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Corpse Narratives and the Teleology of World Literary History

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Abstract

The present essay proposes an orientation towards the corpse as a viable telos for the present-day revival of World Literature as critical paradigm. The argument has three parts. First, it characterizes two central tenets of the existing paradigm: a profession of dynamism for its own sake and an implicit lack of finality. Drawing on Kristeva and on examples from contemporary Latin American fiction, especially Roberto Bolaño's *2666*, the article then introduces corpse narratives that embrace the abject and reorient critical practice towards materiality. Finally, the conclusions propose a modest agenda for a different "worldliteraturism" that valorizes abject materiality over high-minded idealism.

Keywords

necropolitics – new materialisms – world literature – Roberto Bolaño – contemporary Latin American literature – corpses

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O fatal change! become in one sad day
A senseless corse! inanimated clay!
HOMER, *The Iliad*

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In fond memory of Ignacio Padilla (1968–2016)

For a remarkably successful critical trend, the revival of world literature in the last three decades makes few explicit pronouncements about its future. Although no one knows for sure where present-day tendencies are headed, they often feature visions of what is to come. The startling thing about the critical discourse surrounding world literature is how effectively generative it has been despite—or because of?—its very modest projections. What currently defines the *telos* of world literature is its own dynamism, rather than a specific goal, even one broadly defined. At best, this amounts to a celebration of the converging creative energies of scholars; at worst, a bias toward action for its own sake, scholarly busyness. I will approach the problem of projection through a related phenomenon: abjection. To that end, I shall draw from a constellation of theoretical referents and from several literary examples, with a non-exclusive emphasis on contemporary Latin American fiction. My goal is to propose an *orientation towards the corpse* as a viable telos for world literature.

Three sections follow. First, I will speculate about the implicit telos of the movement to situate my ideas. Second, I will introduce corpse narratives that embrace the abject and point critical practice towards materiality. Finally, I will draw general conclusions and propose a modest agenda for a different worldliteraturism. Purposefully cacophonous, I adopt the suffix -ism here to keep in mind that we are dealing with one approach among others, as opposed to a meta-theory. Similarly, I stress the caps in World Literature to refer to the more institutionalized, mainstream avatar of the phenomenon, as represented by the present journal and its kindred Institute for World Literature (full disclosure: of which I count myself as a collaborator). I find it useful to estrange all cognate terms surrounding Weltliteratur, lest we adopt them acritically. Thus, I will also occasionally use the more colloquial term "worldlit," following recent usage heard on the field, based on the template of hitherto "complit." The crux of my argument is contributing to world literature with affinity for the emerging paradigm, while also questioning some of its developments and offering first steps toward a more defined sense of finality for the movement.

Purposeless Purposiveness Turns Ugly

Some may have no quibble with conceiving of worldlit criticism as purely autotelic. Increased exchange among critics who were previously not in conversation is a good thing. The reasons why such conversation should revolve around world literature, and not any other encompassing category, are less apparent. But that could be secondary, if the conversation, in itself, is worthwhile. In such a nominalist approach, "World Literature" could be replaced by any other catchphrase that spurs the conversation. "Différance" served similar purposes back in its heyday. And yet the critical trend we came to know as deconstruction, to continue with the example, had very concrete ideas about what it sought to achieve, namely, debunking binarisms.[1] Meanwhile, there is a symptomatic void of goals, let alone theory, in reference works otherwise as enlightening as Theo D'Haen's *The Routledge Concise History of World Literature* (2012). The volume does a formidable job of telling the "story" of world literature since the influential aphorization of the term by Goethe, through Curtius and Auerbach, leading to Moretti, Casanova, and contemporary debates. Non-European, pedagogical, and translation topics are also explored. However, this capacious account of the past and present of world literature lacks a section devoted to imagining the future of the paradigm, as well as a general conclusion. (Each chapter ends with bullet point conclusions intended as takeaways for the student). I see in this conspicuous absence an affirmation of the intrinsic good of worldliteraturism.

Thomsen makes this more evident in *Mapping World Literature* (2008), where he notes: "The important aspect of the future of world literature is the way in which it is being used to make institutional changes in a situation where fields of research are being redefined, and curricula are being determined to some degree by the idea of what will be relevant to the future" (30–1). Note the circularity in this reasoning, best described as self-referential reformism: world literature deserves to be taught because it is worth studying. There is not much room left for literature outside of institutions, or for the referential in literature, i.e., how it connects to the world at large, to be paramount. Later work by Thomsen is more nuanced, below. But this early formulation illustrates the point: either these are tautological, read ideological, pronouncements, or, as I prefer to think, the markings of a leap of faith.

1 In Derrida's succinct formulation, not quite a definition but an illustration: "Deconstruction does not consist in passing from one concept to another, but in overturning and displacing a conceptual order, as well as the nonconceptual order with which the conceptual order is articulated" (329).

In the first case, we face what Žižek would call a sublime object of ideology, that is, those "signifiers without signified" that constitute political communities who identify "with the very gesture of identification" (142). This rings true, to some degree, but ultimately World Literature comes across as a rather benign sublime object of ideology, if at all. The worst possible imaginable ideological fallout is very far removed from the calamitous scenarios that might ensue in society at large from manipulating discursive elements like, say, "security." Additionally, as Damrosch notes, "cross-cultural literary relations" predate modern nations and literary institutions by many centuries, as exchanges along the Silk Road or the Indian Ocean illustrate ("Introduction" 3). Such factual observations would dispel the fear that, in the final analysis, "there is no there there": circulation is something we can point to and call world literature. This leaves open the question of whether a critic's task is to provide accounts of the circulation of textual and oral traditions, past and present. However, as focusing on circulation produces, well, more circulation, then the self-fulfilling prophecy is complete. In other words, autotelic axiology and virtuoso exhibitions of connoisseurship replace discussions about finality.

The leap-of-faith option is not unproblematic. Projection without content, moored in self-affirmation and institutional expansion, excludes by fiat. Regardless of a remarkably inclusive (and salutary) ethos, the risk is to exclude through inclusion, mutatis mutandis, like the Catholic Church does. This is an ironic turn, given Goethe's Lutheran background and polytheistic sympathies, but the "invisible church" of world literature tutors he hoped for in the 1830s sits more squarely with the Church of Rome.[2] World Literature is open to all literatures, sidestepping the thornier question of opening itself to incompatible visions of what literature is. One could argue that such differences can be hammered out along the way, but first we need to "sit at the table." The counterargument would be: why that table in the first place? Canonization, a secularized theological notion like the State structures that Carl Schmitt had in mind, is increasingly about *complexio oppositorum*. This, of course, gives certain privileged institutions an outsized role in orchestrating the whole affair, with pontifical nudges in lieu of party lines. Convening power becomes power tout court. (It might also be the reason why the paradigm feels most at home in partially overlapping readers, genealogies, and surveys than in major monographs with a sustained line of scrutiny). Rather than restating familiar arguments that have been made against World

2 See Damrosch on Goethe's "invisible church" as related to world literature (*What* 17). For an overview of Goethe's complex religious views, I consulted Walter Naumann.

Literature, I underline the recursive structure that leads to the absorption of opposing views within the paradigm.

The most notorious example is Emily Apter's thoughtful and suitably entitled *Against World Literature*, a case for recovering what is lost in translation. It is an exercise both in refutation and in loyal opposition. As Gloria Fisk aptly puts it, "while Apter pretends to fire against world literature like an enemy, she leans against it like a plank on a wall to join a critical conversation." The contagious enthusiasm of World Literature transcends stark methodological differences: Apter stresses "traditional" theorization in her works, while others erudition or sociological analysis. These approaches would normally be incompatible, if not outright antagonistic, were it not for the very wide institutional umbrella above them. Faith in dynamism can also be seen in Damrosch's claim that that "true history [of world literature] lies in the future rather than in the past" ("Toward a History" 483). What future, one may ask? Answers are less forthcoming. The gist of the project is creating the frames, not filling them, or in a different metaphor, establishing a minimal set of rules of a game for others to play.

This same spirit is to be found in the founding charter of *JWL*. Bringing together scholars, creating a forum, and fostering "wider and deeper" discussions feature prominently in the journal's masthead. As befits an ecumenical publication, there is little in the way of the prescriptive or the axiological, other than, respectively, going beyond the national and favoring a cosmopolitan approach. There is plenty about the how (collaboration, networks) and precious few about the what. Unless by the latter we understand: everything. Now, this all-encompassing agenda is prone to suffering from an expansive version of what Gerald Graff described in 1986 as "taking cover in coverage." A more capacious account of the facts of literature on a global scale would allow scholars to leave uninspected, to put it in terms Graff borrows from Norman Foerster, "the theory upon which their practice rests" (41). World Literature can be infinite in one sense and completely flat in another, limitless in coverage but absolutely limited in theory or referentiality. Additionally, in this context, "everything" is a logical impossibility. Short of an Aleph, the Borgesian imaginary object that shows all points in the universe and all points of view at the same time, things happen in succession (Hoyos 14–69). The elusive quid of world literature would be a variedly infinite task that, nonetheless, we must promptly undertake.

The basis for this paradoxical, hypergenerative endeavor is already present in Goethe's most-cited dictum on the matter: "the epoch of World-literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach" (quoted in Damrosch "Introduction" 19–20). Compare this statement to "Godot is coming, quick, we must tidy up the house now!" "At hand"—or "upon us," as it is also translated—

is *an der Zeit*; "hasten" is *beschleunigen*. They are both, unequivocally, about speed. This oft-quoted phrase remains elusive. If the epoch is already here, then why hasten it? "*Everyone* must hasten its approach" acts like a critical-mass resort to self-validation: indeed, if nearly everyone does, the epoch would have, in a sense, arrived. But if that threshold is not met, dynamism suffers. Hospitality entails risks, including the possibility that guests do not show up—or, in this case, join in the active expectation of the new era. The weak spot of convening power is that it is required, in fact, to convene. Its strength is that no one wants to be left without an invitation. Everyone *must*. Goethe's dictum instills enthusiasm (*begeistert*), inaugurating a theme that runs all the way through *JWL*. This coincides with what Pheng Cheah, in a kindred intervention, has rightly called spiritualism: the tendency to think that literary exchange configures a higher, spiritual order (6). Autotelism flies high.

We cannot expect Eckermann's recollections of his conversations with Goethe, or the romantic poet's scattered mentions of the term, to become an oracle for contemporary scholarship. Piecing together what Goethe meant or figuring out what we want to do with it make fascinating pursuits. So should debating the baggage of his aestheticist classicism, a retreat from the politics of his day that Adorno regarded as compromise and Benjamin as capitulation (Hohendahl). (A few lines down, in fact, Goethe invokes the Greeks as ahistorical representation of the beauty of mankind—no need to hurry there). For present purposes, suffice it to note, with a different German thinker, that when dealing with Weltliteratur we appear to be dealing with a thing of beauty. "*Beauty*," says Kant, "is an object's form of *purposiveness* insofar as it is perceived in the object *without the presentation of a purpose*" (17, 236/84). *Zweckmässigkeit ohne Zweck* is an apt description for the enthusiasm that is world literature. A sunset or a poem does not need to exist in the way that a hammer does. Like the hammer, they appear to serve a purpose, but not one in particular. We have seen how the same can be said about World Literature. As with beauty at large, we will do well in taking it with a grain of salt.

Hero Corpses

Fear of death is a driving force behind the rebirth of world literature, a paradigm riddled with ars-longa-vita-brevis anxiety or, in words Damrosch borrows from the metaphysical poet Andrew Marvell, the predicament of not having "world enough and time" (*What* 112). If life is too short to read an expanded canon of books from various cultures, then at least we can approach them more or less superficially. But what if, instead of retreating at the sight of death,

we face it? "Death" we never really see, for it is already an abstract, spiritualist notion. The more radically materialist move is to turn toward the corpse, which the rest of this essay sets out to do. "A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not *signify death*," says Kristeva, "without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live" (3). I am re-introducing a notion that pre-worldlit students were no strangers to: the abject, that which is cast off. Lacanian psychoanalysis holds it as a basis for subjectivity, which defines itself in opposition to what it rejects.[3] "To every ego its object, to every superego its abject," notes Kristeva a few lines above (2). Spiritualist, aspirational World Literature, by merging the represented and the real, inflicts upon itself the violence of thoroughly disowning its own refuse. In an image: the superegoic, deathless ideal critic contemplates monuments of culture, forgetful of the rotting flesh that marble, in a sense, outlives. All along, the corpse teaches how to navigate the tension between literature and world.

I take my cues from the Chilean writer Roberto Bolaño (1953–2003). Consider the following parable, a secondary plotline in *Nocturno de Chile* (2000; *By Night in Chile*), a novella about a dying literary critic. A Vienna court shoemaker, out of equal parts patriotic zeal and the desire to increase his social status, spends all his modest fortune in building a cemetery and sculpture park for the heroes of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He finds a suitable plot of land for that purpose and calls it Heldenberg, Heroes Hill. The joke is on the shoemaker, it seems: he has himself buried there before the outbreak of World War I, with no way of knowing that there would be no more heroes of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, or empire tout court. When Soviet tanks roll in—note the ellipsis—, they only find his vault-like crypt atop the desolated hill, and inside, his corpse, with "eye sockets empty … and his jaw hanging open, as if he were still laughing after having glimpsed immortality" (45). Alas, the joke is on us, readers who embark on similarly futile enterprises, equally unaware of historical contingency, and who will perish all the same. *Cadáver*, Spanish for corpse, originates in the Latin verb for "to fall." This corpse perched upon a hill emphasizes the collapse of high and low, the unavoidable abjection in projection, the decomposing carnality of imagined futures.

Bolaño, whose fiction has very unflattering things to say about critics and idolizes unprofessional readers, is, on one level, lambasting the petty search

3 Mariano Siskind has argued, with Lacan and other psychoanalytical referents, that a desire for worldliness has been a driving force in Latin American writers. The bodily is not central to his argument.

for greatness and subservience to fickle politics that, allegedly, underwrites literary history. (He exaggerates). The Chilean allows for, even cultivates, a naively vitalist, almost anti-intellectual reading of his work. In that vein, Bolaño's answer to the "ars longa, vita brevis" conundrum would be to live more and to read less. But of course, that moment is part of a more complex operation. On a different level, Bolaño is summoning the powers of horror, as Kristeva calls them, to infuse global literary history with a renewed attention to materiality. The literary and cultural transactions across locales that populate the pages of his books, hefty or thin, are all about bodies, not just ideas, traveling. In fact, one can regard the entirety of Bolaño's writing as permutations of three elements: sex, literature, and travel.[4] For a quick illustration, consider a deranged poet who roams the American Southwest in *La literatura nazi en América* (1996; *Nazi Literature in the Americas*). He imagines a centenarian Ernst Jünger and a nonagenarian Leni Riefenstahl, practically corpses, furiously making love: "bones and dead tissue bumping and grinding" (145). It's a harrowing image, somehow aggravated by the figures' fascist proclivities—reminders, like the fine boots the shoemaker made, of the heteronomy of literature. The point here is that World Literature cannot be about pure souls.

Nowhere is this made more apparent in Bolaño than in his short story "El retorno," from *Putas asesinas* (2001), translated by Chris Andrews as "The Return" in an eponymous 2010 collection. (The hilarious B-movie connotations of the original book title, "Murderous Whores," fall flat in English). Like *Memorias Póstumas de Bras Cubas*, by Brazilian master Machado de Assis, it is a first-person account of a deceased person. It is also a story of necrophilia, and a love story at that: the ghost of an unnamed party animal, knocked down by a heart attack on the dance floor, witnesses his body being smuggled from the morgue to a Parisian mansion. There, Jean-Claude Villeneuve, a famous fashion designer, has sex with his corpse. The ghost confronts him, apologies are made and accepted. As the story comes to a close, the morgue smugglers come to pick up the corpse. The ghost narrator chooses to stay in the mansion, while the lonely necrophiliac confides in him or talks to himself, endlessly. The tale is reminiscent of Derrida's "La loi du genre" in its simultaneous unsettling of genre and gender. Genre, because it effectively blurs the boundaries between a fantastic ghost story (like Machado's) and a realist, very straightforward story. Gender,

4 "Kafka comprendía que los viajes, el sexo y los libros son caminos que no llevan a ninguna parte, y que sin embargo son caminos por los que hay que internarse y perderse" (*Gaucho* 158).

because it maps a coming-out confession, a pervert's lot in Western psychiatry pre-DSM-IV, onto a sort of coming-in perversion: a straight man turns gay, a necrophiliac turns domestic partner. As Villeneuve strokes the dead man's genitals, the ghost thinks of Cécile Lamballe, "the woman of his dreams," who left him dead at the disco.

Of the many striking things in this story of abjection, it is the use of language that matters here the most. In the Lacanian tradition, corpses and bodily excretions *always* mediate between world and language, therefore literature. This is the case here, on a meta-level. Readers are not confronted with the real (unless they should choose to have a reading séance at an actual morgue), but read about it. Still, the story conveys to some degree the limit case for language that corpses are. Signification is at a loss. The protagonist ruminates: "my body or my ex-body (I don't know how to put it)" (138); he utters the impossible phrase: "my corpse" (145); he talks about the remains in the first person, with dark humor ("I didn't have the stomach to watch them open me up" 140), only to totter back into the third. This is verisimilar because "he" is only getting used to being dead; just as it is plausible, within the economy of the short story, that the protagonist should forgive and oddly befriend Villeneuve, because "his" body is not *his* anymore, and ultimately, a ghost is neither a "he" nor a "she." The conceit confronts us with the arbitrariness of the signifier, not just pronouns and possessives but the word "corpse" itself. As Natalie Depraz reports in *The Dictionary of Untranslatables*, the German triad Leib/Körper/Fleisch can only be rendered as carne/cuerpo in Spanish or as the rather awkward lived-body/body/flesh in English (561). Case in point, saying "please fetch a chicken corpse from the refrigerator" is both elucidating, as conscientious eaters know well, and ominous. It is funny, too, in a nervous-laughter sort of way: we are what we eat.

While the story builds upon the strong connotations of a word like "corpse," it also relies on smart, silly puns. Read "el retorno" as "el re-torno," a rewriting of the famous potter's wheel (*torno*) scene in the 1980's Hollywood drama *Ghost*, a film the protagonist mentions in passing (136). Or read "Cécile Lamballe" as *ceci l'emballe*, this wraps or covers it, which becomes all the more meaningful in light of Villeneuve's profession as "wrapper of bodies," as one might call a fashion designer. *Emballer* is also used colloquially for seducing, exciting, or making someone get onto a police car, all usages that multiply the possible readings of the story, whether Bolaño intended them or not (Larousse). Further clues can be found when the narrator recounts how Villeneuve contemplates (his) corpse and presumably wonders about the hopes and desires that "had once agitated the contents of that plastic body bag" (144). Also in a thought-provoking passage, from the morgue, before the mansion:

> In life I was afraid of being a toy (or less than a toy) for Cécile, and now that I was dead, that fate, once the cause of my insomnia and pervasive insecurity, seemed sweet, and not without a certain grace [elegancia] and substance: the solidity of the real.
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> 141

In the metaphorical sense of "being a toy for someone," the passage provides characterization of the timid narrator protagonist, who remembers his lover as a femme fatale. She may even have been literally fatal, for all he knows, adding yet another layer, pun intended, to her enveloping last name. But the parenthesis is puzzling: something *less* than the animistic attachment of children to objects is hard to imagine. One reading is that Cécile, the imagined child in the metaphor, plays with him whenever she wants. Another points at a more elementary rapport between a living human and an inanimate object. Not coincidentally, the protagonist yearns for human touch, a common trope in ghost stories, foretelling the sexual acts to follow. I see here Bolaño using all the literary resources at his disposal to try to convey something that lies beyond words, a very primordial chiasm between language and world. Note the overall telos of this story, relevant for World Literature at large: toward the unassailable, uttermost basic actuality of matter.

These ideas come together in Bolaño's unfinished novel, the gargantuan *2666* (2004). If, pace Eco, above, we make lists out of fear of death, then what to make of a list of corpses? "The Part About the Crimes," the most famous and less read, often unbearable section in this long novel, is a plotless mass of corpse narratives. As a list, it provides comfort to readers, who contemplate from a safe distance, much like museum goers experience the sublime painting of a harrowing storm at sea. But the contents of that list are horrendous, resulting in a veritable commotion. The experience of reading this section is a multifarious succession of moral outrage, guilt by omission, morbid fascination, disgust, and anesthesia. In broad strokes, I would like to make one argument about it, to be fleshed out (what's in a metaphor?) elsewhere. Namely, that the section's embeddedness within the novel provides an illustration of what it might mean to bank the future of World Literature on a search for justice, always the more pressing concern than global literary historiography.

"The Part About the Crimes" is the fourth out of five sections in *2666*, each the length of a standard novel. The first provides the overall plot for the novel, which revolves around a quest to find Archimboldi, an incognito German classic, rumored to be in northern Mexico. The second leaves behind the European critics who initially set out to find him and focuses, instead, on the exiled Chilean philosophy professor who hosted them and his daughter, Rosa. The

third, on an African American sports journalist who ends up helping Rosa to leave Mexico for the U.S., where she would presumably be safe from the rampant, narco-trafficking-fueled gender violence that ravishes Mexico both in fiction and in real life. In a sense, "The Part About the Crimes" leaves behind any of the increasingly distant transitive connections to Archimboldi, from his search party, to their acquaintances, to their acquaintances' acquaintances. It focuses, instead, on thinly fictionalized forensic reports of women who *could have been* Rosa. However, there are also enough hints that allow for a paranoid, demonic interpretation ("666"), according to which Archimboldi would somehow be behind all of the crimes. The fifth section dispels that impression, recounting the life and times of the writer, defined by the Second World War and its aftermath. The overarching plot never closes the circle, so to speak. At the end we are left with Archimboldi traveling to Mexico as an old, reclusive, famous writer, searching for his nephew, a brutally violent man introduced in the third section, who is nonetheless imprisoned under unsubstantiated charges.

Perhaps Bolaño would have revised the text into a more rounded novel had he had "world enough and time." (He died of liver failure, at age fifty, in 2003). However, that is unlikely. The not-quite-as-extense, but very sizable *Los detectives salvajes* (1998; *The Savage Detectives*) is also open-ended, and revolves around a similar quest to find an author, in this case Cesárea Tinajero. Both are world-sweeping novels that take readers to places as distant as Bersheeba, Cologne, Kostekino, and Managua, to name a few. African and especially Asian locales are less represented, because Bolaño's worldview is Latin American-centric and also, presumably, for verisimilitude, given the limited literary exchange between the regions. (A great deal of events in his fiction take place in Western Europe, as is also the case for Latin American literature at large: see Cortázar's *Hopscotch*). Bolaño does something of a "bait and switch." In the earlier novel, the mother of all avant-garde poetry is finally found, but dies; in the posthumous novel, the master of twentieth-century literature ultimately peters out. The stories titillate readers, especially their more or less residual, more or less assumed humanistic proclivities and belief in artistic genius—a cumbersome category Bolaño would surely reject for himself. Both novels lead readers, through careful paratactic unfolding, to a materialist horizon. What remains in the more upbeat *The Savage Detectives* is bodily desire and its many ramifications, explored in great detail; what remains in the more somber *2666* is, well, remains.

World Literature deals with phenomena on a global scale, and of international historical significance, all the time. Whether the expansion of the novel form across the continents or the transcultural resonances of epic, our schol-

arly work is increasingly at home among networks and complex interconnections. Meanwhile, six women are assassinated in Mexico every day, which is already a staggering statistic, but the phenomenon is much larger worldwide: according to the UN, Mexico ranks sixteenth in femicides.[5] Why shouldn't literary scholars, then, engage with something as significant, prevalent, rhizomatic, and urgent? One blasé answer would be: because we are not activists, journalists, criminologists, or forensics. Neither is Bolaño, but he assimilates all four discourses to a significant extent, both in the research behind the novel and in the writing itself. Without ceasing to be a work of literary art, however narrowly we wish to construe one, *2666* stretches the limits of the form so as to rub against those other domains. The forensic hermeneutics in the passage above is a case in point: in a mise en abyme, coroners "read" cadaveric fauna for clues, while readers do the same.

Understatedly, as to avoid impossible comparison, *2666* traces an arc from genocide to femicide. Explicit mentions of the Shoah are scarce, but the novel evokes it through the Nazi barbarism that surrounds Hans Reiter, Archimboldi's given name. Bolaño may have drawn inspiration from Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and certainly from their impulse to call into question the entirety of Western civilization in light of the horrors of their day. After a careful close reading of perpetrator's rationale in Sade, they note: "the [purported] justification of hatred for woman that represents her as intellectually and physically inferior, and bearing the brand of domination on her forehead, is equally that of hatred for the Jews" (112). Adorno and Horkheimer regard anti-semitism as an unfolding of the contradictions of enlightenment thought, which they in turn seek to truly enlighten. If the comparison between Bolaño and Adorno and Horkheimer holds, then future readings of the novel will do well in looking for insights about the broad cultural dynamics that pave the way to femicide. As the present argument is concerned, the takeaway is that Bolaño's thrust to approximate the symbolic and the real, however impossible a task to complete, drives him all the way from Hollywoodesque necrophilia into facing a major social issue. It is a phenomenon whose comprehension, let alone resolution, still exceeds us. Bolaño writes the shortest, most modest global Latin American novel necessary to approximate the scale and world historical significance of its horror.

The Chilean is not alone, among post-1989 Latin American writers, in confronting extreme forms of the abject. For a brief overview, consider the Colombian Evelio Rosero's *Los ejércitos* (2006; *The Armies*), a jarringly musical por-

5 As noted by Arnoldo Kraus in the Mexican newspaper *El Universal*.

trayal of paramilitary violence in the country's backlands, which purposefully involves corpse abuse in ways unfit to describe here. The novel extends readers' capacity to take in the horror of history, while remaining empathetic. Or the Argentine José Pablo Feinmann's light-hearted short story "Dieguito," where an idiot child by that name sews back together the corpse of global football icon Diego Armando Maradona. When his father asks him what he is up to, he explains: "Dieguito Armando Maradona." It's a hysterically funny punchline if one is familiar with the uses and abuses of the Spanish gerund, as in *armando*: to assemble. The mind reels when one realizes how that abject figure may be synecdoche for Argentina. For her part, the Chilean Diamela Eltit, an immensely influential figure whose translations into English unfortunately lag behind, has pegged her writing to the suffering real in numerous ways, resulting in dense, experimental works like *Impuesto a la carne* (2010). The title is already informative, wordplay for "a tax on meat" and "an imposition on the flesh." The Guatemalan Rodrigo Rey Rosa's *El material humano* (2009) fictionalizes criminology archives to produce a textured collage of past and present violence, while his countryman Eduardo Halfón's short story "Han vuelto las aves" (2015) subtly hints at the corpse of an assassinated community leader, via negativa, by dwelling on the overgrown coffee plants left behind in the family plot.

Honorary Latin American writer Patti Smith, punk rocker and memoirist, dedicated her hundred-verse, stanza-less poem "Hecatomb" to Roberto Bolaño. (She has also championed the Argentine César Aira on numerous occasions). A few relevant lines include: "A poet's coat is skin," "A poem of perpetual death/ Trumping the Greeks/ In the precinct of the muse." Smith is clearly ruminating on corpses: of Juárez's women, fictionalized in Bolaño's Santa Teresa ("a city shaped like a dress"); of the Chilean author whose reputation caught like wildfire after his death ("we the worthless/ unsolicited revelators/ cash in our chips"). Lest anyone think that an orientation toward the corpse is all about macabre realism, Colombian draughtsman José Antonio Suárez, in a beautifully illustrated booklet by Medellín's Ediciones SML, renders the sacrifice of one hundred oxen in the poem as brightly-colored, deceivingly naive iterations of pierced cattle.

Both Suárez and Smith take something from the playbook of Roberto Bolaño: in the very slow build-up to the crimes, he teaches a sensibility toward human "flesh" by way of "meat." In the first section of *2666*, "The Part About the Critics," cosmopolitan European academics casually compare their lecturing at the small local university to a massacre, and themselves to butchers, gutters, and disembowelers (136). Fittingly, a few pages earlier, they are treated to barbecue:

> On the patio where the barbecue was being held they gazed at several smoke pits [múltiples agujeros humeantes]. The professors of the University of Santa Teresa displayed a rare talent for feats of country living …. [T]hey dug up the barbecue, and a smell of meat and hot earth spread over the patio in a thin curtain of smoke that enveloped them all like the fog that drifts before a murder, and vanished mysteriously as the women carried the plates to the table, leaving clothing and skin impregnated with its aroma.
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> 130

The rapport between lecturing and murder is not causal, but neither is it casual. Their proximity in the plot is about allowing the stench of death to permeate all the seemingly impervious realms of culture. The synesthesia of female clothing smelling of meat, so poignant in this context, brings this point home.

As we have seen, Bolaño is one of several authors to contemplate horror and ask what is to be done. Not just in terms of advocacy, but as writers (or visual artists): what needs to happen to form? This is a question critics can adapt and adopt for their own practice and methods, again, whether they are activist scholars or not. In my mind, a significant part of what distinguishes worldlit approaches is a certain transcendental condition: we write with a renewed awareness of the world, as if in the presence of more and less distant peers who have deeper knowledge of other traditions and languages. I've been making the case to invigorate that awareness with the bodily. Writing literary history and engaging with the world should not be an either/or proposition.

Transcultural Materialism

The narrativization of corpses provides a bridge between the agency of language and the agency of (other) matter. The word "corpse," like the word "meat," have an almost totemic quality: they prescribe a differentiated behavior between human and nonhuman animals and their remains. Denaturalizing the usage of these terms can have powerful effects. It would be callous to refer to a loved one's corpse as "corpse"—let alone meat! There one would rely on an impossible possessive, saying "her" and "his" *body*, although bodies must be alive to merit the name, and ownership, too, requires life. The abject and its misnomers bring us closer to humanity in a non-humanist sense: rather than exceptionality from the rest of nature, they underscore the continuity. Generally speaking, World Literature has been overly humanist. Meanwhile, other

contemporary trends are markedly post-anthropocentric, be they animal studies, new materialism, post-humanism, and so on. It is time to have these trends bear upon each other.

For one, Thomsen's *The New Human in Literature* (2014) has done so persuasively regarding the thematization of post-human topics—prosthetics, living longer lives, and so on. Through readings of Woolf, Achebe, Céline, DeLillo and others, the study makes an eloquent case for how literature can contribute to thinking critically about biomedical innovation, and conversely, how modern science can inform hermeneutic practices. However, the more fundamental question of the relationship between world and language, therefore literature, holds. The same is true of Vilashini Cooppan's timely proposal for a nonlinear history of world literature, understood as non-hierarchical description of the phenomenon as networked flow. My proposal supplements, rather than contradicts, the latter approximation, albeit with a different approach to death, which she approximates via Kittler (111–2). Where she notes that all books are books of the dead, I would—and the difference, as we have seen, is not negligible—emphasize that they are books of the corpse.

Cheah warns against the "teleology of the concept," a trait of Hegelian Eurocentrism. As he puts it, "as spirit, the concept develops itself by externalizing itself in the sphere of objective existence that is other to it" (58). A spiritualist telos for World Literature would see its job accomplished when the world becomes legible to itself at the level of abstraction, as if the word "corpse" could produce the same impact that contemplating one such human thing does. Leaving the institutional project of World Literature with no clear sense of direction, as purposeless enthusiasm, opens the door for the prevailing ideologies of the present to determine the whole enterprise. Busyness, the productive dispersion of attention, blindly exclusionary ecumenism, and trickle-down economies of cultural prestige rank high on the list of teloi this would impose. Instead, we could take a closer look at the soil under our feet. My interest in corpse narratives belongs to a broader ongoing project on what I call "transcultural materialism": a mode of critical story-telling that cuts across the nature-culture divide to affect our rapport to things and reassess our place in human/nonhuman history. World Literature has yet to assimilate how much of the world that is *not* human; the abject, in its liminality, is a useful starting point.

Deconstruction and poststructuralism saw every word as a potential pun, its disseminating energy waiting to be liberated. Building on corpse narratives, in this essay I have attempted to do something similar with regard to "World Literature." All permutations are welcome: world and literature, world or literature, war literature, worm literature—iteratur. Such errancies will bring us

closer to the real than reifying the notion would. Contemporary Latin American literature, a fascinating field of study that increasingly welcomes global readers through better, timelier translations, bears this out. Let the literatures of the world theorize, as they are theorized upon. Just temper Goethe's haste and its teleology of progress with a dialectical, paradoxical image. One that Bolaño puts forward on several occasions: "los grandes cementerios a la velocidad de la luz" (the great cemeteries at the speed of light).

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