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The Virgin of Guadalupe, La Santa and the Penitent: Gender, Mexican Nationalism
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2666 is a novel written by Roberto Bolaño published posthumously. It is composed of five stylistically distinct parts that centers on the Santa Teresa femicides, based on the real murders that took place in Ciudad Juarez during the early to mid 1990's. The central section "The Part About the Crimes" explores the Santa Teresa femicides through a continuous and fragmented forensic cataloguing of various victims' discovered corpses. It also explores the experiences of varied Mexican journalists, jaded and often incompetent police officers that seem complacent in the local/national culture of the crimes, the experience of a German national accused of committing the murders named Klaus, and a number of other various characters that in some way or another speak to and/or reflect the femicides. "The Part" attempts to offer us a cohesive panorama of the unwieldy nature of the Santa Teresa femicides including how this phenomenon is socially voiced and represented, effectively mapping the social heteroglossia (Bakhtin) that surrounds the crimes; the two main "voices" the argument here will analyze belong to the characters La Santa and the Penitent. As a text, 2666 "...does not propose to bury [the victims of the femicides], but [rather] to immortalize them" (Galeano xv) as individually witnessed subjects that require critical examination.

For the purposes of this essay, the femicides will be placed in conversation with critical theories surrounding nationalism, particularly how nationalism comes into symbolic and real contact with gender. The argument will primarily employ Anne McClintock's exploration of nationalism as a means of providing a theoretical framework. From her essay "*No Longer in a Future Heaven*": *Gender, Race and Nationalism*, she asserts that

"[a]ll nationalisms are gendered; all are invented; and all are dangerous – dangerous... in the sense that they represent relations to political power and to the technologies of violence. As such, nations are not simply phantasmagoria of the mind; as systems of cultural representation whereby people come to imagine a shared experience of identification with an extended community, they are historical practices through which social difference is both invented and performed. Nationalism becomes in this way constitutive of people's identities through social contests that are frequently violent and always gendered" (89).

In 2666's "The Part About the Crimes", the femicides collectively represent an example of an inherently gendered violent social contest that constitutes an underlying and irreconcilable aspect of Mexican national identity. It is important to consider that "[a]lthough undeniably powerful in its ability to mobilize the masses, Mexican nationalism has also served in many ways to reinforce a deeply oppressive, patriarchal rule" (McCaughan 62).

Critically situating Mexican nationalism entails a close analysis of its national symbolism and how this particular set of symbolic meaning affects culture.

Throughout the history of Mexico, the originally Catholic meaning of the Spanish Virgin of Guadalupe symbolically adapted to encompass the hybrid yet cohesive aspirations and imagination of the collective nation as a byproduct of a long and culturally catastrophic colonial encounter between the Spaniards and indigenous people of Mexico (Harrington 25-27). In 2666, the fictionalized Sonoran border city Santa Teresa possesses liminal qualities that can be further employed to explore the intersections and divisions of class, ethnic difference and gender that come into contact with Mexico's central mestizo identity. As an allegoric supplement for specifically theorizing women as national subjects in light of Bolaño's novel, Eduardo Galeano writes in *Memories of Fire* that he "...imagined that America was a woman and she was telling in [his] ear her *secrets*, the acts of love and *violations that had created her*" (xi, emphasis added). As expressed in this quotation and many other writings, the Latin American subcontinent has long been mythically theorized as a ravaged female oracle (and body) possessing untold "secrets" that highlight the cultural acts of love and more importantly for the arguments here, the fluid acts of violation that have shaped "her" exteriority (i.e. national infrastructures and industry) and interiority (i.e. cultural and national identities) from colonial times into modernity.

The heuristic curiosity that guides a reader through "The Part About the Crimes" lies in the notions that the torrential crimes readers confront in exclusive aftermath are *almost* always committed against a subaltern demographic who are voiceless even before death, exploited by transnational corporations (maquiladoras) on the border, and often unknown to justice even posthumously. A number of the

ravaged female corpses remain unidentifiable and unclaimed. As the femicides relentlessly progress throughout “The Part”, the chronologically interwoven excerpts of victim’s physical descriptions, names, ages, personal lives and often maquiladora-based motives for living in Santa Teresa collectively overrides each victim’s individual identity. These murdered women are represented beyond the limits of conventionally construed national time (McClintock) through their transcendence into the categorical realm of counted victims, effectively initiating an era between a “before” and projected “after”. The term “national time” refers to nationalism’s relationship to time as a contradictory interchange between the nation-state’s collective nostalgia (rooted in a temporally removed national history) and the impatient urgency of progress. Figured as statistics, the victims each become part of a unified symbol of the city, region, U.S.-Mexico border, and even nation in a way that is antithetical to the Virgin of Guadalupe’s apparently *unifying* symbolic meaning within Mexican national culture, which will be explored in depth later in the argument.

Throughout the essay, the central argument will analyze the border city of Santa Teresa as a microcosm of the volatile Mexican nation-state ravaged by localized manifestations that reflect darker aspects of national determinism and the resultant culture. These manifestations will be analyzed as correlative to the destabilization brought about by modern forms of global imperialism, specifically in regards to” ...the deployment of *maquiladoras* not only throughout [interior] Mexico, but throughout the border metropolis of Ciudad Juarez [where] they are located in more than ten industrial parks strategically established in different sections of the

city” (Lugo 55). At the peak of production, roughly “[o]ne-fourth of all Mexicans [were working] at *maquiladoras*...[and] most [were and still are] young women” (Anzaldúa 32). Many of the murdered women found in Santa Teresa worked at these exploitative *maquiladoras* out of financial necessity, which figures these factories as spaces that contextualize the collective femicides within processes of transnational capital (Farred 694-7, Marling 321) and of the industrial history of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands.

In 1994, the Mexican peso collapsed, resulting in the International Monetary Fund’s largest bailout at the time as Mexico plummeted into one of its worst economic depressions (Cooney 55). Though the bailout can be interpreted as an attempt by an international committee to stimulate the Mexican economy, it “...came with the usual strings of structural adjustment: deeper government cutbacks in spending, increased taxes, and further reductions in workers’ wages” (Cooney 58). The introduction of the North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement during the same year promoted the expansion of transnational corporations along the U.S.-Mexico border, where production at conveniently located export-processing zones could flourish. In many ways, this international trade agreement’s underlying lopsidedness in favor of foreign owned industry contributed to the collapse of Mexico’s already weakened internal market. It is quite telling that the era of the *maquiladora* and the femicides coincide, as it becomes clear that the *maquiladora* affects the production of national culture, and nowhere is this production more rampant than the heavily industrialized Santa Teresa, based on Ciudad Juarez.

Given that Ciudad Juarez is the masculine place name of the border city where these murders actually occurred, it seems a telling sign that Bolaño decided to coin his fictional city *Santa Teresa*, stratifying it as both feminine and culturally engrained in the Roman Catholic canon of Spanish mystics. Santa Teresa de Avila (1515-1582) was a Roman Catholic saint, Spanish mystic and nun who is known for her mystical religious trances and Carmelite emphasis on spiritual contemplation. Bolaño's apparent authorial intention in renaming the city becomes especially telling considering that Ciudad Juarez is patriotically named in honor of former liberal Zapotec Mexican president Benito Juarez (1806-1872) who is remembered for opposing capitalist ideologies, the Catholic church's grip on Mexican culture and foreign occupation in general. He is often projected to be "...a representative of [Mexican] national values" and is widely regarded as a national hero (Weeks 210). His adamant insistence on the separation of the Church and State, Mexican independence and the right to national self-determinism mark him as Mexico's most historically centralized and nostalgically "remembered" president. His indigenous identity served to further the acceptance and celebration of indigenous Mexicans within national discourse. As a symbol, he has been employed and manipulated by political parties and opposing groups within the Mexican government as a means of framing and furthering political ends. The cultural myth and thus meaning surrounding Benito Juarez is a site of contention in Mexican history. Some have described "...the age of Juarez as an 'epoch in transition' during which liberals broke the power of the Church and firmly established the separation of Church and State...[laying the stage for] the social evolution of Mexico" (Weeks 217). Other

more adamantly Catholic Mexicans, representing “the great majority of the nation”(Weeks 218), took Benito Juarez’s political ideologies and national aspirations as an attack on the Catholic and Hispanic traditions that predicate the culturally hybridized Mexican nation-state and its mestizo culture. In a sense, the historic and cultural tension present between the real Ciudad Juarez and fictional Santa Teresa highlights a similar tension that seems to pervade the notion of mestizo Mexican identity; a dualistic identification forged in wake of violent Spanish colonialism and responsive indigenous cultural reconciliation.

Another important factor that encodes nationalism is that of conservative gender roles, which can be dichotomized as the codependent categories of *machismo* and *marianismo* (Stevens) within the scope of traditional Mexican values. Of course, not all Mexicans adhere to these strict categories, but it is worth taking them into account as socialized notions that affect Mexican nationalism regardless. *Machismo* affirms archetypal notions of masculinity by emphasizing strength, virility, power and dominance attributed to the patriarchal influence of Hispanic culture. On the other side of this equation, *marianismo* emphasizes an embodiment of feminine qualities tied up with the Virgin (i.e. The Virgin *Mary*), namely the qualities of sainthood and domestic responsibility. Throughout “The Part About the Crimes”, these traditional notions of gender can be analyzed as a cultural contributor to both the femicides themselves and the apparent negligence and incompetence demonstrated by the local/national police to adequately investigate the crimes. A stark moment of machismo ideology is demonstrated while a group of

police/detectives tells sexist jokes at a local coffee shop in between halfhearted investigations:

“Sometimes they were monographic, the jokes. And many were about women. For example, one cop would say: what’s the perfect woman? *Pues* she’s two feet tall so she comes right up to your waist, big ears so you can steer her, a flat head so you have a place to set your beer, no teeth so she can’t bite your dick and hideously ugly so no bastard can steal her away...what’s the definition of a woman? Silence. And the answer: *pues* a vagina surrounded by a more or less organized bunch of cells...international this time: why is the Statue of Liberty a woman? Because they needed an empty head for the observation deck” (552).

These jokes, as well as the longer list of jokes not quoted, are all causal attempts by clearly macho authority figures representing the State to determine the place of women within society, which is darkly ironic considering the central subject matter of “The Part”. The joke that references the Statue of Liberty even explicitly addresses the intersection of national symbolism and the notion of “woman” by reducing the gendered symbol’s significance to a fillable emptiness. Later in the argument, we will see how traditional Mexican gender roles become a site of symbolic renegotiation as illustrated by the aforementioned characters La Santa and the Penitent.

As a border city or “borderland” (Anzaldúa) Santa Teresa “...should be regarded not as [an] analytically empty transitional zone but as [a site] of *creative cultural production* that require[s] investigation” (Lugo 207-208, emphasis added).

In the case of “The Part About the Crimes”, this “creative cultural production” violently expresses itself as the femicides . According to Santa Teresa’s fictional Department of Sex Crimes, “...the male-to-female ratio of killings in Mexico was ten to one, whereas in Santa Teresa it was ten to four” (563); tellingly, the city also boasts the lowest unemployment rate in the nation, illustrating how both the central economic processes and ongoing violence occurring within and around the border metropolis intersect at the point of gender. Like Galeano’s prophetic Latin America, fictional Santa Teresa has been constructed in the imagination through repeated acts of violation on a more focused geographical scale.

Regarding one of the murders, a telling moment of authorial aside is used to explore the meaning behind one of the many unclaimed bodies, considering the theory that “...[the particular victim] had come to Santa Teresa alone and lived there invisibly until the murderer or murderers took notice of her and killed her” (467). This hypothesis seems to insinuate that many of the murdered women are often socially invisible *before* death; these women’s identities are then only realized through violent male action that ultimately decontextualizes them as fragments belonging to the mosaic tragedy of the femicides, a cohesive body comprised of individual victims. The unapologetic descriptions of corpses in different stages of decomposition, bearing signs of brutal rape and other forms of ideologically encoded physical torture, force our readings into a limited state of violent aftermath situated between each objectified victim’s marginalized past and impossible future. Though voiceless, the victims seem to enact a dialogue between the reader and the crimes parallel to the plot itself by begging both immediately forensic and macro-

cultural investigations that shed light on the novel and the historical phenomenon it's based on. In this way, the simultaneously unified and disparate nature of the femicides constitutes a voiceless heteroglossia of victim narratives that represent a multitude of intersecting meanings.

If nation has been symbolically constituted as feminine by the violent efforts of the state-patriarchal imagination, what might the Santa Teresa femicides collectively represent about the climate of Mexican nationalism in the global (post-national) era? In what ways does the novel function to selectively invest in and destabilize prevalent critical theories surrounding the intersections of gender and nation? How can these femicides be critically situated as a postcolonial phenomenon, and how can we read nationalism as being framed by colonial history throughout "The Part About the Crimes"? The argument here will organize itself by critically analyzing the triangulated functions of the peripheral characters "the Penitent", "La Santa" and the national symbol of the Virgin of Guadalupe as a way of reading the femicides as a post-colonial and nationalistic phenomenon.

III. The Virgin of Guadalupe: Colonial Violence and Mexican Nationalism

Religion circumscribes the very first body discovered in "The Part About the Crimes". Upon approaching the first crime scene, an unnamed pair of police officers "...[come] across two women with their heads covered, kneeling in the weeds, praying. Seen from a distance, the women looked old, but they weren't. Before them lay the body...[the officers] stood there beside them and stared at [it]" (353). The odd detail that figures the women as apparently old from a distance is significant, for it configures the women in prayer as beyond modern time, even establishing

them as atavistic conservers of traditional national culture. The two pairs of unnamed characters depicted here “staring at the body” both represent different forms of national authority; the two police officers embody the legislative authority of the State while the two praying women embody religious authority of the Church, neither of which seem to be in opposition of the other, but rather occupy similar roles in this case. There is a potent symmetry that formats this opening scene: on one side, there are two male police officers “investigating” a crime, on the other, two religious women praying for the murdered girl’s afterlife. The median here includes the lifeless body, and later bodies, that are placed in conversation with the reader from here until the closing pages of “The Part”, establishing an investigative dialogic that doesn’t end when the novel does. Though Bolaño’s manner of representing the victims doesn’t seem to reductively codify their bodies as spectacles, much like spectacles, “...we can’t *not* look” (Taylor 19) to them as sources of narrative knowledge; given their centrality within the reader’s investigation of the crimes, they function as The Part’s epistemological foundation. As a useful extrapolation of this opening moment, we can attempt to read each body in light of the joint failure of religious reconciliation and legislative processes to restore justice and make the victims socially legible.

A critical analysis of how the Virgin of Guadalupe is both represented throughout the novel and theorized by scholars can serve as a useful way to organize the rather complex entanglement of intersecting symbolism, real gendered murder, postcolonial identity, globalizing processes and nationalism that shrouds the femicides and “The Part” itself. There is a brief moment before “The Part About

the Crimes” during “The Part About Fate” in which a strange domestic mural of the Virgin of Guadalupe is described in a way that subtly problematizes her adapted symbolic role as the benevolent Holy Mother of Mexico when read in conversation with critical theories of her national significance. Oscar Fate, an African American magazine writer for a Harlem-based Afro-centric publication visiting Santa Teresa on assignment to cover a U.S.-Mexico boxing match, drunkenly attempts to socialize with Mexican journalists at Charly Cruz’s house after the match quickly ends in favor of the American boxer. Joining them is a young female journalist named Rosa Amalfitano who Fate develops romantic and protective (even possessive) affectations for. As an aside, Rosa’s father is a Chilean-born (like Bolaño) professor at the University of Santa Teresa named Oscar Amalfitano who fears for her in wake of the femicides and generally resents his decision to bring her with him to Mexico from where they lived in Spain.

Upon entering Charly’s house, Fate notices a mural of the Virgin in the garage and mentally registers its features:

“The mural was six feet tall and maybe ten feet long and showed the Virgin of Guadalupe in the middle of a lush landscape of rivers and forests and gold mines and silver mines and oil rigs and giant cornfields and wheat fields and vast meadows where cattle grazed. The Virgin had her arms spread wide, *as if offering all of these riches in exchange for nothing*. But despite being drunk, Fate noticed right away there was something wrong about her face. *One of the Virgin’s eyes was open and the other eye was closed*” (320, emphasis added).

The Virgin is represented here as a benevolent figure surrounded by natural landscapes, bountiful resources and thriving industry, establishing her as an atavistic figure of national progress and nostalgia. Though through Fate's observation of the slight aesthetic details, both the progress and nostalgia contained within the larger image of the Virgin seem laden with acute paradoxes that uphold the romanticized illusion of a unified national culture.

While attempting to socialize with Charly and an unnamed suspicious companion of his in the living room, Charly enthusiastically insists that Fate watch a video with them allegedly directed by a young Robert Rodriguez that depicts a woman that "...looked like a whore" being simultaneously raped by three men in the manner of a "...perpetual motion machine" (320-21). The film seems to echo a later femicide case in which gossiping policemen ponder the possibility that the victim underwent a three-way ("way" meaning orifice) rape, leading them to discuss circulating rumors of other cases of alleged five-way and even seven-way rapes throughout Mexico, pushing the imaginable limits of violent sexual penetration. After reluctantly watching Charly's prized hyper-violent example of pornographic snuff, Fate urgently rises and asks him where in the house Rosa is, to which he crudely responds "In some room...sucking Chucho's [her boyfriend who is also a Mexican journalist] dick" (22). After finding Rosa snorting cocaine, getting into a verbal altercation with Chucho and upper-cutting an armed journalist in the same room named Corona unconscious, Fate demands that Rosa leave the house with him. While in the garage preparing a car to leave the house, Fate "...took another look at the mural of the Virgin of Guadalupe. When he moved to open the garage door he

realized that the Virgin's single open eye seemed to follow him wherever he went" (324). This vexing representation of the Virgin's eyes is unique to this mural. How could one interpret Fate's initial thought that the Virgin seemed to be offering the mentioned "...riches in exchange for nothing"? What might be implied by one of the Virgin's eyes being closed and her open eye's seeming ability to follow ones movements? What is particularly destabilizing about this mural's aesthetic?

The Virgin's same hybridity and fluidity that ideologically transfigured her as the unifying Holy Mother of the [post]colonial Mexican nation-state serves to subtly destabilize the traditional role of her nationally unifying power as discreetly illustrated by the mural's features. The Virgin, though unifying on the surface, can be framed as a critical border that functions to paradoxically dissociate yet intertwine history and modernity, colonizing processes and national culture, progress and degeneration, symbol and agency. The Virgin's liminal capacity to stand as a national symbol stems from her nuanced history of colonial violence and the imbalanced cultural reconciliations inherent in such a rupturing encounter. Patricia Harrington's *Mother of Death, Mother of Rebirth: The Mexican Virgin of Guadalupe* traces the colonial history of the Virgin as a way of mapping her cultural fluctuations throughout this era, including how she went from a symbol of cultural apocalypse to a reconfigured Mother goddess framed within the sacred parameters of the destroyed Aztec goddess Tontazin (which means "Our Mother") in the colonially interrupted imaginations of the colonized people of Mexico (Harrington 33-5, Wolf 35-6). It is important to explicitly consider that the Virgin's benevolence, unifying national power, and aesthetic are predicated on the systematic death, dominance

and near cultural erasure of indigenous people at the hands of the conquest-driven Spaniards.

By framing the Virgin as a geographical, temporal and cultural border, especially considering that 2666 centers on the maquiladora ridden border metropolis of Santa Teresa, notions of national culture, economic progress and power all take on underlying liminal qualities. The idea of liminality applied here should not be taken to imply a systematic analytical binary (i.e. “First World” vs “Third World”), but rather offers up a vast number of possible meanings that have the potential to coexist, intersect and negate one another. In many ways, the Virgin is indicative of an on-going cultural encounter rather than a singular symbol that belongs to a historic moment and/or fixed religious meaning. To cite Gloria Anzaldúa’s eclectic cultural counter-narrative *Borderlands*, the Virgin can be said to embody the notion of the “borderland” integral to “border culture”, acting as a “...vague and undetermined [symbol] created by the emotional [and colonial] residue of an unnatural boundary” (25). In this case, this border can be interpreted as referring to the Other-izing boundary mechanized in imperial processes such as colonial evangelism and even in the self-structuring act of identifying with a national culture. The argument here takes Anzaldúa’s use of the term “unnatural” to signify a destabilization that can’t be completely stabilized given the continued legacy of imperialism embedded in Westernized globalizing processes, a mentioned example being the widespread maquiladoras along the U.S.-Mexican border installed as a transnational corporate response to the Latin American debt crisis. When adhered to, this economically exploitive reality problematizes the progress

that the industry depicted in the mural seems meant to signify. We can now begin to read the Virgin as concurrently unifying and dichotomizing in her nationalizing role.

It becomes necessary to place the national significance of images representing the Virgin within a historic colonial context. Miguel Sanchez's book, *The Image of the Virgin Mary, Mother of God, of Guadalupe, Honored in Her History by the Prophecy of Chapter Twelve of Revelation* (1648) offers historic reflections upon the symbolism contained within the image of the Virgin. Paintings of the Virgin usually include "...[an] encircling sun and moon under [her] foot" and represent her "...stand[ing] alone, absolute in herself, and complete in her perfections" (Harrington 36-7). From Fate's initial observation of the mural, it seems as if the traditional ornaments of the sun and moon have been omitted and replaced with a picturesque backdrop of interconnected landscape and industry, making it a more modernized and consequently industrialized adaptation. It also seems that the notion of religious perfection is immediately negated, given that the Virgin's closed eye signifies for Fate that "...something was wrong with her face" (320).

Given that traditional representations of the Virgin depict her with "grave sweet [often downcast] eyes", it seems telling that Fate gives her eyes so much critical consideration despite being not only intoxicated, but consciously out of his national and racial element due to his embodied identity as an African American on the U.S.-Mexican border. Given the claim that the Virgin of Guadalupe can be read as embodying the multifaceted characteristics of a liminal borderland, the conflict that seems contained within her eyes should also take on pluralistic connotations.

Looking ahead to *La Santa*, the novel's example of a maternal "seer", it becomes

clear that that the sensory ability “to see” is often conflated with the ability “to know”. It also becomes clearer that women have been “...traditional[ly] and powerful[ly] associa[ted] with the city [i.e. Santa Teresa] and nation [i.e. Mexico]” (Harrington 39).

The Virgin’s eyes might implicate her as a Holy Mother that inadequately oversees the murdered and socially abandoned victims of the Santa Teresa femicides. The painted Virgin’s undecided eyes can be understood to represent her inability to fully see, know and therefore inspire social change in response to the femicides. Another interpretation could figure her as winking, which seems to implicate her as a darkly ironic national symbol. Though it’s true that the Virgin is confined to a symbolic agency, it is important to recognize the far-reaching national significance that the symbol contains; the Virgin has undeniably affected the collective Mexican national imagination by religiously inter-animating national identity.

II. La Santa: The Holy Mother, La Facultad and the Legibility of the Femicide Victims

The first character to truly give voice to the topical reality of the Santa Teresa femicides within any public discourse is an elderly Sonoran woman nicknamed “La Santa” who is believed to possess the mystical ability to “...[see] things no else [sees]...[and hear] things no one else hear[s]” (427). She is equipped with an otherworldly power to construct knowledge that Gloria Anzaldúa would refer to as “La facultad” (the faculty or agency), or

“...the capacity to see in surface phenomenon the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface. It is an instant ‘sensing’, a quick

perception arrived at without conscious reasoning. It is an acute awareness mediated by the part of the psyche that does not speak, that communicates in images and symbols which are the faces of feeling, that is, behind which feelings reside/hide. [La Santa] is excruciatingly alive to the world” (60).

La Facultad allows her to “...deconstruct, reinvent, and affirm the multiple [victim’s] subjectivities [within the] dynamic cultural contextualization” of the ongoing femicides (Aldama, Quinonez 2). She is described as a figure that empathizes with the range of local subalterns from abused children, rape victims, those who are the butt of jokes to AIDS patients (434). As a healer of sorts, she is invested in the curative properties of “...healthy eating and prayer” (427) and often prescribes dietary and herbal remedies for treating afflictions. More than a character, La Santa serves as a mythic epistemological medium that embodies the invisible truth behind the murders in a manner that almost seems to establish her as a prophetic Mother Goddess. As a telling detail, she has no children of her own due to her inability to conceive. When she was a girl, she learned to read from local children and read anything she could obtain, reaching for some kind of lesson in each book like “...a doll lost and found in a heap of someone else’s trash” (431). Given that she was preoccupied with caring for her own sightless mother as a girl and eventually her husband who goes blind soon after they marry, she was unable to continue attending school, but employs religion to restore her lack of education by characteristically proverbializing that “...what God takes away the Virgin restores” (431).

The metaphor of the doll “lost and found” in a heap of trash that La Santa mentions serves as a microcosmic image that seems intended to invoke the images of murdered women disposed of in Santa Teresa’s unofficial dump “El Chile”. As a metaphor, the doll is meant by La Santa to signify the knowledge she discovered in the books she read growing up. If the imaged signification of a murdered woman is contained within the image of the doll, yet the doll is used as a reference to knowledge acquired through literature, then it seems that the bodies by metaphorical extension can be framed as epistemological, possibly even didactic. Aside from the inescapable fact that readers are helplessly set up to investigate alongside detectives in “The Part” and thus “learn” by confronting these murdered women’s bodies, their deaths (containing their lives) should not be reduced to proverbs, but rather require the atonement contained in a meaning(s) for which there is no easily established language and certainly no holy scripture to articulate it. It is even mentioned during the first time La Santa appeared on the Hermosillo-based television show *An Hour With Renaldo* that the signal reception in Santa Teresa was terrible, subtly furthering the point that the femicides, even when communicated publically, require an intense effort to even make socially legible let alone solve.

La Santa’s regionally televised appearances on *An Hour With Reinaldo* articulate publically that there is a mostly ignored yet widespread culture of corruption-sustaining complacency that encodes the ongoing Santa Teresa femicides as sociocultural and political, even stating bluntly “[t]he police do nothing” (437). From the beginning to the end of her first televised trance, she

vehemently terms the victims her “daughters”, asking in what seems to be physical pain “[c]an’t [the killers] at least leave the *virgins* in peace?” (436-437, emphasis added). Given her saintly nickname, catholicized and maternal manner of framing the victims and seemingly mystical abilities, La Santa stands in as a regional Holy Mother who articulates the erased “Virgin’s” continual violations. In the manner of a healer, she serves to remedy the sociocultural disease promoting the femicides’ metastasis by initially diagnosing it.

Though she clearly resonates as a kind of Holy Mother, she embodies a *critical agency* (La Facultad) that the traditionally confined Virgin of Guadalupe lacks enabled by mystically superimposed forces that allow her to approach a “...kind of revelation that flashes past and leaves [behind]... only the certainty of a void, a void that very quickly escapes even the word that contains it” (436). As a clarifying note, Bolaño frequently uses the interchangeable terms “void” and “abyss” to signify an epistemological end-stop experienced by characters who come *too* close to realizing a seemingly immeasurable truth. Her otherworldly trances are reminiscent of Santa Teresa de Avila’s ecstatic religious trances, which is affirmed when one considers both the name of the fictional border city and La Santa’s saintly characteristics; the obvious difference here is that La Santa’s trances bring her closer to realizing the hidden truth behind a string of gendered murders, not the love and mercy of a monotheistic God. There is even a point during her interview with Sergio Gonzalez, the main journalist in “The Part”, in which she describes the faces of the killers she remembers envisioning as “...ordinary faces”. She continues to explain that the faces don’t necessarily strike her as killers’ faces, but that that

they appear “...big, somehow swollen”. Her description of the killers’ faces seems to imply that the murderers’ identities belong within the established parameters that confine conservative expressions of Mexican masculinity. Since La Santa’s position can be read as both a catholicized symbol and supernatural political agent for social outcry and systemic change, it seems that she is both implicated within and without the male-determined (Catholic) symbolic order central to Mexican nationalism, framing her as both a subversive and conservative figure. La Santa’s supernatural ability “to see” into the core of the Santa Teresa femicides establishes her as the novel’s illuminating Holy Mother residing over the murdered “daughters” and “virgins” of Santa Teresa.

III. The Penitent: National Symbolism and Sacraphobia

At about the same time the Santa Teresa femicides begin to be counted, a deranged man sensationalized by the Mexican media as “the Penitent” embarks on a mission inspired by sacraphobia, the “fear or hatred of the sacred [and] of sacred objects, *especially from your own religion*” (Bolaño 380, emphasis added), to deface several local churches by excessively urinating all over their interiors, systematically destroying statues of Virgin saints including the Virgin of Guadalupe, and eventually murdering a priest who attempted to stop him from doing so. Even before the priest’s shocking murder, the Penitent’s vandalizing actions at the churches of San Rafael and San Tadeo “...got more attention in the local press than the women killed in the preceding months” (Bolaño 366). After the priest’s socially rattling death, police are actively stationed at churches throughout the area as an urgent preventative measure.

As highlighted by the media-centric attention and police action that the Penitent urgently calls for, it seems clear that the symbolic inscription of women within the gendered project of nationalism, which in this case expresses itself through the predominant religion of Catholicism, vicariously decontextualizes and destroys female bodies, but acts to devalue women by denying them access to real agency within national culture. Though Mexico is officially secular, Catholic symbols and meanings persistently frame what it means to be Mexican and in many ways indicate the creation of the mestizo Mexican nation-state by quietly signifying the past contentions and eventual hybridizations brought on by Spanish colonialism. The Penitent's destruction of Virgin saint statues and general assault on Catholicism socially overshadows the urgency of the unsolved femicides; the symbolic order of the gendered national *imaginary* requires conservation through state protection, while each *real* murdered woman introduced, described and superseded seems systematically forgotten by both society and even the reader the moment they are counted among the other victims. The affect on the reader incited by this collective graveyard is paradoxical, for in learning the name and forensic details of the physical state and background of each victim, readers are urged to consider each identification an observance of individualized solidarity yet can become easily overwhelmed by the femicides' continuity.

The Penitent's serial violation of sacred statues of Virgin saints and church grounds is communally imagined with instigative support from media publications as an ideological assault on the unthinkingly gendered symbolic structure of traditional Mexican nationalism as framed by Catholicism. A young unnamed

Papago seminarian housed in Santa Teresa's oldest church was interviewed about what occurred during the night the Penitent trespassed on the church grounds, customarily destroyed sacred statues with a bat, and beat the priest/caretaker to death. The priest's murder by the Penitent illustrates the increasingly violent succession of his religious violations. The unnamed Papago seminarian explains to inspectors Juan de Dios Martinez and Pedro Negrere that while he allowed the priest to advance towards the Penitent's moans, remaining behind frozen in fear, he began to pray "...for [his] soul...and [specifically] begged *the Holy Mother* not to abandon [him]" (369, emphasis added). The abandonment the ethnically indigenous seminarian seems to be praying away is notably religious and maternal, manifesting as an echo of cultural hybridization's tendency to transplant the imperially dominant systems of social-moral (in this case religious) control that stabilize the colonial past's violent contradictions within a modernly unified national culture (Chatergee 216-17). All the while, "...the [actual] girls and mothers of families and the workers from all walks of life who turn up dead [and abandoned] each day in the neighborhoods and on the edges of [the] industrious city [Santa Teresa]" (459) are abandoned twofold in death as a mostly unexamined byproduct of the structurally codependent local/national political figures, police and economy's complacency within the culture of the crimes.

Though much like a majority of the femicides, the case of the Penitent is never comfortably closed, a peculiar suspect is eventually located. Ernesto Luis Castillo Jimenez, who admitted to murdering his fifty-year-old mother Felicidad Jimenez Jimenez by jamming a piece of wood into her vagina and stabbing her

upwards of sixty times, eagerly admits to being the Penitent (393). Though Juan De Dios Martinez doubts that he is really the Penitent, he is the only true suspect we are offered and the argument will therefore invest in the hypothesis that he is the Penitent. Ironically, this particular murder that belongs to the categorical femicides is one of the few solved, yet Martinez's investigative concern seems to lie with whether or not the suspect is the Penitent.

Given the hypothesis that Ernesto is the Penitent, it seems telling that his sacrophobic spree would come to a self-imposed end with the sexually charged and maniacally excessive murder of his own mother. Unlike most of the other femicides, the victim was murdered and found in the domestic space of her own home, not some degraded margin of the city like most of the others. "When he was asked what made him jam the piece of wood in his mother's vagina, first he answered that he didn't know, and then, after thinking about it more carefully, that he had done it to teach her...[t]o take him seriously" (393). Though an obviously disturbing statement colored by criminal insanity, this statement demonstrates how masculinity volatily affirms itself as legitimate through a selective conservation and/or destruction of the female, in this case maternal, body. The detail of the piece of wood jammed into Felicidad's vagina speaks to an orchestrated desecration of the notions of both female sexuality and maternity; a technically solved murder comprised of such specific violence is surely symbolic; his actions seem to reflect a derangement of traditional machismo identity. His reasons for murdering his mother are also explicitly didactic, given that he meant to teach her to take him seriously.

Elvira Campos, the director at the local asylum, explains to Juan De Dios Martinez, a “...policeman associated with religious faith” (362) that “...religion has always been a problem [in Mexico]....all Mexicans are essentially sacraphobes [and that]...almost all Mexican men are afraid of women” (381). These assertions are worth taking into account, for they invest in generalizing notions regarding the gendered and religious factors that affect the production of national culture in Mexico. She seems to be implying that the Penitent could be any “ordinary” Mexican man, echoing back to the envisioned “ordinary faces” of the Santa Teresa killers La Santa described to Sergio Gonzalez in their interview. Both the Santa Teresa femicides and the Penitent’s sacraphobic mission respectively depict the destruction of both real and religiously represented female bodies. Elvira’s assertions situate the inherently gendered femicides within a Catholic and reactively sacraphobic framework. Not only are the murderers implicated within this framework, but the broader notion of Mexican masculinity perpetuated by said national culture

Given the analyses, what comparative reading can be attempted given the religiously (and thus nationalistically) engrained yet dichotomized positions occupied by the sacraphobic Penitent and the redemptive La Santa? These two characters serve to jointly offer a religiously invested perspective on the “...inherently unstable alternation between self-righteous conservation and violent revolution” that manifests as an integral facet of national determinism. Throughout *The Part*, this tension is performed through gendered acts of both real and symbolic violence that ends up illegible for systemic reasons that can be linked to the affects

that quietly imperial globalizing processes have on “developing” nations’ often volatile development of post-national and intrinsically post-colonial identity.

IV. The Santa Teresa Femicides: Collective Memory and the U.S.-Mexican Border

The proximal relationship between the Virgin and the femicide victims in “The Part About the Crimes” situates the Penitent and La Santa as seemingly dichotomized characters that each reflect upon contesting articulations of national subjectivity, violence and activism. As analyzed, the Penitent stands as a figure moved by fear and hatred to desecrate the symbolically conserved order of Mexico’s most predominant religion. The fact that Ernesto, the only suspect who might be the Penitent, murdered and sexually violated his own mother further establishes his actions as motivated by a desire to destroy maternal figures whose traditional role is to unify the family, just as the Virgin’s role is to unify the nation. His destruction of Virgin saint statues signifies a rejection and destruction of the maternally based familial collective that underscores Mexico’s national pathos. La Santa’s modern embodiment of La Facultad unburies the femicide victims as a way of not only affirming their subjectivities as maternally framed “daughters” and religiously framed “virgins”, but attempts to openly make legible the structural factors that enable the femicides to progress on the border. The Virgin as a historically pluralistic yet modernly compartmentalized colonial, religious, and nationalized notion serves to triangulate the meanings of the Penitent’s violent actions, La Santa’s restorative power and the over-arching femicide victims.

The last case included in “The Part About the Crimes” goes unsolved after “..generally half-hearted investigations” like a majority of the others. The

unidentified victim's bagged naked body was found “..by a dirt road that runs along the border “ in an advanced state of decomposition.”[A] pair of good-quality leather high heels were found in the bag, which led the police to think she might be a whore” (632-633). After bearing witness to this final counted victim, the narrative concludes by hauntingly detailing the traditional celebration of Christmas in Santa Teresa:

“There were *posadas*, piñatas were smashed, tequila and beer were drunk. Even on the poorest street people could be heard laughing. Some of these streets were completely dark, like black holes, *and the laughter came from who knows where was the only sign, the only beacon that kept residents and strangers from getting lost*” (633, emphasis added).

The collective laughter carries the weight of national culture, echoing throughout even the darkest margins of the city in a way that signifies the process by which the femicide victims are forgotten. This collective amnesia becomes apparent if we symmetrically compare even the most basic detail from the first body introduced in “The Part” to the last: the question of victim identification. The first body is given a name, while the last remains unidentified, begging the reader to ask whether such knowledge of her identity would even be constructive. Since the laughter is religiously framed by the festivities of Christmas, it is subsequently laughter that echoes the imagined communion and identification that encodes national subjectivity; it is a sign that offers readily available guidance and in guiding reaffirms the lives of those “residents and strangers” who would otherwise be lost in the borderlands.

Though she “...knows what’s hidden behind the crimes” (562), La Santa’s unsuccessful attempts to reclaim the victims as cultural subjects by employing a traditionally Catholic framework speaks to the limitations of conservative religious ideology. The Penitent’s sacraphobic actions seek to violently dismantle the same framework that La Santa employs, contributing to the near social erasure of the first wave of victims. The Virgin, like the echoing laughter (633), guides and symbolizes traditional Mexican national identity. The distressing catalogue of murdered women, however, sheds light on the “...dark side...of the Virgin” (Harrington 39) by problematizing the notion of national progress.

As a fictionalized border city that is nonetheless rooted in an actual place and history, Santa Teresa is a potent site for national analysis; it is a unique transitional zone between the “First” and “Third” world. When thought of abstractly, Mexican women function as “...symbolic signifiers of national difference” (McClintock 90) in a manner similar to the U.S.-Mexican border itself, and thus the femicide victims collectively signify the vague overlap of [trans]national and intra-national violence and corruption on the basis of this difference. La Santa’s line “[e]very hundred feet the world changes” (430) is nowhere more powerful than between and within both sides of this zone. Though the victims seem to exist outside of the national imagination, figuratively confined to a kind of limbo akin to U.S.-Mexican borderlands themselves, they are unburied by Bolaño’s own final exercise of authorial Facultad for the purpose of being eternally witnessed.

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