the latter but does not, *per se*, prove it. Griffiths elaborates on this relationship, writing:

Tests of psychokinesis can also be used to illustrate how a change in the likelihood ratio can produce *a transition from mere coincidence, to suspicious coincidence, to evidence [of causality]*: eight heads in a row is a mere coincidence, but sixteen might begin to raise suspicions about your friend’s

powers, or the fairness of the coin. At ninety heads in a row you might, like Guildenstern in Stoppard's (1967) play, begin entertaining the possibility of divine intervention, having relatively unambiguous evidence that something unusual is taking place.²⁶ (emphasis mine; 143-4)

Thus, Griffiths suggests that, while the nature of coincidences precludes their acceptance as evidences of causality, the accumulation of coincidences suggests, with greater strength in greater quantity, causality. When coincidences number sufficiently high to be counted as evidences of causality, they become evidences and are no longer coincidences. The novel poses the question of whether to understand the feminicides of Santa Teresa as the products of coincidence or fate, supposing, given either answer, the four dimensional qualities associated with coincidence or fate, namely: void, no-God, evil, and chaos (for coincidence); and thingness, God, goodness, and order (for fate). An understanding of the relationship between coincidence and causality (fate) as explained by Griffiths suggests that the 109 feminicides that the novel describes can be interpreted as evidence for the existence of fate or the suggestion of fate through a great number of coincidences.

A second-look at a passage from the beginning of this essay shows that the novel seems to state facts about probability theory. It reads, "Suffering is accumulated, said my friend, that's a fact, and the greater the suffering, the smaller the coincidence." (90) Edwin Johns's friend, the person speaking in the excerpt, communicates the nature between coincidence and fate by suggesting that an increase in suffering corresponds to a decrease in coincidence. The friend's statement speaks directly to the novel by using "suffering" as the entity, prefiguring the suffering

²⁶ Griffiths's mention of the "possibility of divine intervention" speaks to a common presumption of those who meet with great coincidence. The greater the number of coincidences, the more likely a person is to consider causality (fate), which supposes God.

caused by the feminicides. The formula that the friend sets up can thus be understood in the context of the novel to mean that the greater the number of feminicides (their “accumulation”), the lesser the feminicides seem to be the result of coincidence and, by opposition, the greater they appear to be the result of fate. While Johns and his friend disagree about whether the world is a coincidence or governed by fate, they agree on an understanding of coincidence as “the flip side of fate,” thus establishing the thematic crux and paradox of a reading of *2666* (90).

By association with the four other aspects of the paradigms, a knowledge of the fluid relationship between coincidence and fate raises questions about the relationship between non-being and being, no-God and God, evil and goodness, and chaos and order. Importantly, the novel questions the existence of God and enables the reader to do so (within the realm of the narrative) based on the evidence or coincidence that has been gathered in reading. Given the fluidity between coincidence and fate, and their associations with no-God and God, respectively, the novel begs the question: Is God a semblance, the product of a large set of coincidences that suggest fate by suggesting causality?

VI. Bolaño, Religion, and Modern Evil

Bolaño was an atheist, and while this piece of information may suggest a reading of the feminicides as coincidences, suggesting in turn the illusion but non-existence of God, I will not advance an interpretation that leans in one direction or the other, for I believe that much of the novel’s value hinges on the uncertainty of answers to the questions it poses. Instead, I will discuss the ways in which Bolaño draws upon religious symbols and ideas to frame an understanding of catastrophe (the feminicides of Ciudad Juárez) and how, in light of this reading, he then uses those ideas to question the idea of religion itself. I conclude this section and this

essay by suggesting that, though religion represents an important symbolic-interpretive frame, it does not account for the totality of modern evil. Bolaño uses two diametric paradigms to reveal the dissonance between being and knowing that characterizes the modern human condition.

Religious, specifically Christian, symbols abound throughout the novel, including images of the Abyss, the Beast, and the Whore. These images constitute a key to the novel's understanding of the feminicides of Santa Teresa, and, in the case of the abyss/void, form the novel's conceptual center. Yet the void is not easily recognizable as the abyss, and neither, I would argue, are obvious Christian symbols. Bolaño draws from deep in Christian theology to pepper instances of the void throughout *2666* and uses this scattering to impress the void narratively, structurally, and philosophically. The void only possesses the meaning that it does when taken in consideration of its theological and philosophical heritage. Despite his atheism, Bolaño discerned a useful narrative force in the void and in the symbolic system of Christianity, in general, and used it to center a depiction of feminicide, which, if secular, possesses the spiritual weight of Apocalypse.

However, Bolaño does not stop at offering a religious frame to understand the feminicides; he also uses the Christian symbolic system of the novel to point out, through paradox, the ways in which coincidence operates to suggest the illusion of fate and the concomitant assumptions of the existence of God and the goodness and order of the world. By noting the fluidity between coincidence and fate, Bolaño suggests the fluid relationships between the existence of God and His non-existence, goodness and evil, order and chaos, and being and non-being. It is as hard to say that the feminicides of Ciudad Juárez are coincidences as it is to say that they are attributable to a unifying cause. By constructing a framework that favors an understanding of the feminicides as coincidences due to the absence of God, or the arbitrary acts

of God, yet a framework that, grounded in nothingness, fails to account for material evil, Bolaño highlights the shortcomings of his original paradigm and offers an alternative paradigm that favors the existence of God and fate. Though this alternative paradigm offers insight into the novel's understanding of the feminicides, it fails, through paradox, to answer the unanswerable question: Did these women die because of God or because of His non-existence?

Bolaño's meditation on the existence of God, given its relation to catastrophe, reflects a relevant social anxiety about the prevalence of evil in the modern state. As Gianni Vattimo writes in *Belief*, "The very return of religion in our culture seems to be bound up with the apparent insolubility... of a number of pressing problems confronting late-modern humanity: ...problems concerning the explosion of violence in the new conditions of existence within mass society" (25). Because the feminicides can be understood as a problem of violence in a "new condition of existence" in Ciudad Juárez, a condition which Farred identifies as the "neoliberal postcolonial state," Bolaño's return to religion in the manner of questioning the existence of God is appropriate and speaks to a greater societal trend (693). Despite occurring in a "dechristianized, post-Christian, lay civilization," human encounters with an evil that defies secular explanation prompt the reconsideration of religion in order to understand crises incongruent with modernity's areligious temperament (Vattimo 43). The "return of religion" to contemporary secular culture reflects the increasingly violent, and thus evil, state of the world, as evidenced by events such as the Holocaust and the feminicides.

Bolaño frames the feminicides of Santa Teresa within a Christian (apocalyptic) symbolic framework, suggesting a reading of the feminicides as an event on the scale of Revelation. In the

introduction to Sergio Gonzalez Rodriguez's *Huesos en el desierto*,²⁷ Bolaño writes, “[*Huesos en el desierto*] does not belong to the adventure story tradition, but rather to the apocalyptic tradition, the only two contemporary categories on our continent, maybe because they are the only possible ways of approaching the abyss around us” (qtd. in Grall 481; I use her translation). For Bolaño, the apocalyptic represents one of two genres that survive in contemporary literature, for it represents one of two ways to come close to the abyss that constitutes our world. His use of apocalyptic themes allows him to confront the abyss of the modern state.

However, the religious framework is not sufficient to explain modern evil. The paradoxical relationship between the novel's two paradigms—each implies the other—reflects, at once, states of ambiguity and futility. The novel presents the reader with two ways in which to view disasters of modern human condition, reflecting both spiritual and secular lenses, but neither reads without the implication of the other. The ambiguity that characterizes these modes of understanding suggests that neither can exist alone. Evil as a concept manifests itself in the feminicides of Ciudad Juárez—atrocities which, though committed by humans, reek of spiritual reckoning. It would be as false, according to the logic of the narrative, to claim that the evil of the feminicides is spiritual, as it would be to claim that the evil of the feminicides is secular, as evil in the novel takes on both spiritual and secular shades. The inextricability of the two interpretations points to the futility of understanding modern evil according to a single paradigm. It is impossible to understand modern evil without a paradigm attuned to modern ideology (which is to say secular understanding). Likewise, it is impossible to understand evil without a

²⁷ Bolaño consulted Gonzalez Rodriguez and *Huesos en el desierto* as he wrote 2666, in particular “The Part about the Crimes.”

paradigm attuned to its religious heritage.²⁸ The term modern evil, then, constitutes the paradox that governs *2666* and which *2666*, using diametric paradigms, seeks to deconstruct. By using two ideologically opposed paradigms to read the feminicides of Santa Teresa (Ciudad Juárez), Bolaño reveals the conflict between human condition and human belief, and the gulf that persists between being in a state of modern evil and understanding it.

²⁸ The notion that the secular and the religious need each other suggests the relevance of Jürgen Habermas's idea of post-secularism.

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