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THE BORDERLINES OF THEODICY

Review of Rafael Luévano, *Woman-Killing in Juárez: Theodicy at the Border*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2012.

No one pays attention to these killings, but the secret of the world is hidden in them

—Roberto Bolaño, *2666* 2008¹

In *2666*, his posthumously published masterwork of a novel, Roberto Bolaño paints a painfully vivid portrait of a city on the verge of collapse. Civic decay, economic exploitation, and sadistic violence are all found in Santa Teresa, the thinly veiled version of Juárez that serves as the novel's backdrop. It is a city plagued by crime and corruption, desolation and despair. Santa Teresa is home to gangsters, pimps, and religious desecrators. It is also home to murderers.

The mysterious murders of Santa Teresa's women are documented in the fourth part of *2666*, "The Part About the Crimes." Part four is the longest section of the novel and it offers, among other things, testimony. In frank and unflinching detail, it recounts the many deaths, the seemingly senseless and unexplained deaths, of Santa Teresa's/Juárez's most vulnerable inhabitants. Bolaño's novel does not redeem these deaths, nor does it attempt to. All it does is document them. But documenting them, listening to and presenting the human stories behind the statistics, is nonetheless significant, ethical work. As Rafael Luévano writes in the preface to his *Woman-Killing in Juárez*, "the documentation of the murders in Juárez is an essential act of bearing witness."²

Though one uses the tools of fiction and the other those of non-fiction, both Bolaño and Luévano make use of narrative. The former's fictional narrative invites empathetic response, and the latter's use of "narrative theology" reminds us that his discussion of theodicy is not to be treated as an academic, theological matter, but as a matter of personal, lived experience. Whether fictional or documentary, narrative deals with the realm of concrete, not the abstract. One of the strengths of *Woman-Killing in Juárez* is that it, like *2666*, refuses to treat the Juárez murders as so much fodder for escapist theorizing. Both Bolaño and Luévano recognize that the murders of women in Juárez—more than five hundred in the past two decades—are a reality, not a metaphor.

¹ Roberto Bolaño, *2666*, trans. Natasha Wimmer (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 348.

² Rafael Luévano, *Woman-Killing in Juárez: Theodicy at the Border* (New York: Orbis Books, 2011), xvi.

Traditionally, theodicy has been understood as the attempted explanation of evil in the world. If God is all knowing, all powerful, and – most importantly – all merciful, then how can evil be allowed to run rampant in God’s creation? While this understanding of theodicy has served believers well enough for centuries, from Boethius on, it could be that such a conception of theodicy no longer speaks to us; it no longer consoles us. Especially after the unprecedented brutality of the twentieth century, it may very well be that theodical inquiry has taken on an entirely different meaning altogether.³ It could even be that the real problem of theodicy today is, as the American philosopher Stanley Cavell once suggested, not so much to explain God’s ways to humanity, but to God.⁴ Perhaps it is God who needs convincing – as much as we do, if not more – that human life is not merely, as Hobbes had it, “nasty, brutish, and short.”

Far from resorting to theodicy as a way to explain the phenomenon of woman-killing in Juárez, Luévano’s book’s suggests that these murders be taken as a challenge to theodicy itself. It maintains that the Juárez murders are a “theological event.”⁵ But this fact should not lead us into abstract and abstruse theologizing. To the contrary, Luévano persuasively argues that the killings, which some social scientists have taken to labeling as feminicides, should not be treated as if they posed merely metaphysical or theoretical challenges to belief.⁶ Translating the suffering of these victims into the language of traditional conceptions of theodicy would represent “a grossly insensitive response to the humanity of feminicide victims.”⁷ The only way forward, at least in Luévano’s perspective, is to seek a concrete, existential theodicy, one that might address “particular sufferings,” sufferings which “make a claim on us.”⁸

That claim is articulated on many different levels in this book. Part I of *Woman-Killing in Juárez* offers a largely journalistic depiction of the murders. It alternates between first-hand accounts – from both Luévano and surviving family members of some of the victims whom he interviewed – and wider, social-scientific analyses. Surveying the economic, geopolitical, and socio-cultural contexts of the feminicides, Luévano finds many plausible explanations as to why so many women in particular have been targeted in this most violent of border towns (“the murder capital of the world” according to some), so close and yet so very far away from El Paso, a city with one of the lowest crime rates in the United States.⁹ Ultimately, however, the many discourses that seek to explain – and occasionally, to explain away – the sufferings of these women as a result simply of NAFTA, or of narco-trafficking, or even of a kind of gender backlash against

³ On the transformations of theodicy after the Second World War, for example, see my “Reconsidering the slaughter bench of history: genocide, theodicy, and the philosophy of history,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 13:1-2 (March-June, 2011): 85-105.

⁴ Stanley Cavell, “Ending the Waiting Game: A Reading of Beckett’s *Endgame*,” *Must We Mean What We Say?* Updated Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002), 140.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 8. On feminicide, see, for instance, the work of anthropologist Victoria Sanford, “From Genocide to Feminicide: Impunity and Human Rights in Twenty-First Century Guatemala,” *Journal of Human Rights* 7 (2008): 104-122.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 19, 34.

increasingly independent women, run the risk of abstraction. To be sure, Luévano sees a dangerous “patriarchal discourse” at work beneath all of these developments, but it is one that seeps into every thread of society’s fabric.¹⁰ Precisely because the murders in Juárez do not have a single cause, or a single explanation, they remain open challenges to our conceptions of suffering, justice, and faith, respectively.

After surveying three different understandings of suffering—as ontological, historical, and/or moral experience—Luévano turns in the second part of the book to the expressly theological consequences of the murders. Stressing “God’s compassion and solidarity with all sufferers,” he searches for “a comprehensive and humane theology” that might “make sense out of the suffering and the killings of hundreds of women.”¹¹

Making sense out of what appears to be nothing other than senseless violence is a tall order. But this is precisely what traditional theodicy promises. It attempts nothing less than the rationalizing of irrational pain. In doing so, however, it effectively exonerates God; it removes God from the concrete reality of human suffering in the world. Whether traditional theodicy explains evil as a necessary consequence of God’s providence, or as supreme mystery, the result is often the same: submission and inaction. One of the things Luévano finds most objectionable about traditional theodicy is that it often leads to “indifferent resignation.”¹²

Luévano’s discussion of the problem of apathy reveals just how radical his understanding of theodicy is. Instead of leading to passive contemplation, he suggests that theodicy should in fact lead to active engagement. Theodicy, for Luévano, is a call to action, a challenge to apathetic indifference. Building on the insights of Rollo May and Paul Tillich, Luévano suggests that apathy is everywhere. It is, as May had warned decades earlier, “a plague endemic to modern society.”¹³ Consequently, if theodicy is to have a purpose in the current context, it must play a role in overturning our endemic apathy, our closed and guarded response to the pain and suffering of others. It must help us to confront the daily indignities and injustices that contemporary society tolerates. Rather than offering intellectual and metaphysical comfort, the safety of an easily digestible explanation for seemingly inexplicable events, theodicy should provoke us, unsettle us, and ultimately move us to side with those who are suffering.

Disturbingly, but unsurprisingly, Luévano finds that apathy is the prevalent response to the murders of women in Juárez. Not only does this apathy deny the “women’s humanity,” it also threatens to damage our own moral sensibilities. “When we turn away from human pain,” Luévano writes, “we deaden our own capacity to feel.”¹⁴ And without the capacity to feel we lose the ability to seek

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 69, 68.

¹² *Ibid.*, 82.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 88.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 95.

out and to foster solidarity with those who have, and those who continue to suffer. Luévano attempts to articulate a conception of theodicy that might do a small amount of justice to women such as Coral Arrieta Medina and Julia Hernández-Hernández, just two of the many victims whose stories he recounts.

In the end, Luévano's is a theodicy of questions more than answers, of protest more than submission. His version of theodicy asks us not just to understand, but also to "take on the burden of another."¹⁵ In the latter chapters of *Woman-Killing in Juárez*, Luévano finds useful elements in the writings of such prominent Protestant and Catholic theologians as Jürgen Moltmann, Dorothee Soelle, and Johann Baptist Metz. It is Metz who proves the most influential here, particularly because of his Frankfurt School-inspired emphasis on "*praxis*," as well as his notion of "dangerous memory."¹⁶ Channeling the paradoxically Marxist messianism of Walter Benjamin, Metz argued that even past suffering lays a claim upon us. It disrupts the apathy of the self-satisfied, anaesthetized present and calls out for our attention, for our solidarity and action. Indeed, Metz went so far as to hold out "hope for a revolution on behalf of everyone, those who suffer unjustly, those long ago forgotten, indeed, even the dead."¹⁷ In Metz, Luévano finds a challenge not only to traditional theodicy, but also to contemporary apathy. If theodicy does nothing else but force us to pay attention, to "actively attend" to the reality of pain, suffering, and injustice around us—a reality brought home to us by the events in Juárez, but not limited to them—it will remain beneficial.¹⁸ But the true test of any theodicy—of any theology, really—is whether it advances "protest through both prayer and action as valid Christian responses to suffering."¹⁹ Paying attention to suffering is important, working to end it even more so.

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¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 140.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 112, 114.

¹⁷ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 116.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 137.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 133.