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DENATURALIZING THE MARKET, REVALUATING THE BODY: NEOLIBERAL BIOPOLITICS IN LATIN AMERICAN LITERATURE AND FILM, 1990-2010

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ABSTRACT

During the last three decades of the twentieth century, neoliberalism was the dominant political economic discourse in Latin America, as many countries implemented a series of reforms to promote free markets and free trade. Yet neoliberalism is more than merely a set of economic practices; it is an ideology that generalizes economic principles to all aspects of life. This dissertation analyzes a selection of Latin American novels and films, produced over a twenty-year period from 1990 to 2010: Central do Brasil, directed by Walter Salles; Morena en rojo by Myriam Laurini; Cronicamente Inviável, directed by Sergio Bianchi; María llena eres de gracia, directed by Joshua Marston; 2666 by Roberto Bolaño; La Virgen de los sicarios by Fernando Vallejo; and O Matador by Patrícia Melo. All of these texts use depictions of the commodification of the human body as a way to contest neoliberal ideology. They portray certain bodies as contemporary manifestations of the homo sacer, the figure developed by Giorgio Agamben to describe human life that has no value in any social sphere, and thus is disposable and may be eliminated with impunity. This study argues that these texts utilize the concept of disposable life in order to signal to their audience how neoliberal capitalism makes certain segments of the population vulnerable to bodily harm, thereby denaturalizing neoliberal assumptions about human behavior. Furthermore, these texts emphasize how ordinary people contribute to creating
an atmosphere of disposability through seemingly benign acts such as consumption. In this way, these texts force their audiences to recognize the ways in which they are complicit with the neoliberal system.
The research and writing of this thesis is dedicated to everyone who helped along the way.

First and foremost, I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Adam Lifshey, for his support during the entire process, for his feedback on my writing at various stages, and for all of his words of encouragement. I would also like to extend my gratitude to the other members of my dissertation committee, Dr. Gwen Kirkpatrick and Dr. Laura Demaria, for their invaluable feedback. I am also especially thankful to Dr. Joanne Rappaport, for her assistance and kind words of support, and to Dr. Patricia Vieira, for her feedback on early stages of this study.

I would also like to thank my graduate student colleagues. A special thanks goes out to Maureen Russo and Anthony Perry for their solidarity during different stages of the writing process, and to Ana Maria Ferreira, Monica Simorangkir, and Maisha Mitchell for their moral support during my entire time as a graduate student at Georgetown.

Lastly I must thank my family and friends who supported me on this long journey. I am especially grateful for my parents, my sister Allison, my grandparents, and all of my cousins, aunts, and uncles. I’d also like to thank my friends, who encouraged me throughout this process, among them Claire, Paula, Christina, Margaret, and Mike.

Many thanks,

Ashley B. Caja
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction ...................................................................................................................... 1

Chapter I
Organ Trafficking and Neoliberal Governmentality in Central do Brasil,
Morena en rojo, and Cronicamente Inviável ................................................................. 19

Chapter II
The Denaturalization of Neoliberal Discourse in Maria llena eres de gracia .......... 55

Chapter III
Las muertes cinematográficas: The Production and Consumption of Disposable
Women in Roberto Bolaño’s 2666 ............................................................................... 87

Chapter IV
Las muertes habituales: Disposable Men in La Virgen de los sicarios and O
Matador ........................................................................................................................ 125

Afterword ..................................................................................................................... 171

Bibliography ................................................................................................................ 173
**INTRODUCTION**

Starting in the 1970s, neoliberalism, a school of thought that argues that the free market is the best guide for social organization, began to dominate the political economic landscape of Latin America. The first experiments in neoliberal state formation occurred in Chile and Argentina, as authoritarian regimes supported by the United States implemented economic reforms to create free markets. After these early efforts, other Latin American nations soon followed, as governments privatized industries, signed free trade agreements, and deregulated markets. Yet neoliberalism is more than just a set of economic practices meant to increase and protect market freedoms. Neoliberalism is a hegemonic mode of discourse that structures how individuals understand the world around them. At its essence is the generalization of market principles throughout the social body.

Applying market principles to all aspects of human life has dangerous consequences. Giving the market free reign gives way to economic practices that treat human beings as objects, as can be summarized by Nancy Scheper-Hughes’s warning about the nature of markets, which are: “[b]y their nature, […] indiscriminate, promiscuous and inclined to reduce everything, including human beings, their labor, their bodies, and their sexual and reproductive capacities to the status of commodities, things that can be bought, sold, traded, and stolen” (“Commodity Fetishism,” 43). The neoliberal worldview, in judging everything according to a calculus of supply and demand, reduces human bodies to exchange value. Consequently, a human being is only valuable so long as she is perceived as having value in a strictly commercial sense. At the same time, neoliberal discourse privatizes social problems such as poverty. According to the neoliberal worldview, those who have not succeeded simply have not been effective
Thus, neoliberal discourse devalues certain individuals and concurrently displaces blame onto those same individuals.

The most insidious aspect of neoliberal ideology is that it presents its understanding of human behavior, grounded in the market, as common sense, as the natural order of things. If this worldview remains uncontested, it limits one’s sense of what is possible. Jason Read discusses this aspect of neoliberal ideology when he writes that it is not that neoliberalism prohibits certain actions, rather “they are not seen as possible, closed off by a society made up of self-interested individuals” (36). As neoliberal ideology has greater influence on the creation of subjectivities and the shaping of societies, imagining a future other than one dominated by market interests becomes increasingly difficult.

Even as neoliberalism became a hegemonic force in Latin America, many questioned if neoliberal reforms were successful. In 2006, Paul Krugman suggested that “the perception of most Latin Americans is that ‘neoliberal’ policies have been a failure: the promised takeoff in economic growth never arrived, while income inequality has worsened” (Undeserving). Doubts about the effectiveness of such reforms may have increased opposition to neoliberal practice.

But what can be said for opposition to neoliberal ideology? Several novels and films from Latin America, published or released from 1990 to 2010, point to one way of contesting the hegemony of the neoliberal worldview. These texts feature representations of the commercialization of the human body in order to denaturalize the generalization of market principles to all aspects of life.

“Entrepreneurs of self.”¹ Thus, neoliberal discourse devalues certain individuals and concurrently displaces blame onto those same individuals.

¹ “Entrepreneurs of self” is a term employed by Foucault to express the relationship between work and the worker that neoliberalism seeks to promote. Instead of being a victim of alienation, the worker “[is] for himself his own capital, [is] for himself his own producer, [is] for himself the source of [his] earnings” (Birth, 226). The metaphor “entrepreneur of self” is an attractive one that encourages workers to buy into capitalism, transforming the worker from a victim to the author of his own success or failure.
They highlight the ways that neoliberalism makes certain individuals disposable. These bodies, perceived as having nothing to offer to the market and, by extension, to society as a whole, can be eliminated with impunity.

Displaying how neoliberalism victimizes those who are not successful entrepreneurs of self is only the first step in countering neoliberal ideology. As Read indicates, it is not enough to reveal “the truth of social existence that it misses, or to enumerate its various failings as policy” (36). Concurrently with illustrating how neoliberalism devalues and dehumanizes the poor, a discourse that seeks to oppose neoliberalism needs to alert its audience to the myriad ways that they too have been shaped by neoliberalism, have assimilated the neoliberal understanding of human behavior, and have contributed to creating an environment that marks other human beings as disposable. In other words, a critique of neoliberal ideology must also force its audience to consider their own complicity with the neoliberal system. The texts in this dissertation engage with the idea of complicity in different ways, but all of them emphasize the participation of local, private actors in the exploitation of human bodies. This focus on individuals outshines any concerns about the state exercising excessive power over its citizens or about the participation of foreign companies in plundering national resources.

This analysis of how several Latin American texts contest the neoliberal worldview starts by examining how these texts portray the neoliberal system as one that produces what Giorgio Agamben has called bare life. In developing this concept, Agamben uncovers a figure from Roman Antiquity: the *homo sacer*, the man who “may be killed and yet not sacrificed” (8). Although the prohibition against sacrifice may at first seem contradictory, this limitation means that the *homo sacer* is excluded from all political order, including religion. In short, bare life is
life stripped of all value in any social sphere. For Agamben, the *homo sacer*, as the embodiment of bare life, is the original act of sovereignty, for his existence comes from the sovereign’s declaration that the normal order does not apply in his case and therefore signals the state of exception. Even if the figure of the *homo sacer* suggests that bare life has existed for millennia, Agamben perceives that a change occurred when the modern state became a biopolitical one: biological life and bare life have become indistinguishable. The figure of the *homo sacer* no longer exists because virtually anyone can become bare life (115).

When he describes the modern state as biopolitical, Agamben refers to the work of Michel Foucault. Foucault understood biopolitics as the new technologies focused on regulating life that emerged the nineteenth century and that shifted the focus of the state from disciplining individuals to controlling the population at a demographic level. For Foucault, the technologies that allow this are not as important as the transformation in the relationship between the state and the individual that they provoke. Once the state assumed the responsibility of improving life, it still needed to maintain its right to take life away in certain circumstances, for example, as punishment for crimes or in times of war. However, now it had to justify exercising this right. To resolve this problem, a biopolitical regime must establish a biological relationship between one person’s life and another person’s death; the state can take away life so long as the life taken away represents some sort of threat to the biological health of the population as a whole.

Following Foucault, Agamben interprets the modern state as one that seeks to regulate life. In doing so, it constantly produces bare life, for it is impossible to value or politicize life without simultaneously making a judgment about which life is not politically relevant and therefore can be eliminated without consequence (Agamben 139). Thus the modern state, by trying to maintain
the health and life of a people or a race, inevitably produces within itself the bare life that it
cannot tolerate, and therefore must create territories of exception as a hidden mechanism through
which the state attempts to cleanse the population of those who allegedly represent a risk to their
survival.

The theorization of bare life is anchored in a notion of sovereignty that is not as relevant
in a globalized, neoliberal context in which power has been diffused. Yet the concept can be
applied to a world in which the power of the sovereign state is on decline. Agamben himself
alludes to situations in which economic systems mark certain bodies as *homines sacri*. For
example, he notes that the democratic-capitalist project of international economic development
has transformed the population of the Third World into bare life due to the fact that it frames
poverty, and consequently members of the poorer classes, as something that must be eliminated.
On the other hand, Brett Levinson indicates that the globalized market produces what he calls
“discardable life” or “minimal life,” which, albeit nominally different from bare life, essentially
refers to the same concept. The market classifies its victims as unproductive and valueless, and
therefore they are also individuals who have to be eliminated, because their continued existence
threatens to harm the health or productivity of society as a whole.²

The term neoliberalism is often used to refer to economic practices meant to promote
radically free markets: privatization, deregulation, free trade agreements, elimination of welfare
programs, etc. While this understanding captures many important features of neoliberalism, it
fails to account for how neoliberalism differs from classic economic liberalism, as many scholars

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² Jaime Osorio has also applied Agamben’s concept to the neoliberal context, arguing that the worker is the *homo
sacer* of neoliberal society.
have noted, among them Michel Foucault, David Harvey, and Wendy Brown. For all of these scholars, neoliberalism differs from economic liberalism in that these concrete practices are backed by a political rationality that seeks to apply market principles to all areas of human life. According to Foucault, neoliberalism is the “absolute generalization” of the economic form of the market throughout the entire social body (Birth 243). Harvey comes to a similar conclusion, stating that neoliberalism “seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market” (3). Likewise, Brown argues that, under neoliberalism, the human being is “configured exhaustively as homo economicus” and “all dimensions of human life are cast in terms of market rationality” (“Neo-liberalism”). This expansion of market principles to all areas of human life occurs not only on the discursive level, but also in practice, as proponents of neoliberalism develop institutional practices to enact a worldview that reduces all to a calculus of supply and demand.

Neoliberalism took hold in Latin America starting with the September 11, 1973 coup against Salvador Allende. After gaining control of Chile with the support of the United States, Augusto Pinochet reversed the “Chilean Path to Socialism,” adopting policies advocated by Milton Friedman and a group of Chilean economists educated in the United States known as the “Chicago Boys,” including privatization, the deregulation of markets, and free trade. According to Harvey, the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile was the first experiment in neoliberal state formation, a part of a “neoliberal turn” that was occurring across the globe. From then until the end of the twentieth century, if not beyond, neoliberalism dominated the political economic landscape of most Latin American nations. Direct or indirect external forces aided with the implementation of neoliberalism, as international financial institutions required economic reforms that would replace the previous model of import-substitute industrialization with
practices that favored free markets and free trade as a condition for debt assistance and development aid.

Alongside the neoliberal turn of policy and its attempts to generalize the market to all aspects of human life, there was a neoliberal turn in language. After imposing neoliberal practices by direct or indirect force, its proponents also had to justify them and make them seem more appealing. Postmodernist discourse proved to be a useful tool in this process of manipulating language to portray neoliberalism in a more favorable light. Fredric Jameson first signaled this relationship in 1984, arguing that postmodernism was the cultural logic of the new, emerging stage of capitalism: “postmodern (or multinational) space is not merely a cultural ideology or fantasy, but has a genuine historical (and socioeconomic) reality as the third great original expansion of capitalism around the globe” (49). According to Jameson, postmodernism attempts to distract from the reality of advanced capitalism and disguise its contradictions. Writing nearly ten years later, Martín Hopenhayn analyzed how neoliberalism has capitalized on postmodern rhetoric. He linked commonplaces of postmodern discourse with the elements of free market doctrine that they have been used to promote: celebration of diversity and individualism with the celebration of the market and privatization; criticism of political and aesthetic vanguards with the criticism of state planning and regulation of industry; and the critique of ideologies with the critique of Marxism (99). Euphemisms became an important, effective marketing technique:

It is more attractive to talk about diversity than the market, about desire than the maximization of profits, about play than conflict, about personal creativity than the private appropriation of the economic surplus […]. It is more seductive to speak in favor
of autonomy than against planning, or in favor of the individual than against the state (and against public expenditure and social welfare policies). In this way, the social contradictions of capitalism […] disappear behind the exaltation of forms and language (100).

The goal of this sort of rhetoric is not just to make a market-dominated system appear desirable, but also to convince the public that it is the most natural option. It has enjoyed success to this end; several scholars have noted the hegemonic nature of neoliberal discourse. As early as 1991, attempts to establish the belief that “the market is human nature” as doxa led Jameson to identify it as the “most crucial terrain of ideological struggle in our time” (263-64). In 1998, Pierre Bourdieu lamented that the presuppositions of neoliberal discourse were too often taken as self-evident. More recently, Harvey remarked that this hegemonic mode of discourse has been incorporated into what many consider as common-sense to the extent that people increasingly see it as a “necessary, even wholly natural” way of governing the social order (Brief, 40-41).

One way to encourage the view that these ideological constructs are natural has been to link them to the human body. Of course, the idea of the body is, in itself, a theoretical construct. As scholars including Caroline Bynum, Rosi Braidotti, and Arthur Kroker have discussed, there is no consensus on what the body is. Bodily categories once considered stable have been shown to be socially constructed. For example, though some considered sex to be a relatively fixed biological category in comparison to the socially-constructed concept gender, scholars like Thomas Laqueur have demonstrated that it was not considered an ontological category before the seventeenth century. Despite this inability to define and delimit the body, body imagery continues to pervade all types of discourse. Kroker affirms that images of the corporeal body are
“the key visual language of contemporary politics” (1). The persistence of bodily imagery shows that the body, whatever its limits may be, remains a powerful symbol, perhaps because individuals are confronted daily by the material fact of what they take to be their bodies. Proponents of neoliberalism have tapped into this symbolism, utilizing language associated with the body to make neoliberal assumptions seem natural. Emily Martin, in her fieldwork on contemporary concepts of the immune system, discovered that people tend to describe the functions of the immune system with the same vocabulary that economists use to speak of movements of global capital (“End,” 123). Both the immune system and capital must be flexible and adaptable, in order for a body or an economy to be considered “fit” (Martin, “Flexible,” 248).

In response to proponents of neoliberalism appropriating bodily imagery in this way, certain writers and filmmakers also have resorted to corporeal imagery in order to contest neoliberal theory and practice. Novels such as Morena en rojo by Myriam Laurini, 2666 by Roberto Bolaño, O Matador by Patrícia Melo, and La Virgen de los sicarios by Fernando Vallejo, and films like Central do Brasil, directed by Walter Salles, Cronicamente Inviável, directed by Sergio Bianchi, and María llena eres de gracia, directed by Joshua Marston, denaturalize neoliberalism. First, they show how neoliberal practice has denaturalized the body by presenting the human body as a commodity. Here, commodity is not synonymous with “good,” nor is it used in the strict Marxian sense of the term. Instead, what these texts emphasize is more accurately what Arjun Appadurai has called the “commodity situation” of the body: “the situation in which its exchangeability (past, present, or future) for some other thing is its socially relevant future” (37). Once it has been established that in a neoliberal system human bodies are
reduced to exchange value, and consequently only valuable so long as they are perceived as
having value in a strictly commercial sense, these texts emphasize disposability by showing how
these vulnerable bodies are disappeared, harmed, or killed.

Certainly, disappeared, damaged and deceased bodies have been a recurring motif in
Latin American literature long before the neoliberal period. Without clearly defined national
borders or historical collective identities, the elite classes of newly independent states in the
Americas resorted to bodily elements to define the new nations, whether in terms of blood (racial
purity or mixture), origin (native or immigrant birth), reproduction, labor, or health (Pitt 4).
While bodies have been key elements of national discourse, the physical bodies of citizens of
Latin American nations have frequently experienced abuse, often at the hands of the state.
Kristen Pitt has identified the disappearing citizen as a key figure in Latin American literature
from independence to the dictatorships of the late twentieth century. Additionally she argues
that Latin American texts make use of the *homo sacer* figure in order to stress unease about the
state’s power over the bodies of its citizens (173).

Apart from Pitt’s focus on how literature in the Americas has used the body to express
cconcerns about political systems, there is also a longstanding tradition of using the body to
criticize economic systems, such as slavery or capitalism. Particularly in texts that can be
classified as *novelas de denuncia,3* certain authors have used sick or mutilated bodies to

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3 Also known as *novelas sociales, novelas de denuncia* is a broad term that refers to any novel that explicitly
denounces a political or social problem. It includes texts belonging to various subgenres, such as the indigenist
novel, the *novela de la tierra*, and the anti-imperialist novel. This last category can be further divided into subgenres
based on the type of resource exploited, such as the *novela bananera* or the *novela petrolera*. Ramos-Harthun notes
that the social novel has received minimal critical attention since an emphasis on social or political content has led to
a perceived lack of literary or artistic value (3).
denounce unsafe or unsanitary working conditions and the physical and psychological effects of alienation on the worker; or as a trope to convey the cannibalistic nature of capitalism. Other texts written long before the neoliberal period even include portrayals of the literal commodification of bodies and parts, such as Jorge Luis Borges’s “El cruel redentor Lazarus Morrel,” in which the titular character discovers a way to capitalize on slaves by helping them escape their masters, selling them to ones further north, and then repeating this process until reaching states where slavery is abolished, and Augusto Monterroso’s “Míster Taylor,” in which a North American who has relocated to Latin America starts a business exporting the shrunken heads of an Amazonian indigenous population for sale back home.

This ubiquity of the body in Latin American literature provides a point of comparison that helps illustrate what has changed and what has remained the same with the rise of neoliberalism. One significant change has to do with the relationship between the citizen and the state. Not one of the texts analyzed in this dissertation expresses concerns about the state wielding an excessive amount of power. To the contrary, the state appears to be indifferent to, incapable of, or actively opposed to protecting its citizens. Secondly, while workers’ bodies in novelas sociales tended to be situated in the context of the exploitative nature of labor, in these more contemporary novels they are detached from these contexts. Additionally, earlier examples of bodily commodification tended to identify one person or one group of people—typically in the form of a company or multinational—responsible for the suffering, dismemberment, or death of these workers. But in these newer examples, it is difficult to identify who is responsible for the social injustice that is communicated through the representation of fragmented or dead bodies. Simultaneously, these newer examples place greater emphasis on how ordinary people contribute
to creating an atmosphere of disposability, even at times recurring to techniques to make the reader question her own participation in the neoliberal system.

The list of texts analyzed herein is by no means comprehensive; the objects of study are set in only three countries in the region—Mexico, Colombia, and Brazil—and they do not exhaust all the possible ways that literature and film have used representations of the body in order to counter neoliberalism. Furthermore, they do not all represent the human body in the same fashion, but instead they offer complementary perspectives on the relationship between the body and neoliberal logic. The issues that arise from these novels and films can be studied as isolated phenomena; texts about organ trafficking and novels about paid assassins are two examples that already have generated considerable scholarship. However, analyzing these interrelated problems together offers a more comprehensive and more nuanced view of how neoliberal thought and the human body have interacted in recent cultural artifacts.

Likewise, these novels and films do not belong to a single national category and it is difficult if not impossible to fit most of these texts within any national literature. The same forces of globalization evident in these fictional worlds have shaped their authors’ lives, or—in the case of María llena eres de gracia and Central do Brasil—the circumstances of production. Roberto Bolaño may be Chilean by birth, but he spent most of his life in self-imposed exile. Myriam Laurini was born in Argentina, but fled due to political persecution in 1976, receiving refugee status in Mexico in 1980. Fernando Vallejo writes about his native country, Colombia, but has lived in Mexico since 1971. As for the US/Colombian film María llena eres de gracia, Joshua Marston, its director and screenwriter, is from the United States, but it stars Colombian actors and was filmed mostly in Ecuador. Written and directed by Brazilians, featuring Brazilian actors,
and filmed in Brazil, *Central do Brasil* may initially appear to fit more comfortably within a national cinematic tradition. Nonetheless, appearances can be misleading, especially in the increasingly globalized market of film production. As Laura Rodriguez Isaza has noted, the distribution strategy behind *Central do Brasil* deliberately allowed it to establish itself as “una <<pequeña>> película <<brasileña>>” despite the international efforts behind its production, as a joint Brazilian/French production with backing from Sundance, Sony Pictures Classics, and Miramax International (76). While the other Brazilian texts could perhaps be more comfortably discussed as part of a national tradition, they too demonstrate supranational concerns. Not confining the study to a single national context allows for the development of a broader analysis of neoliberalism, which is necessary given the globalized nature of this particular political and economic system.

Furthermore, these texts do not exhibit only one type of body—whether defined by gender, race, age, or class. This decision is not meant to suggest that these categories no longer matter. On the contrary, it is important to take into consideration these identifying factors when interpreting what is being expressed through the bodies at hand. Why do some focus on children rather than adults, or on women rather than men? Does a body belonging to a wealthy woman have more value than one belonging to a poor maquiladora worker? Neoliberalism may not affect all bodies equally. Analyzing decisions to portray bodies as having certain characteristics can elucidate which bodies are treated differently and why.

The approach to analyzing each of these texts is multifaceted. Since one of this study’s fundamental preoccupations centers on how bodily representation upholds or challenges neoliberal discourse, close readings of the primary texts are at the core of each chapter. In the
case of films, the analysis is not limited to the dialogue, but also takes into account other aspects, including camera angles, acting choices, soundtrack, lighting, and wardrobe, among others. Yet although close readings are a useful tool for delving into linguistic and audiovisual representation, by nature they are ill-equipped to adequately account for the relationships between the word or image and the social, historical, and economic context. Thus all close readings are accompanied by contextual analysis. Additionally, this study examines all texts through the lens of a theoretical framework that incorporates elements of body studies criticism, feminism, and Marxism.

Chapter one, “Organ Trafficking and Neoliberal Governmentality in Central do Brasil, Morena en rojo, and Cronicamente Inviável,” analyzes three texts with a shared plot device: the black trade in human organs. Whereas other texts that have depicted organ harvesting schemes have emphasized foreign involvement in these crimes, Central do Brasil, Morena en rojo, and Cronicamente Inviável stress the involvement of domestic actors and normal citizens. They illustrate how the generalization of market principles creates an amoral society in which criminal actions are justified through cost-benefit analysis. In focusing on how local actors participate in the exploitation of children, the texts draw the audience’s attention to their own participation in an economic system that devalues human life, instead of allowing the audience to displace blame.

Unlike the children who fall victim to black market organ trafficking in Central do Brasil, Morena en rojo, and Cronicamente Inviável, the women who work as drug mules in Joshua Marston’s María llena eres de gracia presumably are exercising their freedom of choice when they decide to participate in this particular body market. Chapter two, “The
Denaturalization of Neoliberal Discourse in *Maria llena eres de gracia,* examines how Marston’s film juxtaposes its protagonist, María Álvarez, with her coworkers, in order to call into question certain neoliberal assumptions such as agency, choice, and meritocracy. Although the film has been often criticized for upholding US-centric, neoliberal capitalist values, it highlights the neoliberal aspects of María’s character in order to subversively challenge these ideals for an audience that has been conditioned to assume that failure and success are purely the consequences of individual choices.

Chapter three, “*Las muertes cinematográficas:* The Production and Consumption of Disposable Women in Roberto Bolaño’s *2666,*” analyzes the dead female bodies of “La parte de los crímenes,” the third chapter of the novel 2666, as waste produced by the neoliberal capitalist system and a spectacle meant for consumption. While the novel never reveals who is responsible for the deaths of the more than one hundred female bodies discovered in its pages, it does indicate that any explanation of the crimes must take into account Santa Teresa’s condition as a city whose economic activity is monopolized by the production of goods for the globalized market. The dead women are portrayed as *homo sacer* in order to draw attention to the devaluation of life inherent to the export-oriented, *maquiladora* economy. Those women can be killed with impunity because they lack value in the neoliberal system. Yet their deaths do present a valuable good for the media, entertainment, and even academic markets that can indirectly profit from the public’s desire to consume the images of these dead women. The novel incorporates discussions of snuff pornography⁴ and deliberately omits death scenes in order to

⁴ Pornographic films that purportedly capture on screen the death of an actor due to homicide or suicide.
invite its readers to reconsider their own consumption habits and the relationship between consumption and suffering.

Chapter four, “Las muertes habituales: Disposable Men in La Virgen de los sicarios and O Matador,” deals with two novels whose central concern is the business of contract killing. The sicarios, or hit men, who are the protagonists of these two novels fulfill a biopolitical function: they kill individuals who have not properly inserted themselves into the neoliberal market. The sicarios thereby guarantee the safety of those considered to be lives worth living and presumably improving the biological health of the species as a whole. However, the killers prove to be just as disposable as those they kill. In contrast with other novelas sicarescas, both La Virgen de los sicarios and O Matador foreground the participation of the middle and upper classes in the contract killing business in order to avoid the presentation of violence as a problem intrinsic to the lower classes. In this way, the representations of disposable life attempt to alert readers to the relationship between seemingly benign acts of consumption and the structural and physical violence that accompany neoliberal capitalism.

Many of these texts discuss markets that are not legal, such as the black market in human organs, drug trafficking, and contract killing. However their illegality is irrelevant in an analysis of neoliberalism. One of the central tenets of neoliberal thought is a belief in the primacy of markets. Neoliberalism holds that the expansion of market transactions maximizes the social good, and as a consequence when markets do not exist, they should be created (Harvey, Brief 3). Therefore, in the neoliberal order, a black market or an illegal market transaction is a contradiction of sorts; the neoliberal worldview would assert that such markets should exist and should be no different from any other economic exchange. In practice, certain markets remain
illegal due to moral concerns and political objectives, but the rationale behind market prohibitions is not a primary concern here.

Why do the majority of these texts feature illegal market transactions instead of legal ones? On one level, the damages inflicted upon the human body are much more evident in portrayals of these illegal markets than in depictions of legal ones. Critics’ reactions to Maria llena eres de gracia illustrate this clearly. A number of critics pass judgment on the protagonist’s decision to swallow pellets full of heroin because transporting drugs in that fashion places her, and her unborn child, at risk of death if one of the pellets explodes. At the same time, few, if any, critics acknowledge that the alternative opportunity of employment available to Maria, working in a flower processing plant, could also result in bodily harm, and even death, due to exposure to chemical pesticides. Since the neoliberal worldview treats all market transactions equally, these texts use these extreme examples of bodily exploitation to establish that neoliberalism systemically makes individuals disposable, even if this everyday attack on those individuals is not as obvious. Additionally, neoliberal ideology may promote an increase in criminal activities. Alejandro Portes and Bryan R. Roberts explain how neoliberal practices result in social instability through “forced entrepreneurialism” (49). When jobs are not available or do not pay livable wages, workers may resort to alternatives such as the informal economy and criminal activities in order to pursue material goods they would not have access to otherwise. José Carlos G. Aguiar notes that neoliberalism’s rationalization of poverty as an outcome of flawed individual choices and its insistence that those who suffer from it assume individual responsibility for improvement of their own position creates an environment in which those who
opt for criminal alternatives are true ‘entrepreneurs’ creating their own sources of employment (173).

Hence all of these texts emphasize how neoliberal environments make individuals disposable and how the reader indirectly participates in this devaluation of human life. In this sense, they resemble *novelas sociales* in that they present the causes of a social problem, though these newer examples typically do so in a more indirect manner. Yet whereas the *novelas de denuncia* not only illustrate the cause and consequences of the problem but also offer a possible solution, the texts ahead offer no vision of a viable alternative to the neoliberal *status quo*, even if some do suggest that an individual can escape the condition of *homo sacer* in certain circumstances. In this sense, they reflect what Ewa Plonowksa Ziarek has called the most pressing political question of Agamben’s work: how can bare life be mobilized when contesting the law or institutionalized power structures is not an effective way to resist a biopolitical regime? (146). At the same time, the inability to provide a possible program to enact change may be an acknowledgement of a need to rethink traditional forms of political activism in literature and film, especially since these artistic objects must compete in the same market that they condemn.
In the context of Latin America, the term “neoliberalism” invokes particular connotations. Its international dimensions may first come to mind. After all, many Latin American nations implemented neoliberal policies as a result of forces coming from outside the region, be it through direct force, like the CIA-backed coup d’état in 1973 that gave way to the regime of Augusto Pinochet in Chile and its reversal of Salvador Allende’s “Chilean path to socialism,” or indirect force, as the International Monetary Fund and other international organizations imposed conditions on Latin American nations seeking debt relief. Or perhaps a series of economic practices associated with neoliberalism come to mind: the privatization of state-run services and industries, the ratification of free trade agreements, and deregulation, among others. What may not come to mind immediately upon hearing the word “neoliberalism” is how the ideology transforms subjectivity.

Jason Read has asserted that a critical examination of neoliberalism must address it not merely as a political or economic program, but also as a “new understanding of human nature and social existence” (26). He writes, “Neoliberalism is not just a way of governing states or economics, but is intimately tied to the government of the individual, to a particular manner of living” (27). For Read, neoliberalism constitutes a “new manner, or mentality, in which people are governed or govern themselves” (29). In other words, to borrow the terminology of Michel Foucault, neoliberalism is a new governmentality. Neoliberal ideology produces this new mentality by applying the discourse of economics to all realms of human existence, so that every

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5 For Foucault’s definition of governmentality, see *Security, Territory, Population*, 144-145.
action—from crime to marriage to the number of hours a mother spends with her child—is weighed through a cost-benefit analysis. The economic approach becomes coextensive with all of society. Individuals are transformed into *homo economicus*, the rational economic agent who makes rational decisions according to a calculus of maximum output for minimum expenditure. As Read has explained, this overgeneralization of economic principles limits the sense of what is possible, effectively curtailing “collective transformations of the conditions of existence” (35). In other words, neoliberalism does not prohibit certain actions, but rather conditions its members to consider those actions as not within the realm of possibility in a society understood to be composed of self-interested actors.

The ways that neoliberal ideology transforms how individual actors are governed and govern themselves come to light through an analysis of a series of texts concerned with the commodification of the human body in one market in particular: the buying and selling of organs for transplant. In Walter Salles’s film *Central do Brasil*, Myriam Laurini’s novel *Morena en rojo*, and Sergio Bianchi’s film *Cronicamente Inviável*, representations of organ trafficking are a pretext for exploring how neoliberal ideology shapes private actors in micro-contexts. All three of these texts depict an organ harvesting scheme in which children are given away, lured away, or abducted so that their organs can be sold to individuals who need a healthy organ for transplantation. Notably, the texts present the individuals who participate in these trafficking rings as average citizens of the country in which these crimes take place, Brazil in *Central do Brasil* and *Cronicamente Inviável*, and Mexico in *Morena en rojo*. By portraying those involved in these organ markets as normal, everyday people, these texts draw attention to how all members of society are complicit in neoliberal exploitation. Applying economic principles to all
areas of life provides an easy justification for actions considered illegal or immoral: the actors involved are merely pursuing their material well-being. Furthermore, *Central do Brasil, Morena en rojo*, and *Cronicamente Inviável* illustrate that even when certain individuals object to these actions and the economic justification behind them, they too have been so shaped by neoliberal ideology that they are unable to effectively contest these exploitative actions.

Unlike other recent texts that provide an in-depth portrayal of organ markets by incorporating narratives from those involved, be they donors, recipients, or traffickers, such as Gabriel Trujillo Muñoz’s *Loverboy*, Eugenio Aguirre’s *Los niños de colores*, and Diamela Eltit’s *Impuesto a la carne*, organ trafficking in *Central do Brasil, Morena en rojo*, and *Cronicamente Inviável* functions primarily as a plot device. It provokes protagonists Dora and Josué into action in the first, maintains the plot in the second by unifying protagonist Morena’s various social causes, and ties together divergent plot lines in the last by linking Alfredo, an intellectual who provides a voice-over critique of the current state of Brazilian society, to Amanda, the manager of the restaurant all of the other characters frequent, via their participation in the organ trade. None of these texts delves into the business of organ trafficking, nor does any explore the subjectivity of the buyers, providers, or brokers of organs, most of whom are either left out of the narrative completely, included as secondary characters who move the plot forward without ever being developed into round characters, or portrayed in a way in which their participation in this market is deemphasized, only becoming relevant when needed for plot development. However, even though organ trafficking may not be the central theme of any of these three texts, its portrayal emphasizes the dangers of neoliberal practice and ideology.
Given that these storylines of children being kidnapped and murdered for their organs echo a long history of rumors, myths, and reports of children being exploited for their body parts, *Central do Brasil, Morena en rojo, and Cronicamente Inviável* can be contrasted with earlier organ trafficking narratives to provide insight into how bodily exploitation has changed as neoliberal ideology became a dominant governmentality. Stories of children being kidnapped for their organs date back to well before organ transplantation was a viable medical operation. David Samper points out medieval tales of children being killed for their blood and a rumor circulating in France shortly before the revolution that claimed that children were kidnapped so that their blood could be used in baths to heal diseases like leprosy (26). In the Latin American context, stories about organ theft have been circulating in many countries, especially starting in the 1980s. In *Niños de repuesto: Tráfico de menores y comercio de órganos*, J.M. Martín Medem presents articles about organ theft networks in several countries, including Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, Guatemala, the Dominican Republic, Peru, and Costa Rica. Anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes notes that she came across similar rumors in the 1980s when she was doing fieldwork in northeastern Brazil, where townspeople spoke of vans driven by American or Japanese agents that would nab children to harvest their organs (“Truth and Rumor”). Some scholars, however, dismiss these organ trafficking narratives as rumor, like Véronique Campion-Vincent, who refers to them “propaganda item(s) used against the United States and the western world by communists and third world leftists” (10).

For the purposes of analyzing fictional works like *Central do Brasil, Morena en rojo, and Cronicamente Inviável*, whether reports of harvesting organs from children have any factual or historical basis is irrelevant. More important is identifying the anxieties that these stories
express. On one level, these rumors convey concerns about excessive exploitation of a nation’s resources. These three texts, like many of the newspaper reports analyzed by scholars such as Martín Medem, Samper, and Campion-Vincent, represent organ theft networks as connected to international adoption agencies. In *Central do Brasil, Morena en rojo*, and *Cronicamente Inviável*, international adoption is merely a front for organ harvesting, but even legitimate international adoptions generate discomfort in the region. Steven L. Varnis suggests that children adopted abroad represent a lost national resource: “Viewed as genetic material, foreign adoption may threaten a nation’s ‘gene pool.’ Viewed as potential labor, children released for adoption abroad constitute a loss of national assets, the next generation of laborers” (41). As Samper has argued, these organ theft rumors reveal that “at least symbolically and metaphorically, the marginalized and disenfranchised peoples of Latin America see their dismembered bodies as just another primary product going North” (19). On another level, the rumors communicate concerns about the devaluation of human life in contemporary society. This is the perceived truth that Scheper-Hughes identifies behind these stories. She writes, “The rumors are based on…perceptions—equally grounded in social and biomedical reality—that their bodies and those of their children are disposable” (“Truth and Rumor”).

The organ trafficking storylines in *Central do Brasil, Morena en rojo*, and *Cronicamente Inviável* exhibit anxieties that wealthy nations exploit Latin American resources and that the high value of human body parts has made the human individual lose value, thereby becoming disposable once the valued organs can be extracted. However, all three texts place more emphasis on the latter concern. While, in most cases, they suggest that the demand for organs comes from abroad, they all highlight the participation of citizens of developing countries in the
kidnapping and murder of children for organs. The depiction of domestic involvement in these crimes emphasizes that, while the nations of the global north certainly overexploit the resources of the global south, forces from within the nations of the global south facilitate and profit from such exploitation.

At the same time, none of these narratives presents the state as having a role in this plundering of its national resources. The fact that these texts do not primarily concern themselves with excessive state control over bodies indicates that they are set in neoliberal environments. A key feature of neoliberalism, as a set of concrete yet plastic practices and as the doctrine that attempts to justify them, is an unrelenting belief in the primacy of the market. Due to this emphasis, certain neoliberal practices actively try to reduce the power of the state and the breadth of its control. While these texts do not show the processes of privatization and deregulation, they all depict situations in which the state is largely absent. Individuals or private companies have assumed responsibilities that usually are though to belong to the state, such as ensuring public order and providing a social safety net.

With regard to this presentation of the state, the ways Central do Brasil, Morena en rojo, and Cronicamente Inviável engage with organ theft narratives suggest a change from what Kristin Pitt has described as the role of bodily representations in Latin American literature. Pitt emphasizes that representations of the physical body became a key element in the formulation of national identities in the Americas due to the fact that the elite classes of the newly independent states frequently could not claim a historical collective identity or point to a clearly defined national border. Thus, bodily elements became key elements of national definition, whether in terms of blood (racial purity or mixture), origin (native or immigrant birth), reproduction, labor,
or health (4). Although bodies have been key elements of national discourse, actual bodies often experienced abuse, which is also reflected in the representation of them in Latin American literature. Pitt notes the centrality of absent and deceased bodies in the literature of the Americas – both North and South – and suggests that the disappearing citizen is the key figure in literary constructions of national identity in the Americas, from the early years of independence to the dictatorships of the late twentieth century. She also makes use of Giorgio Agamben’s theorization of the *homo sacer*, a figure that represents human life that lacks value in any social sphere. Pitt argues that representing the body in this fashion tends to stress unease with the state’s power over the bodies of its citizens (173). This last point is where these newer organ trafficking narratives diverge from previous representations of the disposable body. The disappeared or murdered bodies in *Central do Brasil*, *Morena en Rojo*, and *Cronicamente Inviável* do not suggest concerns about the state wielding an excessive amount of power over the bodies of its citizens. To the contrary, the state appears to be uninterested in protecting the bodies of its citizens. Earlier examples of organ theft narratives focus more on denouncing wealthy nations’ plundering of the region’s natural resources or decrying the abuse that authoritarian regimes in the region enact on the bodies of their citizens. On the other hand, these newer texts emphasize domestic participation while simultaneously deemphasizing the role of the state. They therefore express concerns about a type of bodily commodification that results from the complementary discourses of neoliberalism and biopolitics.

As theorized by Michel Foucault, biopolitics refers to the use of techniques of bodily control with the end of ensuring the health of a population and maximizing its productivity. Once the state takes upon itself the responsibility of protecting life and providing the conditions so that
life may thrive, it then needs to justify the right to take life away, to demand deaths, or to expose its own citizens to death. In justifying this right, a biological relationship between one person’s life and another’s death must be established. Life can be taken away so long as the individual whose life is ended represents a biological threat to the population as a whole.

Upon first analysis, organ transplantation may seem to contradict this biopolitical logic. The removal of healthy organs from young bodies and their transplantation into typically older, sickly bodies, presumably works against the objective of promoting the health of the population as a whole, or, in Foucault’s words, that of the species. This emphasis on population notwithstanding, society does not assign equal value to all bodies. Nancy Scheper-Hughes offers an example from South Africa.

Dr. Johan Brink […] explained to me why, under the old (apartheid) regime, human tissues and organs were harvested from black and mixed race bodies in the ICU (intensive care unit) without the family’s knowledge or consent and transplanted into the bodies of more affluent white patients: ‘The doctors were from conservative [i.e. Dutch reform] backgrounds and they followed a Christian family ethic. To them the idea of “wasting” a good organ was sinful, like wasting a good piece of bread’ (Bodies for sale, 1).

While the Doctor attributes this idea of “wasting a good organ” to a conservative religious upbringing, the statement makes even more sense in a biopolitical context. Leaving the organ in the black body only becomes waste because it could be “donated” to a white body. In a society

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6 For Foucault’s discussion of health on the level of the species, rather than the individual, see Society Must Be Defended, 242-3.
that values white lives over black ones, preserving the health of a white patient is tantamount to protecting the well-being of the people, even if the individual receiving the organs has inferior health.

The determination of which bodies belong to this category of the people or the species is thus greatly influenced by the values and prejudices of the society in question. In assigning worth to certain types of bodies, each society inevitably marks other bodies as life that is not as worthy or not worth living at all. Those who fall into this latter category are examples of what Giorgio Agamben has called *homo sacer*. As Agamben explains, the *homo sacer* is a figure from ancient Roman law, the man who “*may be killed and yet not sacrificed*” (8, emphasis in the original). At first, the *homo sacer* seems to have a contradictory nature – if he can be killed with impunity, why is his sacrifice prohibited? However, the key characteristic of the *homo sacer* is his exclusion from all political order, including religious order. In other words, *homo sacer* refers to life devoid of all value. Historically, different groups have been more susceptible to falling under this category of *homo sacer*, but for Agamben, the defining characteristic of the contemporary biopolitical regime is that bare life can no longer be identified as belonging to a single, definite category, but instead “dwells in the biological body of every living being” (140).

Brett Levinson has discussed the connection between economics and biopolitics. Although Levinson never uses the term “bare life,” preferring instead “minimal life” or “discardable life,” these concepts are synonymous. Levinson points to the globalized market as the economic system that creates “discardable life.” To explain how this happens, Levinson begins with what he identifies as the main thesis of Michal Hardt and Antonio Negri’s *Empire*: “the global includes (so as to build a controlling pluralism) while the state excludes (so as to
maintain homogeneity)” (Biopolitics 67). Pointing out that inclusion is not possible without exclusion, Levinson argues that the global market must exclude, but that what is excluded “is not the foreigner or outsider…but death…and more tangibly, the peoples who embody death” (67). Biopolitics is fundamentally a question of perceived hygiene and its consequences for the purportedly healthy. When confronted with an “other” who embodies the process of dying, biopolitical regulation eliminates that other in the name of keeping society as a whole healthy (Market 51).

This other does not have to be racially different; it could be an immigrant, a transsexual, or any other category of person that incites the paranoia that the biological well-being of the species or even of humanity is compromised by their existence. For the global neoliberal system, those who embody this dying are “the utterly impoverished (so near absolute loss, so close to existing outside the range of choices that sustains the market), the homeless,” “the ones imagined to be unable to insert themselves, properly, into the field of exchange,” those “who possess nothing to offer (for sale),” and those nations “that cannot insert themselves into ‘proper capitalist commerce’” (Biopolitics 68). In short, those who embody homo sacer in the neoliberal context are any individuals who can be eliminated without loss to the market. In Central do Brasil, Morena en rojo, and Cronicamente Inviável, the children who are trafficked for their organs are examples of homo sacer. Perceived as having nothing to offer other than healthy organs, these children disappear and practically no one notices, let alone cares, that they are missing. With the exception of the character of Josué in Central do Brasil, the children who become the victims of these organ trafficking rings are not fully developed as characters, which
reflects society’s view of them: they are notable only because of the valuable commodities that can be extracted from their bodies.

The opening sequence of *Central do Brasil* takes place in Rio’s central train station, where retired school teacher Dora makes a living writing letters dictated by immigrants who want to send news to their loved ones back home. One of her clients is a woman named Ana, whose son Josué wants her to send a letter to her absent husband Jesús. Afterwards, Ana is hit by a bus and dies, leaving Josué orphaned and alone in the city. At first, Dora makes a deal with the station security guard, Pedrão, to deliver Josué to an agency that arranges private adoptions. However, when Dora’s friend Irene confronts her about what happened to the boy and reveals that such adoption agencies are really just a front for harvesting organs for sale, Dora rescues Josué and the two set out to find his father. After overcoming a number of difficulties on the road, Dora and Josué eventually meet Josué’s half-brothers, Isaiás and Moisés. In the end, Dora leaves Josué with his family, who will presumably care for him and teach him a trade, with her future being uncertain.

The early scenes in the train station establish that Rio is an amoral city from which the Brazilian state has completely withdrawn. The camera establishes that Rio is also a place characterized by its alienation of its residents, in the sense that individuals are isolated and cut off from any sort of community despite the fact that they are surrounded by other people. Scenes set in and around the station are filled with crowds and movement, and for the most part the camera maintains its distance from Dora and Josué. Long shots focus on the two characters while capturing the chaotic movements around them, suggesting that they are disconnected from their environment.
During the scenes set in Rio, there are two moments that express the amorality of the city. The first of these focuses on Dora, while the second features the station security guard, Pedrão. Dora returns home from her day of work and invites her friend Irene to visit her. During this scene, the narrative reveals that Dora has been charging her clients extra for postage, but that she never mails the letters, throwing some away and leaving some in a drawer. In a later sequence, Pedrão chases after a young man who has stolen from one of the stores in the station. Once caught, the thief pleads for mercy and promises to return what he stole, but Pedrão shoots him anyway. The murder produces no public outcry. To the contrary, the following shot shows the vendor thanking Pedrão for returning his goods, revealing that an object has more value than a human life in this context.

While Dora’s unethical business practices suggest a willingness to do anything to earn more money, and Pedrão’s disregard for human life indicates how those who are on the margins of the economy become disposable life in a neoliberal context, the depiction of the organ trade brings these two attitudes together. This turn of events begins when Pedrão approaches Josué, who has been living in the train station since his mother’s death. Dora goes over and tells Pedrão that she knows the kid, as a gesture to keep him from harm. The two adults then step outside the station to talk. This conversation is shown from a distance, with Dora and Pedrão shown through a hole in one of the station’s gates, and the audience cannot hear what the two discuss, building tension for the audience. The next day, Dora takes the boy to an apartment where a well-dressed woman opens the door. As the woman who lives there explains that she runs an adoption agency that places children with wealthy families in Europe, the camera alternates between shots of Josué and point-of-view shots that share the boy’s perspective. The apartment is a clean, almost
sterile environment, so much so that it does not seem like a place where children live. In a gesture that makes Josué seem more like an animal or a slave than a human being, the woman asks the boy to open his mouth as she conducts a quick physical inspection. Both she and Pedrão try to make the boy feel more comfortable, offering him ice cream, telling him that he can play video games, and reminding him not to forget those who helped him when he is an adult making a lot of money living in another country. Within a short amount of time, the adults go to the kitchen to talk business: Dora earns $1000 for delivering the boy and Pedrão keeps another $1000 for making the referral. Actress Fernando Montenegro’s eyes express Dora’s excitement over receiving that amount of money in US dollars. As Mr. Pedrão hands it to her, her eyes follow the bills as they travel from Pedrão’s hand on the left hand side of the screen to Dora’s own. As she counts them, a smile comes across her face, and any concerns she may have had about leaving Josué instantaneously disappear. This sequence comes to an end with another point-of-view shot from Josué, who watches from a distance as Dora leaves, cutting to a shot of Josué sitting with his back against the wall, looking upset.

The film then transitions to the next scene with a straight cut to a long-shot showing Dora carting a large box as somber music plays. As Deborah Shaw has noted, the shot parallels an earlier one in which Dora enters the adoption house with Josué. While Shaw emphasizes that this parallelism reveals Dora’s rejection of maternal qualities, it can also be read more generally as Dora’s assimilation of a neoliberal worldview that suggests that economic principles can be applied to all aspects of life (93). Dora only takes an interest in solving Josué’s homelessness when she is offered a monetary incentive to do so. She then exchanges Josué for a brand-new television because the latter has more value to her. At first, Dora has no qualms about her
decision to leave the boy at the adoption house. Only after her friend Irene badgers her about what happened to Josué and chides her for not realizing that such adoption agencies are really just a front to kill children for their organs does Dora begin to feel guilty about her actions.

The most notable aspect of the brief portrayal of organ trafficking in *Central do Brasil* is undoubtedly the domestic nature of the operation. Unlike earlier versions of the rumor that speak of foreigners roaming the streets to look for children, all of the individuals who participate in the organ harvesting scheme in the film are Brazilian: Pedrão, a professional who is shown to be respected by those who work at the station; the woman at the apartment, who in the first scene makes an effort to be kind to Josué and make him feel comfortable, and even Dora, the retired school teacher. Despite signs that the adoption agency might just be putting on a show, Dora readily believes their claims that Josué will be better off with a family outside of Brazil, or, even if she does not fully believe them, she quickly abandons any concerns she may have had when she is presented with one thousand dollars. Notably, when Irene confronts her about where she got the money for the TV, asking her friend to tell her the truth after an initial lie, the camera shifts to the television, where “Topa tudo por dinheiro” can be read, reiterating Dora’s willingness to do anything, even sell a child, for money.

The film suggests that this willingness to do anything for money has been accepted by the neoliberal society of Rio de Janeiro through its depiction of Pedrão. Esteban E. Loustaunau remarks that “Pedrão pretende ser un comerciante honrado al mismo tiempo que asesina a los que roban en los comercios de la estación y contrabandea a niños de la calle en el mercado informal de adopción de menores” (556). However, in the neoliberal city, Pedrão’s actions—murdering a thief, selling children as if they were commodities—do not go against the perception
of how an honorable businessman should act. Both actions, in themselves, reflect processes of privatization. Pedrão’s killing of the shoplifter indicates a privatization of the state’s role to provide security to its citizens. When he and Dora arrange to deliver Josué to the adoption agency, it is another private action that fills the absence created when the state does not provide an adequate social net. Although the viewer may judge his actions to be immoral, morality is no longer relevant in the neoliberal context. As John Dixon explains, a purely neoliberal viewpoint does not allow individuals to decide against taking a job “because it is contrary to their moral obligations or duties to significant others; because it is contrary to the course of action that a virtuous person would choose to follow; or because in their opinion it is not ... morally appropriate” (11). As Loustaunau notes, these actions are further justified because poverty is considered to be the real crime (557).

When Dora returns to the apartment and rescues Josué, she acts against the neoliberal assumption that individuals predictably seek to pursue their own well-being. However, the film does not contest neoliberal ideology. Under neoliberalism, privatization goes beyond ceding control of public services to the private sector. Privatization is also a strategy used to govern and regulate. Read explains:

If disciplinary power worked by confining and fixing bodies to the production apparatuses, neoliberal power works by dispersing bodies and individuals through privatization and isolation. Deregulation, the central term and political strategy of neoliberalism, is not the absence of governing, or regulating, but a form of governing through isolation and dispersion. (34)
Thus, neoliberal power controls society by destroying the very notion of society, breaking it up into autonomous individuals who then, conditioned by the ideology of privatization, cannot conceive of collective actions. David Harvey has also argued that everything becomes privatized under neoliberalism, including the structures, issues and problems that once constituted the public (Brief 154). Wendy Brown contends that this privatization of everything results in a mentality that considers individualized solutions to be the only ways to address any societal problem (“American Nightmare” 703). The model neoliberal citizen, thus, “strategizes for him or herself among various social, political, and economic options” instead of striving with others to alter such options (“Neoliberalism” 43). Central do Brasil represents organ trafficking as an individual problem, endangering the life of one individual, Josué, with an individual solution, Dora rescuing him from the apartment and then returning him to his family.\footnote{The quest to resolve the problem by reuniting Josué with his family is reminiscent of Margaret Thatcher’s notorious quote, “[T]here is no such thing as society. There are men and women and children and there are families” (qtd. in Littler, 63).}

After Dora saves Josué, the rest of Central do Brasil attempts to offer an alternative to the neoliberal model. However, as the film follows Dora and Josué on a road trip to Northeastern Brazil, it oscillates between nostalgia, in which the film problematically yearns for an authoritarian state, and withdrawal to a private sphere, which is truly just a surrender to the neoliberal ideology of self-interested individuals. The former is symbolized by an imaginary, romanticized sertão,\footnote{A region in Northeastern Brazil characterized by a dry, arid climate and commonly associated with rural poverty.} and the planned city where Josué’s brothers reside. The film suggests the latter first in a sequence in which Dora and Josué befriend a religious trucker, only to seemingly...
reject it when the trucker leaves them behind due to moral concerns, but then ultimately reaffirms it at the end of the film when Dora leaves Josué in his brothers’ care.

As the two protagonists set out on their road trip to find Josué’s father, they reverse the typical pattern of migration, moving from the urban metropolis to the sertão, a region that differs greatly from amoral Rio de Janeiro. Much has been written about the problematic portrayal of the sertão in Central do Brasil. The principal argument of scholars who have discussed this issue is that the film’s inclusion of imagery from the sertão engages with the Cinema Novo tradition, but instead of portraying it as an inhospitable environment, Central do Brasil offers an idyllic portrait of the region that masks its poverty and other social problems. As Ivana Bentes writes, “[a]pesar do diálogo com toda uma tradição do Cinema Novo...Central do Brasil se diferencia por retratar não o sertão violento e insuportável do Cinema Novo, mas um sertão ludico, rude, porém inocente e puro, como os irmãos que acolhem o menino Josué” (246). The danger of romanticizing the sertão in this way is that poverty and misery are written off as tradition or nature, allowing the spectator to consume images of these regions without calling upon them to take action. Felix Rebolledo’s criticism of the film is even more scathing. He writes:

[In Central do Brasil] we are taken from the present-day predominantly urban reality depicted by a panoply of social problems including infantile homelessness and delinquency, urban violence and crime, poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, alcoholism, broken families, etc., to the “sacred” place where the first films of Cinema Nôvo were set—in the sertão. Almost every shot or theme in Central do Brasil has a parallel in Deus e o Diabo na Terra do Sol. And one would think that the mirroring of images and themes
would indicate that the concerns raised by both films are similar but … Salles carries us beyond the lefty neo-realist vision of Vidas Secas into a revisionist neo-conservative melodrama full of pathos and optimism with the sertão as the painted backdrop.

Rebolledo also contends that what he calls the “depoliticized” vision of the sertão is what makes the film appealing to foreign audiences. Central do Brasil was an international success, receiving two Academy Award nominations for Best Foreign Language Film and Best Actress in a Leading Role, with Fernanda Montenegro becoming the first and to date only Brazilian actress to be nominated for the award. Darlene Sadlier also attributes the film’s popularity, both within and outside of Brazil, to its treatment of poverty, which is “relatively generalized and not strongly connected to issues of social class; here hunger and poverty function as catalysts for existential encounters on the road” (132).

The last stop on their journey is the epitome of all that the capital city is not. The depiction of Vila do João, the town where Dora and Josué’s journey comes to an end, deliberately contrasts with the depiction of Rio. While the film’s early scenes show large crowds of people chaotically moving through public spaces, the scenes set in the town suggest order and tranquility. James Cisneros aptly describes it as a “government planned, geometrically ordered settlement” that boasts an ideal layout (106). Dora asks for directions as soon as they arrive, and the camera pans up to show the town, which consists of a number of houses arranged into orderly lines. The next shot gives the audience a closer look at the houses. As the camera shows that the houses are all uniform in layout and color scheme, Josué remarks that they are all the same. The streets are clean and empty, with Dora and Josué being the only people walking around town.
The physical space of the city is not the only aspect in which the planned town differs from Rio; they are characterized by different economies as well. Economic exchanges in the Rio scenes involve dishonest or unethical work: Dora makes extra money by charging for postage although she will not mail the letters, and Dora and Pedrão sell Josué to the adoption agency. Whereas the audience does not witness any economic exchanges in Vila do João, the scenes in Móises and Isaías’s home provide some details about the brothers’ economic activities. Since their father lost their home and abandoned them, the two young men are squatting in a house where they have installed a carpentry workshop. As they give Dora and Josué a tour, Isaías talks about how successful their business has been, and Móises even shows Josué how to make a top in a moment that suggests that Josué’s brothers will teach him their trade. In Cisneros’s words, “the [melodrama] substitutes anonymous commerce for a mode of production where workers and apprentices, bound by blood, operate on a micro-industrial scale that approaches craftsmanship” (103). Shaw also comments that the brothers’ professions, Móises as a builder and Isaías as a carpenter, in combination with the Biblical symbolism of their names, symbolically suggest the rebuilding of the nation (94).  

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9 In fact, one of the early signs of the redemption of Dora’s character during the journey is that she becomes more honest in her business. When she and Josué find themselves stranded without any money during the fair in Bom Jesus do Norte, Josué shows that he too has an entrepreneurial spirit. He sets up a stand for her to write letters dictated by those who wish to send news to their loved ones who have migrated to the city. After her work is complete, she decides to mail the letters, much to Josué’s surprise. This moment both evidences Dora’s transformation and, since by this point in the film she has taken on a maternal role, functions as a teaching moment. By mailing the letters, Dora teaches Josué that material gain should be earned in an honest way.

10 The religious symbolism behind the character names has been discussed by several critics, though it is not a primary concern here. Both Jeannette Reedy Solano and Deborah Shaw note that Josué means Joshua, the leader of the Israelites who led them into the Promised Land. Josué’s half-brothers also have names imbued with religious symbolism, Isaías and Moisés, with the former referring to Isaiah, a Biblical prophet known for predicting the coming of the Messiah and the latter to Moses, who saved the Israelites from oppression by the Pharaoh by leading them out of Egypt and ultimately to the Promised Land. Shaw argues that the three sons’ names suggest redemption and the promise of a better future, although she finds the messianic symbolism of the father’s name, Jesús, to offer a false promise. Josué’s father is a drunk and a gambler, not a savior, and he remains absent in the film (92).
Yet if the film’s ending implies this national rebuilding, the reconstruction that it envisions does not propose any new societal model, but rather problematically advocates a return to the type of strong, centralized state that existed before neoliberal reforms. Once Dora and Josué leave Rio, what drives them is their quest to find Jesús, Josué’s father. As Shaw observes, the father figure here functions as a symbol for the state because the film establishes parallels between “the failed patriarch and an ineffective, uncaring state that does not protect its citizens” (91). Throughout the film, the dialogues state or otherwise imply a number of Jesús’s character flaws: he is an alcoholic, he may have beaten his wife, he shows no interest in his sons, and he wastes his financial resources, ultimately leading to the eviction of him and his sons from their home. At the end of the film, Dora does not succeed in reuniting Josué with his father, but she leaves the boy with his brothers in a planned city reminiscent of Brasilia and of a time when the Brazilian state played a much more active role in the lives of its citizens. Cisneros notes the ambiguity of the ending and remarks that “the progenitor of the ordered city remains absent while his progeny continue to await his homecoming” (108). When reconsidering this ending in light of the symbolism, it suggests that the nation continues to wait for the return of the strong, even authoritarian state that existed before the neoliberal period. Central do Brasil seemingly rejects the neoliberal model, but all it can offer in its place is nostalgia for a past that cannot be recovered, that may never have existed, and that is hardly ideal in the first place.

On further consideration, the ending of Central do Brasil suggests that the appropriate course of action, as society awaits the return of the state, is a return to family life. But this is just another instance of neoliberal power controlling individuals through privatization and isolation, as Read has discussed. Such a withdrawal to the familial sphere typifies what John Rodger has
called amoral familism: the belief that each individual should act with the goal maximizing the well-being of his family (416). Lynne Layton sees the retreat into the individualistic private sphere, extending care only to one’s immediate intimate circle, as symptomatic of neoliberalism (168). Essentially, amoral familism reproduces the neoliberal understanding of the individual as *homo economicus*, only now the individual factors in the costs and benefits to the family unit and not simply to his or her self. Thus, *Central do Brasil* exemplifies how neoliberal ideology limits the realm of possibilities, even for those who object to how neoliberal practices have made certain sectors of the population vulnerable. Neither Dora nor the film as a whole can imagine a collective response to the neoliberal model.

In *Morena en rojo*, the difficulties of responding to injustice in a neoliberal context take a slightly different form. When the novel’s protagonist and narrator, referred to only as Morena, learns that these trafficking rings are murdered children for their organs, she becomes obsessed with writing a *nota roja* (crime report) that will cause public outcry in order to bring the appalling action to an end. However, through the novel Morena is plagued by inaction, and she fails to see that her live-in boyfriend Lázaro is a key player in the trafficking ring. Like *Central do Brasil*, *Morena en rojo* links the organ trade to neoliberal practices, emphasizes the domestic nature of this form of child exploitation, and ultimately illustrates the difficulties of contesting neoliberalism for those who have been conditioned by its accompanying ideology.

As in the film, the plot of *Morena en rojo* is propelled by a crime, albeit one that, unlike the potential killing and harvesting of Josué, does take place and is quickly resolved. Morena is called to a murder scene in Nuevo Laredo, a city on the border between the states of Tamaulipas in Mexico and Texas in the United States. As she interviews María Crucita, a woman who has
witnessed the crime, she soon realizes that María Crucita is actually the author of the crime, killing Comandante Videla11 because he had prostituted her in her youth. Instead of crafting the *nota roja* that she has always dreamed of writing, Morena helps María Crucita flee Nuevo Laredo, and the episode serves as a catalyst for Morena’s move to faraway Mérida. There Morena learns of another crime that will serve as the thread that will tie together her experiences in the South with her experiences in the North. While living with a North American boyfriend, Morena learns that his maid’s younger sister, referred to only as *la niña jetona*, the big-lipped girl, has gone missing. With the help of two friends—Güicho, a police officer, and Rosi, his wife—Morena begins to investigate the case only to find that the girl had been found at an adoption agency that is really a front for human trafficking for prostitution. Later, when back in the north, she learns that the same adoption scheme takes in children to sell them for their organs. Though she continues to investigate the case, in the end Morena fails to solve it or write her article. Even so, the text follows the conventions of its genre and does introduce some resolution. The police invite Morena to accompany them as they bust the trafficking ring, and, in a rather contrived dénouement, Morena discovers that Lázaro has been involved in smuggling

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11 Laurini, a political exile from Argentina, gives her character the same name as the Argentine dictator Jorge Rafael Videla. Salvador C. Fernández suggests that the name Videla links the novel to the Argentine Dirty War in order to signal the State as the criminal that needs to be discovered and brought to justice (136-37). However, the novel depicts the Mexican state as ineffective, not as authoritarian. The name choice also evokes a parallel with the crimes that Morena investigates after she has solved the Videla case and fled Nuevo Laredo. Videla was detained on June 9, 1998, based on accusations of participating in the theft of children from disappeared prisoners during the dictatorship from 1976 to 1983. These crimes were the inspiration for the 1985 Argentine film, *La historia oficial*. Similar to *Central do Brasil*, *La historia oficial* enjoyed significant international popularity and received nominations for a number of international awards, becoming the first Latin American film to win the Best Foreign Language Film Oscar. Morena’s investigative project focuses on another scheme in which children are abducted, though the novel does not indicate that the State itself is involved in such crimes.
organs the entire time. Morena then enters a state of shock, and her coworkers write the *nota roja*.

Although the novel was published in 1994, the same year that the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) took effect, eliminating barriers to trade and investment among the U.S., Mexico, and Canada, the environment in which Morena lives has clearly been shaped by neoliberal policies. Morena does, for a short time, work in a *maquiladora* in Nogales, a Mexican city in the state of Sonora that shares its border with Nogales, Arizona. *Maquiladoras* certainly predate neoliberal reforms, with the Mexican government implementing a *maquiladora program* in 1964 as a controversial method to provide employment opportunities to those affected by the cancellation of the *bracero program*, which had allowed farm workers to enter the United States to take temporary jobs (Suhr 44). Regardless, *maquiladoras* by design follow the neoliberal principles of reducing barriers to trade. Shortly before NAFTA was implemented in 1994, Leslie Sklair predicted that the *maquiladoras* would not be affected by the new policy, largely because their operation was “functionally equivalent to a free trade agreement” (243). Morena’s brief description of her employment at the *maquiladora* alludes to the poor working conditions at the plant. Supervisors exercise excessive surveillance, placing restrictions on trips to the bathroom and prohibiting workers from talking with each other. This keeps Morena from being able to gather material for a report. Any attempts to unionize result in the dismissal of the employees, who would find it difficult to find another job in Nogales.

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12 *A maquiladora* is a manufacturing plant that may import certain materials and equipment duty-free and that produces goods for export.
Morena en rojo offers a more detailed account of human trafficking than both of the films. In Central do Brasil, the practice of using adoption agencies as a front is ubiquitous enough for Irene to have heard of it and for her to suggest that Dora should have known what would happen to Josué. At the same time, in the Brazilian film the trafficking occurs on a rather small-scale, given the dialogue overheard when Dora rescues Josué, in which the woman at the apartment speaks with a man about expanding their operation. On the other hand, in Morena en rojo the trafficking of children is less present in the media yet has a wider reach. In her own investigation, Morena realizes that children are trafficked for three ends: to be prostituted, to be forced into becoming drug mules, and to be killed for their organs. For the most part, these activities occurred “de manera bastante legal: agencias, asistentes sociales, religiosas, adopciones, enfermeras, médicos, gente sin opciones” (305). This legality of organ trafficking is also obvious when Güicho accompanies the parents of the niña jetona to Cancún, only to discover that the woman with whom the girl lives has established herself as a “defensora de niños maltratados” and has legally adopted the girl (156).

Here too claims that children were adopted by families abroad are a cover-up for the disappearance of the minors. But the focus stays on private actors within Mexico, even if Morena fails to acknowledge this. In her investigations, Morena travels to Cancún. There, she attempts to find the niña jetona and discovers that the girl no longer lives there. The woman who presented herself as a defender of children’s rights claims that she sends children to families in other countries to ensure that they have a better future. Morena investigates the adoption front further in Tijuana and pretends to be a woman from the United States who wants to adopt a child. Her undercover work does not turn up any illegal activities, but the agencies seem
suspicious. They do not follow up with the families who adopt children from them, and they change their address frequently so their clients will not worry about a mother changing her mind. They tell Morena of North American couples who adopt more than five babies a year. She determines the monetary value of a baby: twenty thousand dollars, twenty five thousand if the agency delivers the baby to her in the United States. After her initial investigation, Morena has no answers but only more questions. Still, she is not able to write a word. Her narration discusses how she would have started the article:

¿Cómo empezar? El primer mundo es un monstruo que se alimenta de nuestros niños.

¿Conocerán los padres el origen de los órganos que les trasplantan a sus hijos? ¿Por qué no? Si lo saben los médicos que sin ningún escrúpulo abren con un bisturí la carne suavecita de una criatura para despojarla…¿Les pondrían anestesia? […]

Un niño pobre vale veinte mil dólares al inicio de la transacción. Si el comprador a su vez lo vende para que le saquen un órgano y el niño va a perder la vida, alcanzará el precio de setenta y cinco mil dólares (307).

As this fragment from the article Morena would have written makes clear, she considers first world nations to be the source of demand, the reason why Mexican children are kidnapped and murdered for their organs. Yet even though the demand comes from outside the nation, the textual depiction of the crimes does not include any foreigners. Mexican citizens are the ones who are carrying out these crimes.

Since Morena is quick to blame first world consumers for these crimes, she is blind to the reality of the crimes and to how closely connected she is to them. Shortly after moving in with Lázaro, she becomes suspicious of her boyfriend’s frequent trips to San Diego. He leaves for a
few days then returns with expensive gifts. Taking note of his consumerist tendencies, she assumes that he is smuggling. Even when Lázaro’s coworker Ramón tries to warn her that her boyfriend is involved in something serious, Morena refuses to listen. She clings to her own worldview so much that she has a psychiatric breakdown when finally confronted with the truth. No longer able to continue living in denial, she spends twenty days in the hospital recovering from the shock. Although she is not harmed physically, her mental health is so poor that the doctors prescribe her a number of pills for anxiety and depression.

Certainly, consumers in the developed world, purchasing organs off the black market without concerning themselves with whether such organs are ethically sourced, are partly to blame for these crimes. After all, if consumers were not willing and able to pay, those carrying out the organ harvesting would have no incentive to do so.\(^\text{13}\) Nonetheless, completely displacing blame onto external forces is problematic. Lidia Huerta Moreno discusses the dangers of such displacement in a slightly different context: the feminicidios, or murder of women motivated by their gender, in Ciudad Juárez, the Mexican city across the border from El Paso where hundreds of women and girls have been murdered since the early 1990s. Huerta Moreno argues that displacing the origins of violence reinforces a belief that the violence “is produced by something outside ourselves […] we are powerless to influence anything” (82). In Morena en rojo, it is not that Morena feels that she is powerless, but that her emphasis on foreign actors makes her overlook local participation. In doing so any action she takes would not effectively address the problem at its roots.

\(^{13}\) Though it is likely that they would merely find another way to exploit poor children for profits, which Morena en rojo makes apparent. Morena learns from her investigation that the trafficking of children has three ends: organ harvesting, prostitution, and drug trafficking.
Morena’s state of denial contributes to an inability to act. She is appalled by the exploitation of children, but she fails to do anything to combat it. According to her worldview, the action that needs to be taken is writing a *nota roja* that will rouse the public into action. Despite a good deal of talk about the articles she wants to write, she never publishes, or even composes, a hard-hitting piece of investigative journalism that would expose the plight of the oppressed and challenge the neoliberal system. Her state of denial hinders her ability to achieve this goal, as even the police commander who invites her to the sting operation points out. She had the material for her report at hand, but she wasted it because her desire for a happy relationship with Lázaro made her blind to his actions.

The character of Morena epitomizes the type of opposition to neoliberalism that, by Read’s estimation, cannot succeed. Her objective in itself is naïve: writing and publishing a newspaper article will not have any effect at all. In fact, Morena witnesses this ineffectiveness. At one point in her investigation, Montiel, a police commander in Tijuana, invites her to a location where the body of a missing girl was discovered. After seeing the body, Morena feels an ethical obligation to tell the girl’s story, writes an article, and submits it directly to the printers, to bypass any censorship. By her own account, what she writes is not an excellent article, nor even a good one. Furthermore, her *denuncia* does not have any impact. Morena offers many excuses for why her article did not elicit the public outrage that she seeks: she did not write it well enough, she did not conduct enough research, she did not specify who was to blame, etc. However the true problem lies in the fact that writing an article cannot effectively challenge the neoliberal worldview. Given that neoliberalism is not just economic policies but a governmentality that transforms subjectivity, Read contends that revealing the truth is not
enough to oppose neoliberalism (36). Morena, like Dora, responds to a societal problem with an individual action, instead of collaborating with others in order to find a collective response that would transform society. Morena’s inability to imagine a more effective course of action is symptomatic of her neoliberal subjectivity. As Read explains, neoliberal ideology has shaped her into an individual who cannot see beyond options condoned by the mentality of fundamentally self-interested individuals.

In both Central do Brasil and Morena en rojo, the protagonists are confronted with a situation in which market logic has been taken to an extreme, placing children at risk of bodily harm or death. From their actions, clearly both Dora and Morena believe that this exploitation of other human beings is morally wrong and needs to be stopped, even though it may be rationalized by the neoliberal understanding of individual behavior. Both of these characters are still shaped by neoliberal ideology, which is perhaps most evident in their reliance on individual actions to counteract the social problem that confronts them. Cronicamente Inviável, on the other hand, features characters who fully embrace neoliberal subjectivity. Instead of being appalled by organ harvesting schemes and the exploitation of children, these characters either profit from these schemes or consider them acceptable given that impoverished children are just going to die anyway. Whereas Central do Brasil and Morena en rojo illustrate how neoliberal governmentality shapes what individuals consider possible, Cronicamente Inviável exhibits a more active complicity with neoliberal ideals.

Of these three texts, Cronicamente Inviável is the most difficult to summarize due to its fragmented nature. Instead of having a unified plot, the film ties together a series of scenes, most of which center on a group of characters loosely connected through a restaurant in São Paulo:
Luis, the owner; Adam, a waiter; Amanda, the manager; Maria Alice and Carlos, a married couple who frequently dine at the restaurant; and Alfredo, an intellectual who does business with Amanda. The narrative not only jumps from character to character, but also from region to region within Brazil, with action taking place not only in the urban centers of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, but also in more peripheral areas, for example Mato Grosso and Rondônia.  

Other formal elements add to the sense of discontinuity in the film, such as the use of different voice-over narrators for different scenes and even variations in the visual styles in which the scenes are filmed. The formal fragmentation of the film reflects its message that Brazilian society is so divided by geography, by race, by class, etc., that the national project is unfeasible. These divergences notwithstanding, the film gains a sense of cohesion because all of its sequences show some aspect of the violence and injustice that characterize neoliberal Brazilian society. This is evident in the storylines of three characters, Amanda, Maria Alice, and Alfredo, who emerge amid the interplay of organ trafficking, neoliberalism, and biopolitics.

The character of Amanda is a model neoliberal agent. She acts as a *homo economicus*, defined by John Dixon as “free individuals who are universally, constantly, and predictably seeking to pursue self-interestedly their own material well-being” (5). Bianchi does not make Amanda a particularly sympathetic character, though she certainly is a successful entrepreneur. The audience learns via flashbacks that Amanda comes from an impoverished family from Mato Grosso. The first depiction of her childhood shows her as a sad, dirty child surrounded by the smoke of the charcoal mines. As the camera shows her gathering wood, the voice-over remarks

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14 Unlike *Central do Brasil*, which presents the northeastern *sertão* in a romanticized, idyllic fashion, *Crônicamente Inviável* emphasizes the exploitation of the poor and other social problems suffered in all regions visited in the narrative.
that hers is another childhood ruined by slavery. Then the narrator says that inventing another past for Amanda would not be a lie, and he calls for a bucolic revision of her childhood. In this second flashback sequence, Amanda grows up in an idyllic poverty in a beautiful countryside. The clean, nicely dressed Amanda picks fruit from trees and runs to a waterfall to play with her friends. João Luis Vieira notes that this second telling of her past is “one of the many recollections with which Amanda entertains her customers at the restaurant, all of them eager for some sort of Brazilian exoticism” (90). In this sense, the revision of her past is an example of how Amanda sells herself to ensure her success. And she has been rather successful in economic and social spheres. From her humble origins, she has risen to restaurant manager and has had some degree of social mobility, as suggested by a scene in which she dines with Luis, Maria Alice, and Carlos. In addition to her work at the restaurant, she participates in several other entrepreneurial endeavors: she runs an adoption agency; she directs the Centro Profissionalizante para Indios, an organization that helps indigenous persons enter the workforce; she plans to export plant extracts to the US market; and she coordinates a black market trade of organs.

*Cronicamente inviável* does not provide many details about the organ trafficking business. There are a couple of scenes showing briefcases being exchanged, but their contents are not revealed until the end of the film. The narrative never states explicitly the origin of these organs, nor does the camera show it. However, by including scenes that show Amanda working for a private, international adoption agency, the film implies that the body parts might come from the unwanted children sold to the agency by their mothers. A scene in a nursery shows Amanda physically inspecting the children. She expresses concern about whether or not the babies are eating well, and remarks that some of them need to put on weight. When an employee brings in
a baby girl who has just arrived, Amanda asks if she has completed all of the medical exams. The film’s portrayal of Amanda is ambiguous. At times, she lovingly picks up the children, and her concern for their health may be genuine. Even so, the film hints that the adoption agency is a cover for the organ trafficking. During the scene at the end of the film that reveals her participation in the organ trade, she hands Alfredo a report from medical exams, raising the question of whether or not the source of the organs was the baby from the nursery scene.

Even if the film only subtly suggests these connections between the adoption agency and the organ trafficking, it plainly stresses that these children are commodities. Immediately before the scene in which the adoption business is introduced, Maria Alice, Luis, and Carlos converse over dinner in the restaurant. Carlos accuses Maria Alice of hypocrisy because she always talks about the need to treat members of the lower classes better, but she refuses to pay more than minimum wage. His last words in the scene declare that human beings are like any other merchandise. This idea is echoed in the following scene when the camera cuts to Amanda in her office. A pregnant woman enters Amanda’s office to make arrangements to give her unborn child up for adoption. Although Amanda makes an effort to convince the woman that her child will have a good life with a wealthy family, the woman does not care at all what will happen to the child. Her only concern is how much Amanda’s agency will pay her for the baby.

*Central do Brasil* and *Morena en rojo* uphold a belief that these crimes are especially abhorrent because they target children, who are seen as belonging to a category that should be given special protections. In *Cronicamente inviável*, there are some glimpses of a different mindset, in which not even children are excluded from the category of disposable life. This change is most apparent in one of the scenes in the Maria Alice storyline. Maria Alice represents
the urban upper-middle class. She is a character who tries, sometimes condescendingly, to treat members of the lower classes well. In one example of her charity, she brings used clothing and toys to a group of street children. The sequence begins with shots of the children consuming drugs. Maria Alice grabs a boy and a girl by the hand and takes them over to her car to give them the clothes and toys she had brought. When the two children deliver the gifts back to the group, violence erupts and the children fight over who gets what. For a few moments, the film alternates between shots of the children beating each other and shots of Maria Alice watching these events unfold from across the street. The violence does not surprise her and does not provoke her to take action. Instead she looks on, developing a slight smile in the last shot of the sequence. Meanwhile, her voice-over provides commentary about charity and the role of the state. She declares that neoliberalism is wrong, because the state should take action: it should give the street children crack because they are just going to die anyway. Despite Maria Alice’s remarks that neoliberalism is wrong, her final comment reveals that she shares the social Darwinistic mindset common to neoliberalism and biopolitics. In her mind, these children will never be able to insert themselves properly into the social order. Thus they are disposable and ultimately should be eliminated, even if Maria Alice’s warped understanding of charity means that she believes they should be kept comfortable until they reach the end of their lives.

Furthermore, the way the film alternates shots of violence with shots of Maria Alice watching the scene functions as a metatextual commentary on how inner city violence is portrayed on film. Here, Maria Alice acting as a spectator parallels Brazilian film audiences at that time. Bentes assails the Brazilian film industry in the 1990s for taking two settings common in films of the Cine Novo—the sertão and the favela—removing any critical lens, and
transforming these settings respectively associated with rural and urban poverty into consumable images of the poor. She especially derides films that depict the violence of the *favelas*, with few notable exceptions, for failing to link poverty and violence with the middle and upper classes, thereby becoming spectacles of the poor killing the poor (249). The sequence of Maria Alice directly ties the actions of a wealthy character to the violence committed among the poor. She participates actively in this violence by setting up the scene knowing how it will play out. Not only does Maria Alice refrain from taking any action to prevent the children from harming each other, she also takes pleasure in watching them do so.

What does Maria Alice gain from instigating violence among the street children in this way? The returns on her actions include both psychological and biopolitical benefits. In donating the toys to the children, she is fulfilling her self-image as a charitable, “good” person who is concerned with the plight of the less fortunate, as opposed to a wealthy woman who merely exploits the lower classes. Additionally, in watching the children inflict pain on each other, she fulfills a sadistic desire. Lastly, the most indirect benefit she gains from her actions is the biopolitical one. If the violence she provokes escalates into murder, then the children will have rid Brazilian society of another individual who embodies the poor, the degenerate, and the dying. Indirectly, the elimination of the street children would contribute to creating a safer society for people like Maria Alice, thereby improving their quality of life.

If the character of Maria Alice functions as the target for the film’s critique of the upper-middle class, the film’s criticism of the intellectual classes’ role in denouncing social injustice

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15 The film indicates that Maria Alice sees herself in this way through conversations among her, her husband, and Luis at Luis’s restaurant. At the same time, the film often criticizes her hypocrisy, both with this scene and in her husband’s comment that if she were a good person, she would pay her employees more than the minimum wage.
centers on the figure of Alfredo. He is the author of a social critique entitled *Brasil Ilegal*, who also often provides the voiceover for the film, which is typically synched with shots sharing his point of view. Vieira observes that the audience is led to identify with this character, since his voice is “the traditional progressive consciousness…that sees and analyses everything, requesting the spectator’s complicity” (89). Furthermore, as the film jumps from region to region within Brasil, Alfredo travels throughout the country as well, presumably attempting to understand social problems. All the while he states his arguments against capitalism and exploitation as if he were preparing to write another book.

Yet by the end of the film, this image of Alfredo is undone. In one of the closing scenes, the audience learns that Alfredo collaborates with Amanda in the black market in organs. His reason for traveling around Brazil was not to conduct research, but to deliver organs. In the last scene to feature the two characters, Amanda asks Alfredo if he wants to take on another assignment. Alfredo responds that he is willing to do so, because “escrever livros não enche a bolsa de ninguem.” Writing about this scene, Andrew Rajca observes that “Alfredo, author of the scathing social critique *Brasil Ilegal* within the film’s narrative while he himself is involved in the illegal trafficking of human organs, serves to represent Bianchi and any purveyor of social critique – thus implicating them (and us as spectators) as complicit in the production and perpetuation of social problems in Brazil” (307). In this sense, the portrayal of Alfredo in *Cronicamente Inviável* is a moment of self-awareness in which the text acknowledges that its portrayal of the social problems that it hopes to condemn is problematic. The film risks

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16 Bianchi continues to explore the themes of the commodification of human suffering and the complicity of middle and upper classes in a neoliberal setting in his film *Quanto Vale o É Por Quilo*, which premiered in 2005.
perpetuating the use of images of the poor as entertainment for the leisure classes and, as a consequence, the film profits, albeit indirectly, from others’ misery. This portrayal of Alfredo, coupled with that of Maria Alice, makes *Cronicamente Inviável* the most radical of these three texts in its attempt to communicate to its audience their own complicity in the vulnerability of certain groups under a neoliberal regime.

Though *Central do Brasil*, *Morena en rojo*, and *Cronicamente Inviável* portray children as modern-day incarnations of the *homo sacer* in order to emphasize the dangers of neoliberal ideology and the audience’s complicity, the portrayal of disposable life in these texts is problematic. With the exception of Josué in *Central do Brasil*, the texts do not develop the subjectivity of those characters who become bare life. The children whose bodies are disposed of once their organs are harvested for the benefit of the wealthy are only present in these texts in their absence. Given that *Central do Brasil*, *Morena en rojo*, and *Cronicamente Inviável* do not even allow these characters to have a voice, the texts fail to restore value to those who have been marginalized.

All these texts adapt the narrative of organ theft, a rumor that commonly circulated throughout Latin America for decades, in order to express concerns about exploitation that, while not new to neoliberalism, are certainly exacerbated by neoliberal theory and practice. If these nations’ children, and symbolically their futures, were threatened by capitalist forces during eras of strong state protectionism, they are even more threatened in an age when the state has undergone processes of privatization and decentralization. Yet perhaps more important than the way that neoliberalism has transformed the state is the way it has altered behavior at the individual level. *Central do Brasil*, *Morena en rojo*, and *Cronicamente Inviável* illustrate this
less apparent but more insidious change provoked by a neoliberal governmentality. An expansion of market logic to all areas of life makes it easy to justify an action such as selling a child to an adoption agency, as Dora initially does, or to rationalize violent actions against street children, as Maria Alice verbalizes in her monologue about charity. At the same time, the privatization of responses to social problems makes opposition to such exploitation difficult. This is best demonstrated by Morena’s inability to take action against the crimes that she finds so appalling. Moreover, all three texts, to greater or lesser extents, hint at the complicity of all members of society in the exploitative practices that go hand-in-hand with neoliberalism, be it overtly, like Amanda’s and Alfredo’s participation in the trafficking rings, or inadvertently, as in Morena’s case, with her close relationship with Lázaro. Though Central do Brasil, Morena en rojo, and Cronicamente Inviável do not offer any suggestions for an alternative to neoliberalism, their depictions of organ trafficking, and their focus on local, private neoliberal actors in micro-contexts are a call for individuals to reflect on the ways that neoliberal ideology has shaped their own behavior and sense of what is and is not possible.
CHAPTER II: THE DENATURALIZATION OF NEOLIBERAL DISCOURSE IN

MARÍA LLENA ERES DE GRACIA

The opening sequence of María llenas eres de gracia, the directorial debut of US filmmaker Joshua Marston, symbolically foreshadows one of the ideological aims of the film. As the film begins, the camera follows protagonist María Álvarez to her workplace. In a series of shots with minimal dialogue, she leaves her house before dawn, buses to a factory that processes flowers, puts on protective gear, and clocks in. At this moment, the camera shifts its focus away from María for nearly a minute. Though brief, this diversion in perspective is a significant break from the rest of the film, which features in every scene its titular character, played by Catalina Sandino Moreno, frequently in medium close-up or close up shots. Here, the camera focuses on the roses, allowing the audience to see and hear the production side of a commodity chain. First, workers in bulky protective gear spray the plants with pesticides. Then others cut the flowers from the bushes. Lastly, different employees perform a series of tasks to prepare the roses for export: arranging petals, removing thorns, and wrapping bouquets in paper packaging. Although a rose is presumably a natural product, the film shows that it undergoes a process analogous to any other manufactured good. From the chemical treatment it receives while it grows to the meticulous arrangement of petals once it has been cut, the rose is the product of chemical, mechanical, and human manipulation. As the roses arrive at her workstation, the camera rejoins María. The young woman removes a thorn from her hand, and then proceeds to return to her task of removing thorns from the roses. After calling into question the naturalness of the rose, the film will now move on to the denaturalization of María, by extension, to the denaturalization of what it means to be a worker in a neoliberal environment.
At the beginning of the film María lives in a small, unnamed town in Colombia and makes a living by removing thorns from roses at this factory. Bored with her job and with her boyfriend, she soon finds herself unemployed and faced with an unplanned pregnancy. With limited employment opportunities in her town, she plans to travel to Bogotá to search for a job as a maid. Her plans change when an outsider, Franklin, offers to help her find a lucrative, if dangerous, job as a drug mule. After smuggling into the United States dozens of pellets filled with heroin in her stomach, María reconsiders her options. Ultimately, she decides to remain in New York as an undocumented immigrant.

The characterization of María and her decision to remain in the United States have led scholars to accuse Marston’s film of upholding hegemonic values instead of challenging them. Silvia Schultermandl interprets the ending as a suggestion that immigration will solve all of María’s problems, and consequently an endorsement of “an underlying belief in American exceptionalism” (283). Florencia Cortés-Conde describes it as a film that reproduces “middle-class values” such as the certainty that social mobility is possible and the belief in the importance of individual enterprise (82). For Cortés-Conde, the film “does not question the value system of its audience” because María’s involvement in the criminal world of the drug trade is portrayed as the result of “individual choices” that have “individual solutions” (83). Aldona Bialowas Pobutsky combines these complaints about the film’s allegedly nationalist and pro-capitalist agenda. She writes that “thanks to her entrepreneurial spirit … María embodies the neoliberal ideal,” which makes her, by definition, “a deserving immigrant to the US” (38).

This reading of María as the individualistic, neoliberal model proto-US citizen flattens the ambiguous nature of her character, an aspect that the title of the film and its marketing
materials make apparent. As the opening line of the Catholic prayer, *María llena eres de gracia* alerts the audience to the religious symbolism of the protagonist’s name even before it reveals that she is a young, unmarried woman named María who happens to become pregnant. Yet María is not just a stand in for the Virgin Mother of Catholicism. As Emily Davis has pointed out, María’s attitude towards her unwed pregnancy positions her as a double for not just the Virgin but also the other María of Catholicism, the prostitute María Magdalena (62-63). The publicity poster also evokes religious symbolism, but in a way that suggests other interpretations of the “gracia” of the title. The image is a photo staged to make it look as if María were about to receive Holy Communion, but instead of the host she looks up at a pellet filled with heroin. The religious symbolism encountered before the film builds into one of the tensions that shapes María’s character as the plot develops: is this María a sinner or a saint? Yet the point of the unresolved question is to show that she does not fall on either side of the dichotomy. It is not a question of either/or, but of both/and, with the unification of extremes in María’s character destabilizing binary logic.

The deconstruction of such dichotomies in the film is not limited to the realm of religion, which, although present in this symbolism, is not a primary concern. In fact, one of the oppositions that the film challenges relates to the hegemonic values criticized by scholars. María can be considered the embodiment of the neoliberal ideal because, on some level, her personality does conform to the neoliberal expectations of how an individual should act. At the same time, María is also the incarnation of what Giorgio Agamben has called *homo sacer*. A man who can be killed and yet not sacrificed, *homo sacer* represents life that has no value in any social sphere. The ideal neoliberal worker and the *homo sacer* become polar extremes through neoliberal
discourse, which, as Jo Littler discusses, appeals to the language of meritocracy. Simultaneous to the neoliberal policy of eliminating safety nets, the neoliberal discourse of meritocracy implies that, regardless of social position, those individuals who possess talent and exert effort will achieve social mobility (Littler 52). The film portrays María as an individual who is smart, enterprising, and committed to do what is necessary to give her family a better life. However, as she undergoes several changes in the film, moving from factory worker to low level participant in the international drug trade and lastly to undocumented immigrant, what remains constant is her disposability—the very condition that seems to contradict the meritocratic appeals of neoliberalism.

The tension between María as an inherently disposable individual in a neoliberal system and María as a model agent according to the theoretical basis of that same system allows María llena eres de gracia to contest these values from within. This approach allows the film to denaturalize neoliberalism, which, to use the words of David Harvey, is often considered a “necessary, even wholly natural” way of governing the social order (Brief 40-41). Just as the film shows that an apparently unprocessed good—a rose—is not as natural as the consumer believes, it suggests that neoliberal assumptions about choice and agency should not be taken as self-evident. The early scenes that depict María’s life in a small town in Colombia, an economy that has been shaped by neoliberal politics, raises the question of whether or not it is possible to speak of choice in such environments. Later scenes that show how María, Blanca, and Lucy rent out their stomachs as drug mules calls into question a premise that Nancy Scheper-Hughes has called an “ethics of parts:” the presumption that a divisible body or its owner is capable of rationally responding to market demand for one of its parts (“Bodies” 1).
Furthermore, the subversive appropriation of neoliberal concepts seeks to reverse the disposability that derives from another neoliberal assumption: individuals are ultimately responsible for their own success or failure in a neoliberal economy. As Pierre Bourdieu has pointed out, neoliberalism tends to privatize everything, including and especially failure:

The strength of the neo-liberal ideology is that it is based on a kind of social neo-Darwinism [...] The ideology of competence serves very well to justify an opposition which is rather like that between masters and slaves. On the one hand there are full citizens who have very rare and overpaid capacities and activities, who are able to choose their employer (whereas the others are at best chosen by their employer), who are able to obtain very high incomes on the international labour market, who are, both men and women, overworked [...] and then, on the other side, there is a great mass of people condemned to borderline jobs or unemployment. (42-43)

When Bourdieu speaks of neoliberalism, he is mainly concerned with the French experience. Nonetheless, his description of how the privatization of failure coupled with the notion that “the best and the brightest” flourish in a neoliberal framework creates two classes of people is also applicable at a global level. When combined with the logic of biopolitics, this other class of people, those who are not successful and thus do not have the right to be full citizens, can easily be turned into disposable life. They can be eliminated without any loss to the market, and, since neoliberalism generalizes market logic to govern all aspects of life, these disposable individuals can be eliminated without any loss to the body politic. *María llena eres de gracia* deflects this tendency to displace responsibility and blame for poor living conditions onto the person suffering from them through its use of a neoliberal subject.
In interviews, Marston has identified this gesture of restoring value to those who have been made into bare life as one of the motives that inspired him to make the film. Yet some of the aesthetic choices of the film seem to counteract this objective. Marston states that his hope for the film was for it to humanize the figure of the drug mule by “taking the viewpoint of a person whose voice would be marginalized” (Bailey). The scope of the film remains faithful to María insofar that it limits itself to the representation of scenes in which its protagonist is directly involved, with the exception of the aforementioned brief turning away from her in the opening sequence. At the same time, perhaps as a consequence of the desired documentary-feel aesthetic, neither the camera nor the script allows María to express her own point of view. True point of view shots that share her perspective are rare, typically limited to establishing shots, and there is no attempt to represent María’s subjectivity through interior monologue.

Moreover, the circumstances of production have prompted academic analyses to criticize the film for purporting to speak for a Latin American other, though much of the creative control was in the hands of North Americans. Both Marston and the film’s producer, Paul Mezey, are US citizens, and the project was financed by HBO. Marston wrote the screenplay in English, and then had it translated because he did not know Spanish well enough to write in it (Hundley). In the words of Pobutsky, the film “seemingly speaks for Colombians” which allows it to mask as Colombian the values legitimized by its story, instead of clearly representing them as ones that originate in the United States (31). Chris Garces takes a more nuanced view, noting that Marston’s decision to allow the Colombian actors to improvise their dialogue “lend[s] [the film] a more regionally precise and specific poetics” (37). Certainly, some Colombians considered the film to speak for their nation. After all, the Colombian Consejo Nacional de Cinematografía
chose *María llena eres de gracia* as the selection for the Colombian submission for the Best Foreign Film category of the Academy awards. Nonetheless, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences disqualified the film due to the degree of involvement of non-Colombians. According to Marston, the Academy thought that the film “did not have enough Colombian participation among the key creative roles” which resulted in “a lot of disappointment, because the movie looks and feels Colombian” (qtd. in Horn). Marston’s remarks notwithstanding, the film does not even give Colombia a voice through its scenery. The majority of the filming took place in Ecuador and the United States.

Given these circumstances, the skepticism with which many scholars have interpreted the film is not surprising. Schultermandl acknowledges Marston’s good intentions, but ultimately judges the film to make a spectacle out of the drug mule business, objectifying images of the female Colombian “other”, reinforcing stereotypes about Third World women, and insinuating the superiority of the First World by presenting the United States as the only environment in which María, a strong and determined women, can thrive (276; 285). In this reading of the film, she invokes Gayatri Spivak’s question of whether the subaltern can speak. For Schultermandl, Marston’s attempt to represent or speak for the oppressed, despite the sincerity of his determination to deconstruct persistent stereotypes of the third word, is doomed to failure. As an agent from a dominant society who attempts to speak for the subaltern, Marston merely reinforces the division between the dominant and the marginal and renders the subaltern subject mute (281). Just as Spivak answers her own question with a categorical no, even if *María llena eres de gracia* had been a film made without US participation, the marginalized subject would be silenced regardless.
Bearing in mind these problems of representation, *María llena eres de gracia* can be considered a film that is, to borrow the words of film reviewer Javier Castro, “hecha por y para [norte]americanos.” Once this US-centered aspect of the film is acknowledged, one must reconsider the film in light of the context of the site of enunciation and that of its intended audience. By presuming that its viewers are from the US, the film is targeting an audience that has been shaped by Bourdieu’s ideology of competence: the belief that the best and the brightest triumph, while those who fail do so due to their own faults. Paul Krugman has spoken of the same concepts in the US context as the “myth of the undeserving poor” and its counterpart, the myth of “the deserving rich.” Given the cultural tendency to view poverty as the result of personal defect, the film develops María as a neoliberal character so that humanity can be restored to a person who is made disposable by the capitalist system. Thus, the film reproduces to some extent the logic of neoliberalism while other aspects of the film contest that same logic, thereby engaging in what Michael Feher has proposed as a way to revitalize Leftist opposition to neoliberalism: “challenging the neoliberal condition from within” as a way of “relaunching the politicization of the personal” (38).

What does it mean to describe María as a neoliberal subject? How is the neoliberal understanding of the worker different from a liberal one? One of the key differences lies in the concept of human capital, which, in his lectures *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Michel Foucault identifies as one of the elements that distinguishes neoliberalism from liberalism. According to Foucault, classical political economy did not develop an analysis of labor, considered to be one of the three factors of production, and instead reduced it to merely a factor of time. The only classical theorist to go beyond this and place labor at the center of his analysis is Karl Marx, who
discusses the abstraction of labor. Foucault summarizes his interpretation of the Marxian approach to labor:

[L]abor in all this is “abstract,” that is to say, the concrete labor transformed into labor power, measured by time, put on the market and paid by wages, is not concrete labor; it is labor that has been cut off from its human reality, from all its qualitative variables, and precisely…the logic of capital reduces labor to labor power and time. It makes it a commodity and reduces it to the effects of value produced. (*Birth*, 221)

Marx interpreted this abstraction of labor as inherent to capitalism and articulated the relationship between the worker and her labor in terms of alienation. From this perspective, labor is external to the worker and “does not belong to his essential being.” Consequently, labor therefore atrophies the worker instead of developing his physical and mental abilities (*Manuscripts* 72). What makes labor external to the worker is “the fact that it is not his own, but someone else’s, that it does not belong to him, that in it he belongs, not to himself, but to another […] It belongs to another; it is the loss of his self” (73).

Although neoliberal theorists agree that the abstraction of labor has been a problem, they fundamentally disagree that such abstraction is inherent to the capitalist system, and instead they see it simply as a product of inadequate economic discourse: “the neo-liberals say, if economists see labor in such an abstract way, if they fail to grasp its specifications, its qualitative modulations, and the economic effects of these modulations, it is basically because classical economists only ever envisaged the object of economics as processes of capital” (*Birth* 222). To remedy this problem, neoliberals turn to the idea of human capital, defined as the combination of innate and acquired elements that form the skills and abilities that make present
and future streams of income possible. In the words of Feher: “More radically put, my human
capital is me, as a set of skills and capabilities that is modified that all that affects me and all that
I effect … everything I earn—be it salary, returns on investments, booty, or favors I may have
incurred—can be understood as the return on the human capital that constitutes me” (26).
Foucault describes the neoliberal worker as an “entrepreneur of himself, being for himself his
own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of [his] earnings”
(Birth 226).

This idea of “my human capital is me” constitutes a radical shift from the liberal vision of
the worker to a neoliberal one. As Feher explains, under liberalism, the worker rents out his
labor power to his employer, and both worker and employer are “subjects who are free to dispose
of their property (be it labor power or capital) and to exchange it at its proper value in the
marketplace” (22). Yet if the worker is human capital, the worker/employer relationship cannot
be described in this way. Since all of a person’s qualities, skills, and experiences, be they innate
or learned, form his human capital, there cannot be any part of him outside of his capital; there is
no separate part of his being—previously known as labor power—that can be rented out.
Instead, as Ilana Gershon has explained, the relationship between employer and worker is a
business partnership, and people “are imagined to behave as businesses themselves” and are
“simply smaller versions of corporations” (541). By framing the worker as an entrepreneur of
self or as a business, neoliberal discourse removes labor from the realm of exploitation. In other
words, the neoliberal agent is homo economicus, succinctly described by John Dixon as “free
individuals who are universally, constantly, and predictably seeking to pursue self-interestedly
their own material well-being” (5).
The emphasis on free will in neoliberal discourse obscures the very real ways that options are limited for those individuals operating in a neoliberal landscape. *María llena eres de gracia* portrays its protagonist as a neoliberal agent, but Marston’s use of the floriculture industry and of a small town in Colombia as the context highlights the contradictions of neoliberal free will. Just as neoliberalism will shape María’s character, neoliberal policies have transformed the economy of her home town. The event that will trigger María’s involvement in the drug trade is her decision to leave her job. When she tells her mother that she will find another job, María’s mother points out that there simply are none in town. The narrative does not explore the reasons for this lack of opportunity, but presumably it is a consequence of neoliberal policy. The growth of the floral industry in Colombia has been linked to neoliberal politics, with the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank promoting cut flowers as a non-traditional export to generate foreign exchange and state support through tariff reduction, lowered taxation, and recruitment of foreign investment (Wright and Madrid, 256-57). Despite the lack of development of the reasons why the local economy of María’s town has been debilitated, the film indicates that neoliberalism creates situations in which many are left without opportunities and without a safety net. Without viable alternatives, it is questionable whether or not an individual has a choice at all.

In addition to the notion of choice, another key element in neoliberal agency is risk. As Pat O’Malley explains, neoliberal theory does not view risk as inherently negative. To the contrary, “risk is a source or condition of opportunity, an avenue for enterprise and the creation of wealth, and thus an unavoidable and invaluable part of a progressive environment. Without risk, wealth would not be created, innovation would be stultified, individuals would lose a spur...
to action and a crucial condition for generating responsibility” (204). Thus, a neoliberal worker should not seek to avoid risk, but rather view the decision to take calculated risks as the best way to achieve success. As Gershon points out, “according to the neoliberal perspective, to prosper, one must engage with risk” (540).

Given this framing of the worker, the choices that María makes over the course of the film can be evaluated as business decisions. María’s workplace at the beginning of the film is more reminiscent of a Fordist workspace, with its disciplined, routine order of time, space, and laboring bodies, than a neoliberal one, characterized by an emphasis on flexibility, problem-solving, adaptability, and rapid yet specialized responses (Harvey, *Condition* 155). The opening montage includes a series of scenes that depict several workers repeating simple tasks on a production line. The composition of the shot that shows María at work visually suggests Fordist manufacturing. María, dressed in her uniform, stands at the front of the frame. Two other workers—both women styled and dressed like María—stand staggered behind her, giving the impression that the worker is standardized and repeated, just like the means of production of the goods. The standardization is emphasized further by the movements of the three women; as they remove the thorns, they do so with identical gestures and body angles. While these women and others perform tasks that do not require specialized skills or training, a male supervisor yells orders. This opening sequence indicates that the floral workers are a “vestige of liberal labor under [a] neoliberal [regime],” which Gershon identifies as a disadvantageous position because these workers are seen as offering “stagnant labor capacities” instead of improvable skills (540). Melissa Wright develops further how such environments lead to the depreciation of female workers in particular. Considered to be unsuitable for training and relegated to low-skilled tasks,
these workers represent declining value and are ultimately disposable, while their antithesis, generally male counterparts, are seen as trainable and potentially skilled employees who will then be offered opportunities to appreciate their human capital (73).

Even though the viewer and the camera easily lose sight of María among the crowds of women who look, dress, and move like her in these initial scenes, the narrative of the film reminds the audience that there is something different about María. The first indications of her ambition are subtle: as she rides the bus to work, she has her head up, staring out the window, as her friend Blanca sleeps. The film leaves the claustrophobic space of María’s workplace to cut to a scene in which María is spending time with her boyfriend Juan near an abandoned house on the outskirts of town. While the couple kisses, María becomes visibly bored, losing interest in Juan and looking up at the horizon. She asks Juan to climb up to the roof with her. She confidently reaches the top, but Juan refuses to even try. As Schultermandl observes, this scene makes evident María’s “desire for something higher” (277). Cortés-Conde also comments on the scene, remarking that it “makes sure that we understand that María … aspires to something more” (81). Placed immediately after the scenes that depict her boredom at work, the action of climbing the wall symbolizes her knowledge that she is not profiting as much as she could be, both in terms of her career and her relationship with Juan. Perhaps without being conscious of it, María is a neoliberal subject: her human capital is depreciating in her low skilled work, and she wants something more so that she can maintain or appreciate it instead.

While the first scene set in the flower processing plant underscores how the mundane nature of the work bores María, the second gives a more concrete example of the exploitative working conditions at the plant. Nauseous from what the audience will later learn is morning
sickness, María asks for permission to use the bathroom. Her supervisor refuses, complaining that María has not filled her quotas for the day. His attitude toward her indicates that the production schedule is more important than the health of the workers. Stuck at her post, María vomits on the roses in front of her, and her boss insists that she clean them up, despite María’s protests that it is a waste of time since they will have to be discarded. The supervisor tells her to follow his orders and then make up her quotas, thereby showing that the worker is not as important as the goods she produces. Then the scene is abruptly cut off so the spectator cannot see under what circumstances María ends her employment at the flower plant. The audience hears only María’s explanation to her mother: that she decided to quit because she did not like the way that she was treated.

María, as a neoliberal agent, has no desire to remain unemployed, and she soon begins her search for a new job. On her way into the city, Franklin first presents the option of working as a mule. When Franklin and later Javier, her future employer, explain the job to her, they downplay the risks involved. Franklin assures her that the only mules who end up in prisons are the ones who get caught on purpose because they want to be famous. Javier, on the other hand, masks the danger of ingesting the drugs through his use of euphemisms: “te vamos a dar unos rollos de fotografía” and, once she arrives in New York, “revelamos los rollos y en 5 o 10 días estás de nuevo aquí.” At the same time, María is not duped into becoming a drug mule; she is portrayed an intelligent character who does understand the dangers involved. As a rational economic actor, she would weigh the costs – the risk of death should one of the “pepitas” burst in her stomach – against the benefits – the high rate of compensation – before making a decision. Far from being someone who is easily manipulated, she shows that she is just as capable of
manipulating others, lying about her age and her relationship with her previous boss in the interview.

At the same time, there is no internal monologue that helps the viewer understand why María agrees to become a mule. Given that the audience has no access to her interiority, the film must use other means to make it clear that María is making a rational, calculated decision. To do so, it juxtaposes María with two other women who will travel with her on the same flight: Blanca, a friend from her town, and Lucy, a veteran mule who gives María advice about her new job. After a scene in which a visibly distressed María practices for her new job as Lucy has shown her, unsuccessfully struggling to swallow a grape as she looks at herself in the mirror, the film cuts to a dialogue between María and Blanca. The camera shows María washing sheets as Blanca idly sits and watches, suggesting that María is industrious and productive while Blanca is not. Meanwhile, Blanca tells María that she too will work as a mule. The dialogue indicates that Blanca has agreed to become a mule because of the amount of money that she will earn while also giving the impression that Blanca has not truly weighed the risks involved, unlike María. On the other hand, the narrative suggests that Lucy joins the others on the trip because she had no choice at all. When María mentions that she had not realized that her mentor would be making the trip as well, Lucy replies that she had not either, that it just happened. The juxtapositions of María, the one who weighs the risks, and Blanca, the one who impulsively says yes for the money, and Lucy, the one who does not have any choice in the matter, is one moment in which the film can suggest that the notion of choice may be a myth without being detrimental to its presentation of its protagonist as a proactive, enterprising individual.
As Dixon points out, a neoliberal viewpoint does not allow those living in poverty to decide against taking a job “because it is contrary to their moral obligations or duties to significant others; because it is contrary to the course of action that a virtuous person would choose to follow; or because in their opinion it is not ... morally appropriate” (11). Even so, some critics have severely criticized María’s decision to ingest drugs, especially in light of the fact that she is pregnant. In Bialowas Pobutsky’s words, her actions are “extremely dangerous, considering that she is also carrying a baby” (30). Film critic John Petrakis declares that María could survive without breaking the law, and essentially blames Marston for not espousing a simplistic view that straightforwardly condemns the drug trade: “Given that drug dealing is bad and the drugs themselves can kill, it’s fascinating—and a bit disturbing—to consider how film leads us to overlook this truth” (57). It is equally as fascinating, though perhaps not at all surprising, to consider how audiences tend to overlook the bodily harm caused by the chemicals utilized in flower production. The film only alludes to these pesticides once, with a shot in the opening montage of a man in protective gear fumigating, but the health risks associated with the industry have been explored in documentaries such as Jorge Silva and Marta Rodríguez’s Amor, mujeres y flores and investigative news reports. While the workers do not become sick from long-term exposure, “pesticides … cross the placenta and affect the health of their children” (Lallanilla). In an interview with Joshua Tanzer, Marston makes clear that he was aware of the dangers that cut flower production poses to its employees, stating “the chemicals, though they have made improvements in regulating so that theoretically people don’t get exposed to the fumigants, inevitably they wear off on your hands from processing the flowers, and it begins to irritate your skin and your eyes, and there are a still a dramatic number of birth defects associated
with plantation works in Ecuador and Colombia.” The film does not indicate whether or not María contemplates these health risks before leaving this job, but a double standard clearly arises from applying traditional moral codes to the neoliberal environment.

The film’s attempt to denaturalize neoliberalism benefits greatly from its depiction of María’s involvement in the drug trade, since her work as a mule brings to light the ways that neoliberal discourse and biopolitical discourse have transformed the relationship between the self and the body. María llena eres de gracia engages with many of the debates that arise from other body markets, such as the organ trade. What is perhaps most interesting is that through her job as a mule, renting an organ instead of selling one, María can be considered a worker in a body market, instead of a one-time participant as a vendor. The mule labors for a wage, and for as much as certain characters in the film say that it is an easy job, or, in the case of Lucy, not easy but not hard, the film stresses the opposite. The inclusion of the scenes that focus on María’s trip, from when she arrives at the pharmacy where she will swallow the pellets to the hotel room where her handlers will keep her until all of the drugs pass through her system, contain the moments when the film most directly stresses that the biopolitical and neoliberal understanding of the relationship between the self and the body is not natural.

In the neoliberal context, the prohibition or restriction of markets represents a roadblock to individual freedom. Body markets are no exception. As Scheper-Hughes has indicated, the neoliberal would argue that free body markets would be “liberating in their valuing of individual choice, autonomy and the impersonality of economic exchanges,” and thus should not be encumbered by outside meddling or governmental regulation (“Bodies” 3). Because the expansion of free markets is considered synonymous with the maximization of the social good,
the opening of body markets can now be interpreted as a positive development. From this perspective, a mule’s decision to rent out her stomach should be considered just another market transaction, in which the individual will rationally weigh the costs and benefits before making a decision. Such logic results in a naturalization of the fragmentation of the body. *Maria llena eres de gracia* denaturalizes such fragmentation through both its structure and its content. On the level of the image, the camera highlights the discomfort to which the mule’s body is subjected, thereby insinuating that this is not a natural use of the body. On the level of the narrative, the film explores Rosa Braidotti’s concept of “organs without bodies” and the instrumental logic that follows from fragmentation.

From the moment when María begins her training until the moment when the last of the drug pellets leaves her system, the film includes many shots of María’s body that are difficult to watch owing to the camera’s focus on bodily discomfort. For example, when María swallows the first pellet, she is first shown attempting twice, coughing when she cannot do this. The shots that show these attempts interchange with shots of Javier supervising. Then, one uninterrupted continuous shot documents her third attempt, as she struggles to swallow the pellet. The absence of sound, other than Javier’s voice as he occasionally offers suggestions, intensifies the shot by not allowing any distractions from the image of María’s throat, placed at the center of the screen.

The depictions of María’s physical efforts are intensified by the use of color. Nick Wright notes that “the grammar of the shots and the editing conspire such that we cannot look at Sandino Moreno’s face, much less her body, without feeling something of the bodily torture (that’s what it is) that she is withstanding, and around this time, the color palette of the movie
becomes that of a bruise: sickly yellows, deep purples, deeper shadows of blue and black.”

Reyes Caballo-Márquez elaborates:

Estos colores predominan sobre todo en las tomas enmarcando a María, realzadas por el propio vestuario de la protagonista (la camisa azul violeta, cárdigan gris oscuro y falda azul oscuro que lleva en el viaje), mientras María tiene las pepitas aún dentro de su vientre—por ejemplo, cabe notar las tonalidades “amoratadas” de las tomas dentro de la farmacia una vez que empieza a tragar las pepitas, cuando María pasa el control de seguridad, y dentro del avión [...]. Estos colores empiezan a ser menos predominantes una vez que María expulsa las pepitas en el hotel en Nueva Jersey. (150-51)

For Caballo-Márquez, the bruise-like color scheme stresses the pain that the marginalized individual experiences upon becoming inserted into the economy that places her body at risk (151). It is not just the economy that places her body at risk, but the way that neoliberal biopolitics has transformed the relationship between the self and the body in encouraging individuals to consider their bodies as objects.

Key in this transformation of the relationship between the self in the body is Braidotti’s concept of “organs without bodies,” which explores the fragmentation of the body that occurs at the confluence of neoliberalism and biopolitics. For Braidotti, the relationship between the self and the body has shifted at the discursive level in two ways. On the one hand, a distancing from metaphysical unity has occurred; on the other, the number of discourses that take the body as their object has proliferated. The concept of body that results from these two processes is “merely an empirical entity that refers to the living organism meant as the sum of its organic parts, an assemblage of detachable parts,” but, at the same time, it “cannot be reduced to the sum
of its organic components” (177-78). Therefore, the body is fragmented as an object because the different discourses that act upon the body have divergent accounts of what the body is, while at the same time it is fragmented as a subject because the subject is no longer considered to be sovereign or unitary. “Organs without bodies” refers to this condition of overexposure of the body and lack of consensus about what the body is. The body may refer to a set of interrelated issues, but “there is ‘no-body’ there, just a discursively productive process of simultaneous fragmentation (‘organs without bodies’) and disciplining or surveillance (biopolitical management)” (179). This philosophical fragmentation of the body is conducive to its physical fragmentation, to which end Braidotti concludes that “[i]n a perverse twist, the loss of unity of the ‘subject’ results in the human being lending its organic components to many a prostitutional swap: the part for the whole” (183).

In María llena eres de gracia, this fragmentation of María’s body first becomes evident in her interview with Javier, her potential employer. After a few preliminary questions, Javier shifts his focus to her body and asks María about her appetite and digestive habits. He does not see María, or any other employee, as a person or as a body. She is just an assemblage of parts, and the most important one to him is her stomach. Likewise, when María agrees to offer up her stomach for the purpose of transporting heroin, she is lending an organic component without regard to how this job will affect her body as a whole. Although she knows that she risks death, she also considers her stomach in terms of its instrumental value: by agreeing to swallow and transport the pellets, she hopes to ensure that she will be able to feed herself and her family from the profits.
This instrumental understanding of body parts leads to a belief that all parts are interchangeable. Braidotti discusses this interchangeability of parts in terms of the use of the organ trade to achieve the biopolitical aim of keeping consumers healthy and safe. She explains: “according to the instrumental logic of biopower […] all organisms are equal in helping achieve [this] aim” (183). In the context of *María llena eres de gracia* and the drug trade, the aim is not to keep consumers healthy, but to transport the drugs to market. Yet the logic is the same: one stomach is as good as any other.

The film’s depiction of the work of being a drug mule merges two biopolitical assumptions: the individual as nothing more than a stomach and the interchangeability of stomachs. Since the film has no access to showing the stomachs of the women, it stresses the ways the women resemble each other in order to suggest interchangeability. Schultermandl, in a discussion of how the film others the Colombian woman, remarks that Marston “cast for the roles of María, Lucy, and Blanca three women who look very much alike” (282). Although it is possible that actresses Catalina Sandino Moreno, Guilied Lopez, and Yenny Paola Vega do resemble each other off-screen, they are also made to look alike. Their similarities are accentuated through styling, especially in the case of Sandino Moreno and Lopez. During the scenes that take place on the flight, the two women have the same hairstyle and wear jackets of the same color. The sequences in which María and Lucy speak to each other evince a high level of directorial intentionality. During the director’s commentary that accompanies the DVD, Marston refers specifically to the scene that takes place in Lucy’s home and admits that he had a specific vision for what the two women’s conversations should look like. In this scene, as well as in the shots and countershots of their other dialogues, the placement of the women in the frame
and the movements of their bodies reflect each other. One example of this occurs on the plane, when María realizes that she has forgotten the address of the hotel. In a series of brief takes, the camera highlights the parallelism between the two women’s bodies. As Lucy writes down her sister Carla’s address, a shot of María’s hands with a pen jumps to a shot of Lucy’s hands with the same pen. The camera cuts upwards, catching a shot of Lucy’s face, as she looks down and to the right, followed by a shot of María’s face, looking down and to the left. The bodies and movements of the two women give the impression that it is one woman looking into a mirror.

While the interchangeability of the women is emphasized during the scenes on the plan, later sequences seem to contradict this logic. As at the beginning of the film, when the camera loses María among the other floral workers to later follow up with a sequence that confirms that the viewer should see María as unique, here the film alternates scenes that visually underscore interchangeability with a sequence that affirms that such interchangeability has limits. A stomach is a stomach, but when customs officers briefly detain María for further questioning, a stomach alongside a pregnant uterus is what saves her from imprisonment. María benefits from legal protections as a pregnant woman and such protections indicate that bare life is a conditional, not an ontological status. However, the film does not naively suggest that there is a simple way to rescue bodies from becoming marked as disposable life. Even the loophole that saves María from being x-rayed is only a partial, temporary reversal of her status as disposable life. As one of the officers reminds her, they cannot x-ray her but they can detain her indefinitely. Nonetheless, the film reasserts the positive qualities of María’s character: she uses her wits to answer the interrogation questions in a satisfactory way and manages to enter the United States.
When the body or its parts are only valued as instruments and all bodies or parts are seen as interchangeable, there is a greater risk that individuals will become disposable life. In one of the conversations between María and Lucy on the plane, María mentions that two other women—her friend Blanca and a woman referred to as Constanza in the final shooting script—are also transporting drugs. An unsurprised Lucy explains that the traffickers plan it that way so that if one gets caught, the rest will have a better chance of passing through customs, ensuring that the shipment makes it to the United States. Each individual woman is worthless outside of what she is carrying in her stomach, and those who are in control are prepared to lose some of the shipment. The fates of two of the mules illustrate this disposability. While María waits in an interrogation room at the airport, the film shows a brief take in which Constanza is arrested, with an x-ray of the pellets in her stomach on the wall in the background. Later, Lucy disappears from the hotel room after having shown several signs of being ill. María wakes up to find blood in the bathtub. Given that the film follows the perspective of María, who was asleep when Lucy disappears, it is never clarified whether the handlers kill Lucy or if she dies from accidental drug ingestion. Regardless, her body becomes symbolic for the disposability of these women. Once the rest of the pellets are cut out of her stomach, the handlers dispose of her body.

*María llena eres de gracia* does not just demonstrate how women like Lucy and María become disposable bodies. It also attempts to reclaim meaning for these bodies. The film makes visible those who are ignored by an audience that has stopped questioning how a given object moves from its origin through production to being available for their consumption. Roger Ebert describes this sort of consumer blindness in his review of the film: “Long-stemmed roses must come from somewhere, but I never gave the matter much thought until I saw ‘Maria Full of
Grace,’ [...] I guess I thought the florist picked them early every morning, while mockingbirds trilled.” Emily Davis also speaks of how the film addresses consumer violence, though in this case in the drug trade. She writes, “Marston’s script forces US audiences to see how their consumption of drugs such as heroin and cocaine requires the murder of largely invisible people who transport them inside their bodies” (61). Neoliberal ideology, by promoting free trade and the proliferation of market transactions as the most desirable type of economic organization, has also made international trade relationships seem natural, to the point that no one questions how roses or heroin become available for purchase. A person can consume either of these products without realizing that their production and transportation place other people at risk of bodily harm: be it the long term effects of floral workers inhaling the chemicals used in the floral industry or the risk of a drug mule dying from an overdose should a pellet burst in her stomach. By revealing this hidden side of economic transactions, and emphasizing the humanity of those behind them, María llena eres de gracia takes the first step in reclaiming a place in society for those bodies that the neoliberal system has made disposable.

This metatextual aim of restoring value to those who have been marginalized has an echo on the narrative level, as María symbolically carries out the same project when she attempts to figure out what happened to Lucy. Once María realizes that her friend is gone, she and Blanca flee the hotel room, and María decides to go to the apartment where Lucy’s sister Carla lives. In this last act of the film, María gets to know Lucy’s family and, with the help of a community organizer named Don Fernando, tracks down Lucy’s body. In doing so, María does what Lucy could not do in her lifetime—contact her sister—and ensures that Lucy’s body can be sent back to Colombia, saving her body from remaining an unidentified, anonymous body in a morgue.
For Cortés-Conde, María’s good deed of paying for her friend’s funeral is a redemptive act through which she exonerates herself of her criminal activities and through which the narrative affirms US neoliberal individualism over more collectivistic social systems. In Cortés-Conde’s interpretation of the film, “In choosing [María’s] story, Marston is carefully aiming the film to his US audience. The US values system is not only present in the fact that cutting [family] ties is viewed as positive, but that the other choices are devalued or lead to tragic failure” (88). Cortés-Conde grounds her argument in what she perceives as negative depictions of María’s mother and her sister Diana, María’s best friend Blanca, her boyfriend Juan, and her community back home in general. She writes:

Diana does not work; Juan has no ambition; Blanca tags along with no sense of personal direction… From an “oppressive” collectivistic society that offers no outlet for individuality and no possibility of economic betterment, María has a future with ample opportunities in the United States. This is what a US audience is meant to understand, as it is compatible with the familiar narrative of immigrants seeking the American Dream (87-88).

This perception that María rejects a “collectivistic” society issues from a scene in which María’s mother demands money from her to pay for medicine for Diana’s son Pacho, to which María complains that she is financially supporting the family while Diana is not. For Cortés-Conde, María’s family situation is suggestive of socialism: “Diana, María’s sister recriminates her for resigning her job, and shouts, “Aquí somos todos iguales”… Diana wants equality when she cannot contribute herself to the general well-being” (88). Even if María’s story, at least at the beginning of the film, is a rejection of a family-oriented, collectivistic value system, it is
important to note that the collectivistic value system in question is not one without its own hierarchies. The audience sees early on that not everyone in the family is treated as an equal; although her family expects her to help pay the bills, María’s sister and mother do not give her an equal voice in family affairs: in the first scene at their home, her mother treats her like a child and no one takes seriously her opinions about Pacho’s health.

Cortés-Conde sees Blanca’s and Lucy’s stories as a counterpoint to María’s, since both women are “focused on family ties” (88). Blanca, when defending her decision to join María as a mule, states that she can buy a home for her parents with the money she would make. Lucy, on the other hand, says that she first made the trip in hopes of visiting her sister Carla, who lives in New York. The text devalues Blanca by portraying her as an annoying character, while Lucy’s story has a tragic end: ashamed of becoming a drug mule, she lacks the courage to face her sister, and dies on her third trip. Cortés-Conde concludes, “In [María llena eres de gracia] the choice of María Álvarez’s choice as the central story and not Blanca’s or Lucy’s, values ‘individualism’ over collectivistic [sic] a family oriented value system” (89).

Yet this characterization of María’s storyline as individualistic and Blanca’s as “family oriented” may be too much of a simplification, for in the film the pursuit of individual economic well-being is inextricably linked to community well-being. In a scene near the end of the film, Carla sets up a crib while speaking to María about the difficulties and rewards of deciding to immigrate to the United States. When María claims that she has no plans of staying in New York, Carla makes it clear that she does not believe María will return to Colombia, and then describes how homesick she was when she first arrived. On the verge of tears, Carla describes how she felt the first time she was able to send money home. Saona notes that although the
audience is led to believe that María’s decision has to do with her own child’s future, “Carla does not know that María is pregnant when she talks to her about staying” (134). While the issue of remittances is one of many aspects of international immigration left underdeveloped in the film, Carla’s speech emphasizes that the decision to leave one’s family behind is not necessarily reducible to a selfish desire to secure one’s own economic future; to the contrary, it may also mean an individual sacrifice for the common well-being.

An analysis of María’s and Blanca’s relationship to consumption further problematizes Cortés-Conde’s claim that the positive representation of María affirms neoliberal values in its praise of individualism. As much as María can be considered a neoliberal agent in terms of her choices regarding labor and her body, she falls short of the neoliberal ideal in one realm in particular: consumption. In contrast, Blanca does participate in the consumerism characteristic of neoliberalism. The film hints at this even before both women board the plane for New York. In the brief scene at the airport in Bogotá, María watches as Blanca shops for perfumes. During the scenes that take place in New York, a subtle change in costuming reveals Blanca’s consumerist side. From when she arrives in New York, Blanca is always shown as wearing the same earrings, a pair of silver ones made up of three dangling spirals. However, in the scene where Blanca and María share an inflatable mattress on the floor of Carla’s apartment, a careful eye will note that Blanca has purchased new earrings: a set of gold hoops. This moment was developed further in a dialogue that was cut from the film. The action block for this scene notes: “Maria and Blanca lie in bed – Blanca acts like she’s ignoring Maria. Maria sees that Blanca’s got GOLD EARRINGS that say ‘Blanca’ in cursive” (91). A dialogue between the two begins:

MARIA: What did you do with the pellets?
BLANCA: Nothing yet… I just decided I’m at least going to enjoy the money they advanced me… I bought a dress for my mother. (Marston, Maria 91)

Read alongside the moment when Blanca reveals to María that she too will be working as a mule, despite María’s objections, this scene indicates that Blanca’s apparent dedication to her family is superficial, since her appeals to family occur at moments when she wants to justify her decisions. Finally, the last scene in the airport reiterates this aspect of Blanca’s character. Blanca carries shopping bags with her new purchases, implying that she has already spent part of the money that she claimed would buy her parents a home. As they wait, Blanca looks at her new clothing, while María contemplates the picture from her ultrasound. Blanca is the character who engages with the consumerism associated with capitalism. María, on the other hand, uses her earnings to pay for a medical appointment and to arrange Lucy’s funeral and the repatriation of her body.

María’s relationship to consumption relates back to the criticism of the neoliberal discourse of meritocracy, calling into question the myths of the deserving rich and the undeserving poor. Littler notes one of the characteristics of neoliberal meritocracy is that it frames “the accumulation of consumer goods” as “at once a sign of merit and its tangible award” (63). The film inverts this vision of consumerism. María, presented throughout the film as a character with whom the audience should sympathize, abounds in merit but does not receive any tangible reward. Meanwhile, Blanca obtains the material rewards despite the film’s suggestion that she does not deserve them due to character flaws: she is a follower, not a leader, and she acts like a child instead of an adult.
Some have argued that María is rewarded for her entrepreneurial spirit, though her reward is not material, but rather the opportunity of a better future as an immigrant to the United States. The end of the film—when María, the entrepreneur of self, weighs the costs and the benefits of remaining in the United States as illegal immigrant and decides to stay—is often cited by critics as the moment in which the film most clearly reaffirms the hegemonic values of US neoliberalism. Several scholars have characterized the ending as a happy one. Without a doubt, the ending is not tragic, considering all that could have gone wrong. María and Blanca return the drugs to their handlers and get paid; María pays for Lucy’s funeral arrangements and reconciles with Carla at the funeral home; and María leaves Blanca at the airport, ostensibly leaving the drug trade without any negative consequences for herself or her family. Schultermandl writes, “This ‘happy’ ending underscores the image of the United States as offering a positive alternative to the miserable living conditions María seems to have escaped from … [the] happy ending raises hopes that once María is in the United States all of her problems will vanish although she is a pregnant teenage illegal alien with limited financial assets, education or job training” (283). Pobutsky reads the ending in the same light, stating that “by rejecting what the film presents as stagnation, chaos, and corruption in Colombia, to, instead, take advantage of the land of opportunities in Queens, New York, María subscribes to the imperial discourse of the desirable metropolis to which all the neocolonial subjects should aspire” (38).

In some ways, the final image of the film insinuates that the audience should be optimistic about María’s future. After indicating to Blanca that she will not be boarding the plane, María walks toward the camera. The sound that accompanies these final images is a Julieta Venegas song whose lyrics speak of leaving the past behind and not fearing the future.
María’s growing confidence is reflected by both her body language, at first she walks with her gaze down to later raise her head and look straight ahead, and the lighting, which is shadowy until she raises her gaze, at which point the film abandons briefly its realist aesthetic to offer a shot of María surrounded by a bright, nearly white background. However, given that all of the aesthetic choices made in the film’s production have maintained a documentary-like feel, this lighting effect implies that the conveyed optimism may not be realistic.

Furthermore, other moments in the film imply that María’s future may not be that different from her past. In part, this owes to the film’s portrayal of Colombia and its portrayal of New York. As Schultermandl notes, “Marston’s movie … hardly addresses the social and economic dimensions of life in Colombia” (281). While audiences may make their assumptions about poverty in María’s home town, none of the images of Colombia make such conditions evident. In fact, the image of Colombia on screen does not show living conditions to be any worse than those in its image of New York. Both María’s home and Carla’s apartment are spaces filled with clutter, generating a degree of claustrophobia. The overcrowding of María’s home is suggested through the audience’s knowledge that she lives there with her grandmother, mother, sister, and nephew, but never shown. On the other hand, the camera reveals the overcrowding of Carla’s home in a scene when Don Fernando calls the apartment to tell Carla that her sister was found dead. The frame is filled with people. María, Carla, and Blanca are seated at the table eating breakfast in the foreground, while behind them Carla’s husband reads a newspaper to the back right and his brother sleeps on the couch. Given that crowded living conditions was one of María’s complaints in her argument with Juan, this moment suggests that she may end up in a living situation similar to the one she wanted to avoid.
The film also suggests that, should María find a job, the working conditions would be no better than her job at the beginning of the film. Don Fernando tells María about a job opportunity working as a seamstress for minimum wage. In the final shooting script, additional dialogue between María and Carla paints a bleak picture of this opportunity. Carla warns Maria, “If it’s Frank and Sons tell [Don Fernando] to keep looking for something else. They treat you terribly and then they don’t pay for weeks and weeks” (Marston, Maria 89). Margarita Saona refers to testimony given by an immigrant seamstress to point out that the ending of the film may not be as “happy” as most suggest:

My eyes hurt from straining under poor lighting; my throat hurts because of the chemical fumes from the fabric dye. Sometimes, I would wear surgical masks so I don’t have to breathe in all the dust from the fabric. My back never stopped hurting from bending over the sewing machine. […] There was a sign in the shop that said, “No loud talking. You cannot go to the bathroom.” (qtd. in Saona, 135)

Although this conversation between María and Carla was edited out of the film, the film still suggests that María’s future may not differ from her past, albeit in a much more subtle manner, in a sequence after Don Fernando tells Maria about this job opportunity. The camera shows María as she walks through the streets of New York, walking with her gaze straight ahead until she looks down and to the right. The image then jumps, and now with the camera behind her it captures what had caught her attention: a Latino man sitting in a floral shop, surrounded by bouquets of flowers. Although the flowers around him are bouquets of different colors, in his hand the employee holds a single red rose, arranging its petals just as the women did in the film’s opening sequence. As María passes by, she turns her head to watch him, and he drops the rose to
pick up another. By making this encounter with the roses the first thing that María sees, the film subtly suggests that María’s journey will only lead her back to the beginning. Her future is her past: a monotonous job where her supervisor does not have to treat her well. Given that throughout the film María is a proactive, intelligent character who, in neoliberal fashion, actively pursues a better life, the stasis of the film’s ending is all the more striking. María plays the neoliberal game, but even so is not rewarded.

Without a doubt, there are many social problems that go unexplored in the film, or are treated in a naïve or superficial manner: the way that US foreign policy—notably Plan Colombia and the War on Drugs—plays a role in creating situations in which people like María do not have viable options for making a living, the violence of the drug trade, and the consumer side of the drug commodity chain are just a few examples. To a certain extent, the restricted narrative focus of the film inhibits it from dealing with these systemic issues in a meaningful way; to do so would require the narrative to go beyond the experiences of María. While this limited focal point may allow the audience to lose sight of the aforementioned concerns, it helps spectators to focus on another key issue: the devaluation and dehumanization of the poor in a country where the rationale of neoliberalism has been internalized as natural.
CHAPTER III: Las muertes cinematográficas: The Production and Consumption of Disposable Women in Roberto Bolaño’s 2666

Four European literature professors searching for a reclusive author. An exiled Chilean professor living in northern Mexico. An African-American journalist covering a boxing match. One hundred and ten dead bodies and the detectives and journalists investigating them. A German boy growing up to become a famous author. At first glance, the parts of Roberto Bolaño’s 2666 do not seem to belong to the same whole. Only one character ties them together: the city of Santa Teresa. This fictional city in the Sonoran desert on the US-Mexican border draws in characters from each of the novel’s five stand-alone sections: “La parte de los críticos,” “La parte de Amalfitano,” “La parte de Fate,” “La parte de los crímenes,” and “La parte de Archimboldi.” Yet the fictional city has a real counterpart: Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, a border city known for its booming export-oriented industrial economy and a series of unsolved murders targeting women. The city notorious for its epidemic of femicides is the thread linking the novel’s otherwise disparate plot lines. Rumors about the novel prior to the publication of its English translation tended to claim that 2666 was about the Juárez murders, thereby oversimplifying a complex plot that follows several storylines as they connect and diverge. Nevertheless, 2666 may not be about Juárez, but the relationship between the mutilated cadavers found in Santa Teresa/Juárez and the city’s role in the globalized neoliberal system is crucial to understanding the novel as a unified whole.

The relationship between the bodies and neoliberalism is captured by one particular scene in “La parte de los crímenes:” the discovery of an anonymous body in May 1993. Starting with a brief close-up of the cadaver’s location—the garbage dump between the Las Flores
neighborhood and the General Sepúlveda industrial park—the narrative begins to zoom out, immediately mentioning the body’s proximity to four maquiladoras. The descriptions that fill the next half-page do not discuss the woman who has been murdered, but rather subtly situate the maquiladora within a broader socioeconomic context. First, the reader is told that the electrical towers are new, as is the squatter colony of “casuchas” that popped up soon after the construction of the maquiladora, signaling how Santa Teresa has become a magnet for economic immigrants. Next, the text mentions the trees in the plaza, which are so covered in dust that they appear yellow instead of green, suggesting the environmental degradation caused by the industry. From the plaza the narrator moves to the bus stop and the long dirt path that the workers must tread to reach the security checkpoint. This security, however, protects only the building, not its workers, the majority of whom, the narrator adds, are women. Lastly, the text diverts its focus back to the dead woman, stressing that she was found amid the waste produced by those four maquiladoras (449). Only after the descriptions of the reactions of three executives from the Multizone-West transnational, who bribe police to take care of the situation so that they can avoid wasting their time, does the reader learn that the woman had been raped and strangled, and that she was five months pregnant. This episode, read on a symbolic level, directly criticizes the maquiladora industry and by extension the global neoliberal system. Just as the woman’s body ends up among the maquiladoras’ garbage, this economic model, Roberto Bolaño implies, produces disposable life at the same rate it produces consumer goods for the world market.

In this instance, disposable life refers back to Giorgio Agamben’s concept of bare life. In Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life, Agamben develops this concept through the analysis of the homo sacer, a figure from archaic Roman law. The defining characteristic of the
homo sacer is that he may be killed with impunity, but his death cannot be a sacrifice. Though
the ban on sacrifice may seem contradictory, this prohibition reveals that the homo sacer is
excluded from all political order, including religion. Therefore, bare life refers to life devoid of
all value. Although bare life has existed throughout history, to wit its appearance in ancient
Rome, Agamben also suggests that in recent history a significant change has occurred: that
biological life and bare life have become indistinguishable: “if today there is no longer any one
clear figure of the sacred man, it is perhaps because we are all virtually homines sacri” (115).

The roots of this shift in homo sacer from an identifiable figure to a potential inherent in
any person lie in the development of technologies of power that Michel Foucault has called
biopolitics. For Foucault, the biopolitical state concerns itself not just with the regulation of a
certain way of life, bios or the life of the citizen, but with life itself, or zoē. Reaching beyond the
traditional sovereign right to “take life and let live,” a biopolitical regime assumes the inverse
right, the power to “make live and let die.” Once the state takes on this opposite role, it finds
itself in a contradictory position: if the basic function of power is to improve life, “[h]ow … is it
possible for a political power to kill, to call for deaths, to demand deaths, to give the order to kill,
and to expose not only its enemies but its own citizens to the risk of death?” (Foucault, Society
254). To solve this problem, says Foucault, a biopolitical regime must establish a biological
relationship between one person’s life and another person’s death; the state can take away life so
long as the life taken away represents some sort of threat to the biological health of the
population as a whole. Foucault illustrates this link between the death of one and the health of
another with the concrete example of warfare. War, from the biopolitical perspective, means
killing an enemy to protect the lives of the citizens, and simultaneously improving the health of
the body politic, since presumably those who will die in defense of the state will be society’s weakest members (Society, 257). When Agamben remarks that each and every person potentially may become homo sacer, he is signaling that this biopolitical logic reaches beyond the context of war. With any attempt to regulate life, both in terms of maintaining the health of a population and maximizing its economic productivity, the modern state inevitably produces within itself the bare life that it cannot tolerate, a life that is disposable.

Disposable life is perhaps a more appropriate term as the biopolitical state becomes also a neoliberal one. Agamben’s discussion of bare life and the sacred man is dependent upon a notion of sovereignty that no longer seems applicable as multinational companies become more powerful than nations and the market becomes the guiding principle for all decisions, not just economic ones. Yet the neoliberal state is fundamentally a biopolitical one. Pierre Bourdieu’s analysis of neoliberalism as a system that individualizes everything, even failure, illustrates the commonalities shared by neoliberalism and biopolitics, even if he does not frame it in those exact terms. This individualization of failure that Bourdieu identifies derives from the conception of the worker that neoliberal discourse promotes. Foucault has explained this change as the shift from the worker as a victim of alienation to the worker as an “entrepreneur of self,” because the worker is “for himself his own capital, for himself his own producer, for himself the source of [his] earnings” (Foucault, Birth 226). The metaphor “entrepreneur of self is an attractive one that encourages workers to buy into capitalism, transforming the worker from a victim to the author of his own success or failure. Bourdieu develops the effects of this metaphor at greater depth, arguing that it leads to the portrayal of social problems such as poverty and unemployment as the result of individual incompetence. According to Bourdieu, neoliberal ideology employs what he
calls an “ideology of competence,” which is a sort of social neo-Darwinism. This ideology of competence divides the human population into two classes of people. It holds that those who obtain very high incomes do so because of their talents, whereas the masses of people stuck in borderline jobs or unemployment are not successful due to their own faults. Bourdieu’s description of how the coupling of the privatization of failure and the notion that “the best and the brightest” flourish in a neoliberal framework creates two classes of people is also applicable at a global level. When combined with the logic of biopolitics, this other class of people, those who are not successful and thus do not have the right to be full citizens, can easily be turned into disposable life, the element that may be eliminated without loss to the market, and—since the market has been generalized to encompass all aspects of life—without loss to the body politic.

The dead women of Santa Teresa represent the disposable life of Juárez, that embodied waste found in the model city of post-Fordist capitalism. Be that as it may, they are usually not recognized as such. The characters that populate “La parte de los crímenes” mistake them in many ways: as prostitutes, as victims of a deranged serial killer, as evidence of incontrollable gender violence in a society where traditional patriarchal values are in conflict with progress and economic modernization. In any given case, one or more of these explanations may hold true, but the seemingly never-ending parade of female bodies in this section invites the reader to contemplate the crimes as a mass phenomenon, one that is not isolated to the immediate context of Santa Teresa. In order to find patterns where there seemingly are none, to understand why, as one character in 2666 will say, no one pays any attention to these particular crimes but the secret of the world is hidden amongst them, a series of questions must be addressed (439). How do the formal characteristics of “La parte de los crímenes” influence the way the reader can interpret the
crimes? Why should the crimes be interpreted as the result of neoliberal economic practices, even if not all of the dead women are maquiladora workers? Given that all of the dead bodies belong to women, is 2666 suggesting that the creation of disposable life is a gendered phenomenon? What does reading “La parte de los crímenes” alongside its companion texts suggest about the geography of disposable life? How does 2666 engage the reader and encourage him to reevaluate how his actions relate to the violence in Santa Teresa, and, by extension, Ciudad Juárez? Only then will the text’s critique of the neoliberal production of disposable life and of the readers’ complicity as consumers of disposable life become evident.

“La parte de los crímenes” opens with a scene that quickly will become familiar to the reader: a dead woman’s body appears unexpectedly. Later identified as thirteen-year-old Esperanza Gómez Saldaña, she is the first of the female bodies that the text uncovers. Aside from differences in details about the precise location of the body, the articles of clothing found nearby, etc., the text treats the bodies in a repetitive fashion. Once the body appears, the narrator describes the scene of discovery and then the body itself using a sterile, forensic language. The text proceeds to identify the cause of death and whether the body shows signs of rape or torture. Lastly, it discusses the investigation, if there is one. Otherwise it recounts a few details about the dead woman’s prior life, if the police manage to identify her. Afterwards, the dead woman exits as quickly and as silently as her body appeared, to be followed by the discovery of another body or a short narrative about a character involved with the investigation of the crimes.

This repetition of the discovery of a cadaver and its almost immediate departure fills most of the pages of “La parte de los crímenes.” Unlike the other parts of 2666, all of which feature a central plot, a protagonist or a group of protagonists, and an internally-consistent style, literary
conventions here are distorted, mimicking the way that the bodies it discovers have been mutilated or disfigured. Its multiple storylines all directly relate to the femicides, yet the chapter lacks a plot in the traditional sense. Characters sporadically enter and exit the narrative, with the fragments jumping from one character to another ostensibly without order. The text even seems to lack a beginning and an end. In the second fragment, the narrator discusses how it would be naïve to think that Esperanza Gomez Saldaña was the first murder victim. The count begins with her, “[t]al vez por comodidad,” despite the fact that surely others were murdered before her (444). After reading that the only reason why this dead woman is the first on the list of the dead is for the sake of convenience, the reader realizes that there is also no compelling reason why her death should be the beginning of this section of the novel. It may have been the first death in 1993, but the narrative could just as easily have started with the first death of 1992 or 1994. The end seems equally as arbitrary. Although “La parte de los crímenes” ends with the anonymous last body of December 1997, closing with the end of a different calendar year, referring to it as the last death also is a misnomer. Surely more bodies will soon resurface in the desert.

The lack of closure that the reader has at the end of “La parte de los crímenes” is intensified by the text’s refusal to follow the conventions of the genre that many critics have classified it as: the detective novel or novela negra. Significantly, the text breaks with two cornerstones of the genre: the necessity of an ending that offers a certain degree of resolution and the presence of a detective hero. With regard to the first, after reading about the last dead woman and the relative tranquility of the holiday celebrations of 1997, the reader arrives at the last words of the section and still does not know who perpetrated the crimes, what their motives were, or even if all of the crimes were connected. When Gina Louise Robinson Sherriff discusses
how “La parte de los crímenes” frustrates the reader expectation it implicitly creates through its detective novel structure, she emphasizes the second element, the need for a detective. Sherriff summarizes, “while the detective story formula requires both a crime and a detective … ‘La parte de los crímenes’ is overflowing with crime but lacks a real detective” (139). She analyzes in depth the numerous characters that could fulfill that role—journalist Sergio Rodríguez, police officers Lalo Cura and Harry Magaña, and FBI profiler Albert Kessler—and concludes that this absence of a hero enables Bolaño to confirm his point that these murder cases are inherently “unsolvable” (146). She identifies several reasons for this insolvability: their systemic nature, the reluctance of authorities to consider the crimes as the work of multiple murderers instead of a single serial killer, and the city’s unwillingness to advocate for improved security when those who are being killed come from poor neighborhoods. With this last reason, Sheriff hints at how the victims are characterized as disposable life, even if she does not explicitly refer to that term.

For Sherriff, nonconformity to genre owes to nothing other than a manifestation of realism. She explains that, though “[i]t is tempting to create an alternate and more satisfying universe in which the crimes are solved and the guilty are punished,” Bolaño’s “adherence to real-life events placed considerable constraints on him, none more difficult than the fact that the majority of the murders remain unsolved” (173). Sherriff is right to stress the similarities between fiction and the historical details of the murders. The descriptions of the dead women are almost identical to the crime reports that Norberto Moreno compiled in 444/Ciudad Juárez/93-06: Expedientes del feminicidio. Several characters, like Sergio Rodríguez and Albert Kessler, are based on real people, namely Mexican journalist Sergio Rodríguez and FBI profiler Robert K. Ressler. At the same time, her conclusion is too simplistic. More often than not, “La parte de
los crímenes” is almost but not quite faithful to the real-life events. Names are vaguely modified and history is slightly altered. Even the geographical space is marginally displaced, with the murders moved from Ciudad Juárez in the state of Chihuahua to fictional Santa Teresa in the neighboring state of Sonora. All of this raises the question of whether defiance of genre expectation can be explained strictly by a desire to reproduce historical facts faithfully.

Rather than being merely a manifestation of realism, both genre noncompliance and the defiance of literary conventions in general impact the reader’s interpretation of the crimes. Andrew McCann has described the narrative chaos as a refusal to offer the reader a framework to make sense of the violence (138). This technique becomes even more important when one considers Susan E. Sweeney’s characterization of the ending of a detective story as so “definitive, complete, and single-minded” that it is more of an “erasure” than a resolution (5). If “La parte de los crímenes” offered answers, it would erase the urgency of the crimes. If readers could attribute these deaths to a serial killer or a group of serial killers, the violence of Santa Teresa and, consequently, Ciudad Juárez would not be symbolic of a broader phenomenon, and it would not require its readers to reevaluate their own complicity in the creation of such violence. If the readers knew the details of the crimes, the dead women of Santa Teresa would more easily become, to use James A. Tyner’s words, “consumable images of dead women” (121), which allow readers to voyeuristically enjoy brutal acts secure in their knowledge that the perpetrators of such crimes have been caught. Instead, by refusing to allow the reader to reason away the crimes or to regain his peace of mind at the end of the narrative, “La parte de los crímenes” disrupts the complacency of the reader. It also signals that the continued failure to solve the
crimes stems from a persistent refusal to read them in a broader context: as a manifestation of disposable life engendered by the confluence of biopolitics and neoliberalism.

For even though “La parte de los crímenes” ends without indicting any individual for his participation in the crimes or revealing what his motives may have been, the narrative does indicate a connection between the femicides and Santa Teresa’s condition as a city whose economic activity is monopolized by the production of goods for the globalized market. The first insinuation of this connection occurs before “La parte de los crímenes:” in a scene from “La parte de Fate” when journalist Oscar Fate spends the night in a hotel in Detroit. As he sleeps with the television on, a news program broadcasts a report about a North American woman who has disappeared in Santa Teresa. Immediately after locating this incident within the series of murders targeting women that has been plaguing the city, the reporter changes topics and briefly discusses the economy, mentioning that unemployment is practically nonexistent in the border town (328). The reader may overlook the importance of this connection until a few hundred pages later, after the murders have taken over the narrative. Yolanda Palacios – the director of Santa Teresa’s Department of Sexually Motivated Crimes – references the same point when speaking with Sergio González, a Mexico City-based reporter investigating the crimes. Palacios mentions two statistics in her talks with González: that the proportion of homicides in all of Mexico was ten men to one woman but the proportion in Santa Teresa was four women per ten men, and that Santa Teresa is the city with the lowest rate of female unemployment in all of Mexico (703; 710). Again, the text places economics and the crimes at the same level, pointing to the need to interpret the femicides in light of the neoliberal system.
These descriptive passages about Santa Teresa are not the only indications of the relationship between the murders and the economy. Many of the dead women in “La parte de los crímenes” have connections to the maquiladora industry: they are maquiladora workers, former maquiladora employees, newly-arrived migrants who are interviewing for a desperately-needed job at a maquiladora, or maquiladora employees’ family members. Because the text only allows itself to access the world within the maquiladoras through the stories of the dead, their surviving family members, or the police who first arrive at the scenes of the crime, its social critique differs greatly from the Latin American literary tradition of social realist protest novels. Instead of portraying abhorrent working conditions straightforwardly, making them the central focal point of the narrative, the depiction of the maquiladoras in 2666 is oblique, restrained, and fragmented. The reader never witnesses those inhumane working conditions that presumably exist. Rather, the text illustrates the dangers of an attitude that values efficiency and cost-effectiveness over humanity, an attitude that manifests itself in various ways in “La parte de los crímenes.” On one end of the spectrum, it translates into the dismissal of any worker who attempts to unionize and the company’s negligence in providing security for its workers who must walk through poorly lit and unguarded areas on their commute to and from the workplace. On the other end, it is manifested in extremely callous attitudes towards human life, be it maquiladora executives’ unwillingness to cooperate with murder investigations (450; 619), or their refusal to allow anyone to notify employees whose their children have been kidnapped, merely giving the excuse that personal phone calls are not permitted (659).

In focusing on the atmosphere created by the maquiladora industry and not the details of how these companies exploit their workers, “La parte de los crímenes” fictionalizes the
environments that Melissa Wright analyzes in her ethnography *Disposable Women and Other Myths of Global Capitalism*. Wright identifies a commonly-held belief among managers of export-oriented production facilities in Mexico and China about high turnover rates of female workers – what she refers to as “the myth of the disposable third world woman” – and she traces how this belief generates a myth that women are disposable, both inside and outside of the workplace. It is important to note that Wright uses the word “myth” according to Roland Barthes’s definition: a type of language that confuses history with nature, thereby masking political situations (Barthes 165; M. Wright, *Disposable* 3). The “myth of the disposable third world woman” naturalizes the *maquiladoras*’ high turnover rates by attributing to all of their female workers certain inherent characteristics: their unsuitability for training, their lack of ambition, etc. From this perspective, the “turnover problem” has nothing to do with declining productivity due to job-related repetitive stress injuries, discriminatory practices that monitor the menstrual cycles of workers, or employee dissatisfaction from being stuck in a tedious, dead-end job while male coworkers are quickly promoted. The constant flow of women being dismissed or deciding to quit for another job in the *maquiladora* industry is attributed to nothing other than the character flaws common to all of the women who work there.

Wright’s use of the concept of myth rightly captures how disposability is an ideological and discursive tool, but, as Michelle Yates has indicated, her choice of wording obscures material reality. According to Yates, Wright’s analysis lacks a Marxian theoretical framework that would illustrate how capitalism transforms humans into waste, both discursively and tangibly. To achieve this end, Yates focuses on a contradiction apparent in the *maquiladora* environments as described by Wright: how can women who produce great wealth for their
employers be considered disposable? She stresses the relevance of this contradiction to the capitalist mode of production in general and not just the particular situation of the maquiladora. In other words, the conflict between “capital’s internal drive for ever increasing value, which can only be produced and extracted from human labor” and the production of waste in its human form is fundamental to the reproduction of capitalism (Yates 1688-89). Although capital depends on labor, the introduction of machinery and other technological advances results in a decrease in necessary labor, rendering an increasing part of the human population superfluous. Wright discusses how the myth justifies the maquiladoras’ refusal to improve working conditions or wages since it portrays these women are workers who do not possess any valuable skills, lack corporate loyalty, and could be replaced at any moment. Yet this is just a manifestation of Marx’s absolute general law of capitalist accumulation: that the surplus population or the “industrial reserve army” increases with the growth of capital (Marx, Capital 798). A worker in a Juárez maquiladora is disposable because there is always a steady stream of other women who can take her place. Notably, these replacements are not necessarily new to the industry, but include veteran workers, who have already outlived their usefulness to their prior employer and will restart the cycle of devaluation with another maquiladora. In “La parte de los crímenes,” the brief biographies of the dead women illustrate this phenomenon: many workers move from one maquiladora to another in hopes of finding better employment.

The strength of Wright’s critique is that she does not limit the discursive consequences of the myth to the maquiladora workplace. Instead, she identifies a parallel between the termination of a worker’s employment with one company – what she refers to as a woman’s “corporate death” – and the bodies of the victims of the Ciudad Juárez femicides. The common thread
between the corporate and the literal deaths of these women lies in the depiction of both as “death by culture,” a way of explaining termination or death as embedded in culture or “resulting from the distortion of traditional values” (M. Wright, *Disposable* 76). In the case of their corporate deaths, as mentioned above, managers presume that high turnover rates cannot be avoided in Juárez because women by nature cannot be trained, are not loyal to their employers, and do not have the motivation to take on more complex tasks and responsibilities. As for their literal deaths, the blame lies squarely on the women whose susceptibility to immorality and vices directly leads to their deaths. In turn, their lack of moral rectitude mirrors the decline in traditional cultural values in Juárez. Wright explains:

In such a cultural climate, such murders are bound to happen … The cultural decline is found within the girls themselves: as [a] criminologist asked in reference to the discovery of a girl’s body, “What was a thirteen-year-old girl doing out at night anyway?” The fact that she is commuting does not seem sufficient proof for such experts to conclude that she is out at night due to her economic need in a city full of nighttime commuters. Rather, her presence in the night points toward a cultural decline within which her death … can be logically anticipated (*Disposable*, 75-76).

Similar to how the myth that female workers will leave their jobs no matter what allows the maquiladoras to justify not offering any incentives to convince these workers to remain in their posts, this belief that the decline in moral values is what is really responsible for these women’s deaths exonerates the maquiladoras from changing the conditions that put these women at risk. Seen through the lens of neoliberal capitalism, if both the corporate and physical deaths of these women are inevitable, any change to how the maquiladoras operate – be it measures to improve
working conditions in exchange for increased employee loyalty to the company or changing production schedules in order to place fewer employees at risk of being abducted, raped, and murdered – would be a waste of money and resources. As long as it is considered more cost effective to replace these women, they can be easily discarded. Having no further value, the female maquiladora workers become the embodiment of industrial waste. The end result is captured in “La parte de los crímenes” as garbage in the literal sense: several bodies appear in garbage dumps or in sewage pipes, like the aforementioned anonymous body of May 1993.

This “death by culture” logic has been used by the authorities to justify their lack of progress in solving the cases and protecting the women of Juárez. Señorita Extraviada, a documentary by Lourdes Portillo that explores the Juárez murders, includes footage of how Francisco Barrio, then-governor of Chihuahua, initially reacted to the bodies found in 1993. At a press conference, Barrio dismisses the women as prostitutes and declares that the solution to the problem is for women to stay at home at night. When a journalist points out the high numbers of workers who finished their shifts at midnight or started them in the early morning, Barrio replies that the focus should be on women who do not work, since those who do work dress a certain way and follow a straight path to work. The message is clear: any woman who appears murdered must have been the victim of her own lascivious lifestyle. The subtext is less direct: the government shall not interfere with business as usual in the maquiladora industry.

“La parte de los crímenes” captures both the managerial indifference to crimes and the broader tendency to deflect responsibility onto the dead women, which allows management and the police to absolve themselves from the necessity of taking action to prevent or even investigate the crimes. The police classify the women as prostitutes so often that the reader may
start to forget the role that the *maquiladoras* and the broader socio-economic environment play in placing women at risk. One such example is the case of Emilia Escalante Sanjuán in August 1995, who according to the police is “media puta” for going out to drink with her friends once every other month (576). Another instance occurs on October 26, 1996, when police believe that an anonymous woman is a prostitute merely because her fingernails are painted red (650). Similarly, the police suspect that Carolina Fernández Fuentes lived a double life because they find a black nylon near her body, despite the fact that in many cases the police determine that clothing found near the women does not belong to them (683). The police are not the only ones who think the dead women are prostitutes. When Klaus Haas, a man accused of masterminding the serial killings, first arrives at the prison, he worries that the other inmates will want to harm him because he allegedly killed the women. Soon he finds out, from another inmate, that the women “eran unas putas” (613), which suggests that finding the real killer would not be worth the trouble.

A contributing factor to this confusion between worker and prostitute may be the fluidity between these two lines of work, which becomes clear through the juxtaposition of the first two deaths of November 1996. The first, María Sandra Rosales Zepeda, worked as a prostitute when she was murdered, but previously had been employed at two different *maquiladoras*. The career path of the second dead woman, Luisa Cardona Pardo, went in the opposite direction: after having worked as a prostitute and later a waitress, at the time of her death she worked at the EMSA *maquiladora*. The inclusion of these background stories of women who moved from *maquiladora* work to prostitution or vice versa, plays a different role than the portrayal of how male characters dismiss the dead women as prostitutes. While the first draws the reader’s
attention to the similarities between these lines of work, the second stresses the *machista* attitude that supports the “death by culture” logic. In a context where women are constantly devalued and debased, impunity for the authors of the *femicides* can only be expected.

The pervasiveness of this confusion between prostitute and worker shows that these women become disposable in two ways because they are caught between two systems. On one hand, they have transgressed patriarchal norms. Instead of remaining in their place at home, they have entered the workforce. Because they have abandoned their traditional roles in the home, male society considers them to be morally corrupt; they have lost their value as good women. On the other hand, these women are disposable according to neoliberal society because they are unskilled workers that can easily be replaced. Yet the traditional patriarchy and the newer neoliberal system are not mutually opposing; the relationship between the two is ambiguous. After all, male managers want the same supposedly feminine characteristics valued by the patriarchy – submissiveness, docility, obedience to authority – even if they are disrupting tradition by taking women out of the home. Regardless, neoliberal practice is the primary cause of these women’s transformation into disposable life. As in Wright’s example of the thirteen-year old victim cited earlier, the reason why these women have come out of their homes and accepted late-night shifts is economic necessity. Similar to the film *María llena eres de gracia*, in which neoliberal policies have changed the local economy of María’s town and made it so that the only jobs are in the export-oriented floral industry, neoliberal policies have also transformed the economy of Santa Teresa/Ciudad Juárez, making jobs in the *maquiladoras* the only option for female workers who need to support their families.
That neoliberalism, and not a transgression of traditional values, is the principal cause of the transformation of these women into disposable life can be seen through how the text depicts its characters’ reactions to the crimes. Those who are able to move beyond the tendency to categorize the dead as prostitutes are the ones gain the most insight into what is happening in Santa Teresa. This becomes especially clear in the case of Sergio González. After returning to his normal assignment with the cultural section of a Mexico City newspaper, the murders in Santa Teresa still haunt him. One night, while speaking with a prostitute, González finally realizes who these victims are:

[M]ientras él hablaba la puta bostezaba, no porque no le interesara lo que él decía, sino porque tenía sueño, de modo que concitó el enojo de Sergio, quien exasperado le dijo que en Santa Teresa estaban matando putas, que por lo menos demostrara un poco de solidaridad gremial, a lo que la puta le contestó que no, que tal como él le había contado la historia las que estaban muriendo eran obreras, no putas. Obreras, obreras, dijo. Y entonces Sergio … como tocado por un rayo vio un aspecto de la situación que hasta ese momento había pasado por alto (583).

The conversation with the prostitute is a moment of epiphany, both for González and for the reader, who has heard these women called prostitutes so many times that he may have started to believe it. After this realization, González takes the lead in investigating these crimes.

The other character whose interest in the crimes is consolidated once he understands their connection to the economic situation of Santa Teresa is Oscar Fate. Fate, unlike most of the characters who come to Santa Teresa, arrives there by accident; he unexpectedly has to write about a boxing match despite not being a sports reporter. In a conversation with Chucho Flores, a
Mexican sports writer covering the same fight, Fate consciously hears about the crimes for the first time. He learns that the murdered women are workers, and he asks several questions as to how they were murdered. Regarding this conversation, Grant Farred notes that Fate, in his initial inquiries about the murders with Flores, asks how the women were killed but never why. In the context of neoliberalism, why is an unaskable question, for answering it would require a commitment to understanding not just the violence committed against women by the murderers, but also the broader violence inherent to the neoliberal exploitation of women in the maquiladora. Therefore, the question is rendered meaningless because Santa Teresa is a town “where everyone—more or less, of course—accepts the killings as the cost of doing business” (Farred 699). Fate never asks Flores why the women are murdered, but he does seem to immediately understand the need to investigate the murders in Santa Teresa within a broader context. Identifying it as material for a great journalistic piece, he pitches the story to his editor as “un retrato del mundo industrial … un aide-mémoire de la situación actual de México, una panorámica de la frontera” (373). Unfortunately, Fate never writes his article because his editor’s decisions are also dictated by the market: the editor judges the story to be unmarketable to his primarily African-American readership, negating any possibility for solidarity which would cross racial, class, and national boundaries. In any case, Fate is the character who gets the closest to possibly witnessing one of the murders, rescuing Rosa Amalfitano, a woman he meets in Santa Teresa, from a situation in which she presumably would have been raped and murdered.

The most salient example of the truth behind the statement that the dead women are the cost of doing business appears in a fragment about Guadalupe Rojas, a dead woman whose case is one of the few in which the police can piece together the details: “[Guadalupe Rojas] trabajaba
de obrera en la maquiladora File-Sis, instalada no hacía mucho en la carretera a Nogales, a unos
diez kilómetros de Santa Teresa. Guadalupe Rojas, por otra parte, no murió mientras se dirigía a
su trabajo, algo que se hubiera podido entender” (450-51, emphasis added). Had Guadalupe
Rojas died on her way to work, her death would have been understandable, but why? On one
hand, as Julia Monárrez Fragoso points out in her statistical analysis of one hundred and ten
femicide cases from 1993 to 1998—the body count and the time period covered in “La parte de
los crímenes”—the women who appear to be at the greatest risk are maquiladora employees or
women who are seeking work in that industry: the single occupation shared by the largest
proportion of the murdered women, 22.8% of the dead (“Serial” 170). On the other hand, more
important than the exact numbers, whose explanatory power is limited once one considers that in
58.4% of the cases the woman’s profession could not be determined, is the perception that the
maquiladoras put women in harm’s way. 185,000 maquiladora workers start work at 5 or 6 a.m.
or leave at 12 p.m., and their workplaces are often located in isolated, dangerous neighborhoods
(Señorita extraviada).

Well-publicized cases of women who have died on their way to or from work have
contributed to this belief that a woman dying on her way to or from work is understandable. One
such case is Claudia Ivette González, a maquiladora worker whose body was found a month
after she was turned away from work for arriving four minutes late. Elvia Arriola frames this
individual case within a broader institutional disregard for human rights. During her fieldwork
investigating the conditions in the maquiladoras, workers told her of long production schedules,
workplace injuries, exposure to dangerous equipment or toxic chemicals: a general disregard for
safety in the workplace. Late night or early morning shifts, production quotas that must be met at
any cost, punishment for using the bathroom during work time, all of these problems “flow
directly from the signal by company owners and their agents to supervisors and managers that
(1) workers’ lives are less important than production schedules and (2) the safety of workers is
yet another cost that disturbs the projected return on investment” (Arriola 38). Read against this
backdrop, Claudia Ivette González’s death—or that of any other maquiladora worker—is
understandable, since her employer is not required to consider her safety. After all, as Arriola
concludes, “[t]he policy of free trade is profit making, not the terms and conditions under which
a poor woman is hired, worked, paid, or disciplined” (44). In the context of the maquiladora
industry, the death of a worker is an ordinary occurrence, a consequence of an overly-simplified
economic mindset that places the bottom line over its own workers’ wellbeing.

As the narrator indicates through the comment that Guadalupe Rojas’s death would have
been understandable, the crimes have been normalized—provided that the body appears in a
certain context and that the dead women belong to the working class. 2666 does recount some
anomalies from the typical femicide scenario, but the differences only reinforce the norm. When
a body turns up in one of Santa Teresa’s wealthier neighborhoods, the crime bothers policeman
Epifanio Galindo so much that he cannot stop thinking about the case for days. Clearly the dead
woman did not live in the neighborhood, and the presence of police and private security
companies on the streets makes it unlikely that she had been killed there. Her presence is more
disruptive than most of the dead women because Epifanio cannot rationalize her death.
Ultimately, he must conclude that he will never find a satisfactory answer to his questions (532).
It is a given that these crimes will only affect certain types of people in certain places; anything
otherwise is not intelligible. The presence of disposable life, of homo sacer, in a wealthy
Another deviation from the norm is the case of Linda Vásquez, the only dead woman to come from a wealthy family. Police quickly find and incarcerate her killer: Jesús Chimal, a gang member who had been dating Linda. In one of the fragments focusing on Klaus Haas, the text describes the prison atmosphere in the days before Chimal’s arrival: “A Chimal lo esperaban. Sabían que iba hacia allí. Sabían qué celda iba a ocupar y sabían que se había cargado a la hija de una persona de dinero” (651). A week later, a group of inmates brutally tortures and murders Chimal and his gang associates. This episode stands in stark contrast to the others, and the message is clear: while some women are homo sacer and may be murdered with impunity, murdering someone who does not fall within that category results in harsh consequences for the author of the crime, who has transgressed an implicit societal norm. The fact that even prisoners, representing the underclass of society, are policing these norms that favor the wealthy highlights the extent to which the presence of disposable life has been normalized in Santa Teresa.

Given that all of the dead bodies in “La parte de los crímenes” are female, the text may seem to suggest that their disposability results from their gender identity, but the dead women of Santa Teresa are not the only examples of bare life in 2666. The novel illustrates how the human-as-waste phenomenon is more universal, not through the exhibition of dead male bodies, but rather primarily through silences. To understand how 2666 presents the disposability of bodies as not an exclusively gendered phenomenon, it is necessary to consider a discussion that takes place in “La parte de Fate,” when Fate overhears two men, one of whom turns out to be FBI profiler Albert Kessler, discussing death in a rest stop diner on the highway leading to Santa Teresa.
Kessler, who is returning to the States, philosophizes about why certain deaths matter and others do not, juxtaposing deaths from other eras: the twenty-percent of slaves transported on ships from Africa compared to a theoretical case of a wealthy landowner who kills his neighbor and his wife, and the deaths of thousands during the Paris Commune in 1871 alongside the case of a Frenchman who killed his wife and mother around the same time. While no one cared about the slave ships or the commune deaths, the example of the landowner would have terrorized society for months, and that of the Frenchman received press coverage at that time throughout Europe and even in the United States. On considering the question of why some deaths matter and others do not, Kessler quickly formulates a response, “los muertos de la Comuna no pertenecían a la sociedad, la gente de color muerta en el barco no pertenecían a la sociedad, mientras la mujer muerta en una capital de provincia francesa y el asesino a caballo de Virginia sí pertenecían, es decir, lo que a ellos les sucediera era escribible, era legible” (339). Considered in this way, the situation of the dead women of Santa Teresa is complex. On one level, they do not belong to society and are *homo sacer* because they can be murdered with impunity. On another, the fact that they do receive some media attention suggests that they are not completely excluded from society.

Before turning to why the dead women can be disposable life and yet not be completely excluded from society, it is necessary to consider those deaths in Santa Teresa that seem to correspond to those of the commune and those of the slave ships. The bodies are never shown, but they are referred to in “La parte de los crímenes” during a discussion of one of the periods in which no female bodies are found, in January and February of 1997:
Ciertamente, hubo muertos. Murió apuñalado un ladrón …, murieron dos tipos vinculados al narcotráfico, murió un criador de perros, pero nadie encontró a ninguna mujer violada y torturada y después asesinada. Eso en el mes de enero. Y en el mes de febrero se repitió lo mismo. Las muertes habituales, sí, las usuales, gente que empezaba festejando y terminaba matándose, muertes que no eran cinematográficas, muertes que pertenecían al folklore pero no a la modernidad: muertes que no asustaban a nadie (675).

Despite the narrator’s initial characterization of these two months as a respite from the killings, it is clear that death—even violent death—is ever-present in Santa Teresa; the only difference is that even in death certain bodies are worth more than others. These dead bodies referred to above are also homo sacer, life so disposable that they can be killed not only without punishment, but also without anyone noticing their deaths at all. Even when their deaths are recorded, they are dismissed as criminals or as people who in some way deserved to die, just like the dead women are classified as prostitutes.

These dead male bodies are only present through their absence in “La parte de los crímenes,” but they are not the sole example of a male body transformed into disposable life in 2666. In fact, to fully understand the novel’s message about the relationship between neoliberalism and bare life, one must turn back to “La parte de los críticos.” In many ways, this first section appears to be worlds apart from the parade of death that comprises “La parte de los crímenes.” Although the narrative eventually travels to Santa Teresa, most of it takes place in Europe, where it follows the intellectual pursuits of Jean-Claude Pelletier from France, Manuel Espinoza from Spain, Piero Morini from Italy, and Liz Norton from England: four literature professors who have devoted their scholarly careers to the analysis of the literary works of
Benno von Archimboldi, an enigmatic German novelist. In stark contrast to the portrayal of Santa Teresa, the lives of the critics highlight the more positive aspects of globalization: they have formed friendships that transcend national borders, they constantly travel to attend conferences, all of them study literature written in a language other than their native language, and they all live comfortable, bourgeois lives. The plot of this first part may seem trivial in comparison to what the novel will later bring, focusing primarily on two conflicts: their quest to meet Archimboldi in person and a love triangle among Pelletier, Espinoza, and Norton.

In comparison to the rest of the novel, the tone of La parte de los críticos” is so much lighter that it has even lead one reviewer to remark that the rest of a novel shifts to a “world so far beyond the imagining of the first section’s ‘critics’” (Lethem). However, one of the darkest moments in this section provides a key to understanding the relationship between disposable life and neoliberalism in the novel as a whole and illustrates that disposable life is not a category that is restricted by gender. During a trip when Pelletier and Espinoza visit Norton in London, the three critics are riding in a taxi when the driver takes a wrong turn. After the three professors make some comments that the driver, who happens to be an immigrant from Pakistan, finds insulting, he offends them by calling Norton a “puta” and the two men “chulos.” Instead of just leaving, Espinoza pulls the driver out of the car, and he and Pelletier start to beat him. They repeatedly kick him until he is “inconsciente y sangrando por todos los orificios de la cabeza, menos por los ojos” (103). The immediate effect of participating in this violence is sexual satisfaction: the text remarks that it was as if they had the ménage à trios that they had always desired. The next day, Pelletier and Espinoza check the newspapers, but there is no mention of the crime. Later they find out from Norton that the driver is still alive and has been hospitalized.
with several broken bones and a concussion. However, the two men never have to face the consequences of their actions. Even their guilt is easily assuaged, for deep down they are “convencidos de que el verdadero derechista y misógino era el paquistaní, de que el violento era el paquistaní, de que el intolerante y mal educado era el paquistaní, de que el que se lo había buscado era el paquistaní, una y mil veces” (110). Once again, blame is deflected away from those who commit crimes and onto the object of their violence.

Through this episode, 2666 illustrates a few points about the creation of disposable life in the neoliberal era, the first of which is establishing which bodies are vulnerable to becoming disposable life. Like the dead women, or even the dead men of Santa Teresa, the Pakistani is another embodiment of homo sacer or disposable life: he is left for dead and yet no one cares, leaving his aggressors unpunished. As a working-class immigrant, society considers him to be an outsider, and his beating does not generate any media uproar. Although a maquiladora worker in Santa Teresa and a taxi driver in London do not have much in common, the narrative treats their bodies in the same way, which illustrates Agamben’s thesis that the condition of homo sacer “now dwells in the biological body of every living being” (140). Disposable life existed before neoliberalism, but what has changed is that certain bodies are marked as homo sacer not because of any shared racial or religious identity, but because of their relationship to the market. Neither the maquiladora workers nor the taxi driver possess valuable skills for the market; they are all easily replaced.

In juxtaposing different manifestations of bare life, 2666 is not arguing that these traumatic events are equatable in terms of scale or severity. The point is not to determine who has suffered the most nor is it to subsume all violence under the same category; rather, what
2666 achieves is pointing out a commonality behind all of these events. When Sol Inéz Peláez reads the episode of the Pakistani taxi driver in light of the dead women of Santa Teresa, she warns against conflating the xenophobic violence of the first example with the gendered violence of the latter, stating that viewing the *femicides* as a sort of paradigm of global neoliberal violence would “obliterat[e] the singularity of this [sic] (and the other) victims” (191). However, not recognizing underlying connection between the two would overlook the text’s strongest social criticism: that these acts of violence, in spite of their singularity, share common roots in the globalized neoliberal system.

Focusing on the singularity of each victim would also lead the reader to overlook other insights about bare life in the neoliberal era that come from the inclusion of the episode about the Pakistani taxi driver: that this neoliberal, biopolitical violence is not geographically limited, and consequently that the multi-cultural, border-crossing world that the reader encounters in “La parte de los críticos” has a role in its creation. The world portrayed in “La parte de los críticos” may *seem* disconnected from that of “La parte de los crímenes;” most of the violence portrayed in 2666 is contained within the limits of Santa Teresa. In this sense, 2666 may appear to reproduce perceptions about violence in the real-life case of Ciudad Juárez, where is depicted as a “Mexican border phenomenon that stops once you cross the Río Bravo” (Monárrez Fragoso, “Death” 24). Yet the inclusion of the academics’ brutality reminds the reader that these geographic separations are illusory. The same assumptions about who qualifies as having a life worth living that fuel the indifference toward the killings of women in Santa Teresa exist even in the parts of the world that are allegedly more civilized, erupting into other, less visible forms of violence. To this end, Farred’s characterization of 2666 as an “über-rhizome of death, linking
one unknown, overinhabited place (the city that promises ‘almost full employment’) with every other unknowable space of potential violence against women” making the scene of death “unending and international” (699) is a useful image for understanding disposable life in the novel, despite the fact that Farred, like Wright, falls into the trap of limiting this category to gender. By rhizome, Farred is referring to the concept developed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, who define a rhizome as a non-hierarchical system that connects multiple points. Like a rhizome, 2666 connects Santa Teresa to London and elsewhere, the maquiladora murders to xenophobic violence to other manifestations of bare life.

Hermann Herlinghaus is perhaps the scholar who has developed the most comprehensive reading of “La parte de los críticos” vis-à-vis the femicides. He too argues against any geographical exceptionalism of the U.S.-Mexican border, claiming that “[i]f ‘The Part About the Crimes’ presents a kind of slow-motion that is a spectrally intensified perception of the biopolitical violence abounding across one of the hemisphere’s most tragic scenarios, ‘The Part About the Critics’ shows that violence … cannot be understood from its most destructive outgrows on the global map alone” (“Placebo” 106). Herlinghaus identifies a link between the “violence and biopolitical apocalypse emanating from ‘Santa Teresa’” and “intellectual identities that are caught up—by virtue of literary critics’ mission—in the masterful sublimation of an age-old history of violence and inequality (“Placebo” 117). In his reading of “La parte de los críticos,” the key moment is not when Espinoza and Pelletier erupt in violence against the taxi driver, but their subsequent repression of their remorse, because the literal violence against the taxi driver supplants the metaphorical violence against the Global South resulting from Western intellectuals’ justifications of practices and ideologies, such as neoliberalism, in the name of
progress or civilization. The professors’ ability to convince themselves that the violent one was really the taxi driver, and conversely that they acted in defense of humanity—even as they are beating him, the scholars consecrate their kicks to Salman Rushdie and the feminists of New York and Paris—reflects this symbolic violence through which the liberal democratic tradition has justified violent actions.

Beyond this symbolic, discursive violence that Herlinghaus discusses, in what other ways do those who hold a relatively privileged position in the neoliberal world order—not just the critics, but also those who are reading the novel—participate or at least tacitly consent to the violence epitomized by the femicides in Santa Teresa? As Lidia Huerta Moreno has pointed out, much of the scholarly work discussing the femicides in 2666 has approached the crimes in a tangential way, contextualizing them within a genealogy of evil, be it aesthetic (Donoso Macaya), political (Olivier), or economic (Farred). Although Huerta Moreno judges these studies to be “valid within a critical literary tradition,” she criticizes their failure to provoke a debate about evil. Instead, scholars have suggested to readers that violence originates from “something outside of [them]selves,” displacing the root of violence so that readers feel “powerless to influence anything, not even [their] own actions—‘Evil’ is inevitable—and as such we must resign ourselves to it” (92). Huerta Moreno proposes an alternative reading of 2666, using the text as a prompt for “role-taking” exercises and ethical discussions, which focus on the femicides in hopes of drawing the reader’s attention to his own indifference to the crimes. Such a narrow focus, however, upholds the geographical distancing of the reader from the violence in question, which may result in the same attitude that the cause of the violence is external to the reader. The only way to encourage the reader to acknowledge his own participation in the violence is to
consider his own participation in the economic system that encourages people to consider some lives less worthy than others. This creates an atmosphere in which violent actions such as the femicides are considered to be nothing more than an ordinary cost of business. Furthermore, when Huerta Moreno argues that an economic interpretation of the violence in Santa Teresa absolves the reader from any obligation to act because the individual does not have the power to change the economic system, she too is naturalizing the market as human nature or as the only viable option. \textit{2666} invites the reader to reconsider his own role in the production of disposable life by reflecting on how his own choices contribute to that production.

The novel manages to engage the reader in this way through its portrayal of consumption and commodification. Of course, the text itself is a good participating in the very market that it criticizes, consumed by the reader. As Sharae Deckard has observed, \textit{2666} was thoroughly and swiftly commodified as a global best seller, and she has identified some of the negative consequences of such commodification. “[S]tripped of context,” she writes, “Even the images of the hellish world of post-NAFTA factories and narcocorridors can be reassimilated into the dominant imaginary of Mexico as an infernal borderland to the United States’ civilized North, instead of read as indictments of the systemic violence implicit in the North’s exploitation of the South” (372). Deckard later concludes that the novel still succeeds in challenging, and not merely reproducing, the hegemonic discourse of neoliberalism because of its self-conscious approach to the question of how literary values are produced when scholarship is subjected to market laws, this can be taken further by exploring the text’s self-conscious approach to commodification and consumption more generally. Acts of consumption, including even the
consumption of the novel itself, may appear to be benign choices, but 2666 reveals that through them the reader becomes complicit in the violence of neoliberalism.

Ultimately, “La parte de los crímenes” is a text that places consumption, not production, in the spotlight. It focuses on products, not means of their production; as mentioned earlier, the reader sees the end result—the worker made disposable, the cadaver of the dead woman—but never the processes that lead to it—the inner world of the maquiladora, the acts of raping, murdering, and dumping her body. This disassociation is analogous to the Marxian concept of commodity fetishism. When Marx theorizes the commodity, he identifies it as the source of its peculiar nature as its tendency to be seen as something with an objective value inherent to itself, which thereby masks the social relationship that truly gives it value: the amount of labor that the worker expended to create it (164-65). By presenting these dead bodies as detached from the circumstances leading to their deaths, “La parte de los crímenes” reproduces the logic of the commodity fetishist, who does not concern himself with the commodity’s journey to the marketplace.

Comparing a dead body to an object meant for consumption may at first seem incongruous, but the text invites the reader to do so. To understand this point, it is necessary to reconsider a passage cited earlier, which discusses a period without deaths: “Ciertamente, hubo muertos. … Las muertes habituales, sí, las usuales, … muertes que no eran cinematográficas, muertes que pertenecían al folklore pero no a la modernidad: muertes que no asustaban a nadie” (675; emphasis added). This moment in the text simultaneously points to the existence of others who fall under the category of homo sacer and hints at the way the bodies of the dead women have become a commodity in themselves. In fact, unlike the instances of media coverage that
proved that certain people belonged to society while others did not, the attention that the 
femicides receive is indicative of market demand. Ed Vulliamy stresses that “[t]he feminicidio 
became a badge of Juárez: doctoral theses were published across university departments in the 
United States; films were made, including Bordertown, starring Jennifer Lopez; many books 
were written … the feminicidio continues; it never went away” (178-79). Because these deaths 
are cinematographic, they sell; worthless as individuals, these cadavers, when considered 
together, generate a spectacle that becomes profitable for the media, entertainment, and academic 
markets. Even victims support groups have been accused of profiting off the situation (M. 
Wright, “Public” 688). Media coverage has generated more interest in the crimes, but such 
interest has not led to any progress in resolving them.

The cinematographic idea gains more importance when locating this fragment within the 
rest of the novel, due to its placement amidst a tangential storyline that discusses snuff films. 
These are films, typically pornographic ones, in which one of the actors actually dies. Although 
the term snuff has a broader definition, referring to any film that records a real death, 2666 
primarily concerns itself with pornographic/exploitation snuff films in which the murder of an 
actress coincides with the climax of a sexual act. Shortly before the invocation of 
cinematographic deaths, the text recounts a conversation among General Humberto Paredes, the 
former police chief of Mexico City, Sergio Rodriguez, and another journalist about snuff movies. 
The General adamantly denies the veracity of rumors that Santa Teresa is the snuff capital of the 
world (669). Immediately following the fragment cited above, the narrator relates the story of the 
production of a supposedly real snuff movie in Argentina by North American filmmaking couple 
Mike and Clarissa Epstein. Here again the text plays with its historical references: the Epsteins,
like Sergio Rodriguez and Albert Kessler, are slightly modified versions of real people. Their story parallels that of Michael and Roberta Findlay, whose film *The Slaughter* was renamed *Snuff* to take advantage of media hype about an allegedly real snuff movie. By closely mimicking real life, Bolaño dialogues with historical events. When *Snuff* premiered in the United States, it was marketed with the tagline: “The film that could only be made in South America—where life is CHEAP!” This attention-grabbing line may be sensational, but it also encodes the reasons why the Findlays decided to film in Argentina, where the cheap cost of labor meant that investors could “get triple or quadruple [their] money’s worth” (Findlay 30). When *2666* transports snuff to 1990s Mexico by indicating that Santa Teresa is the alleged snuff capital of the world, it is again stressing the fact that life is cheap in Santa Teresa, be it in terms of labor costs or the more general value of human life.

*Snuff*, like the organ trafficking analyzed earlier or the contract killing industry that will be discussed in the next chapter, is an extreme example that illustrates the dangers inherent to any market, even those considered to be benign. Although many would dismiss the person who wants to see a real snuff film as a sadist, according to Robert Cluley and Stephen Dunne, his behavior does not differ from other consumers. In their study of commodity fetishism and commodity narcissism, Cluley and Dunne identify an “as if” moment in consumption, regardless of the object being consumed: “we continue to consume commodities *as if* we did not know what we know only all too well about the various uncomfortable facts about production” (255). The viewer knows, when viewing a snuff film, that an actress was murdered so that he could be entertained. Regardless, he chooses to pay a high price to see it. Because the snuff viewer knows and yet does not act according to this knowledge, he exemplifies Slavoj Žižek’s modification of
commodity fetishism theory. For Žižek, the fetish is not just a gesture of transference onto an object, but also an inversion: “what fetishism gives body to is precisely my disavowal of knowledge, my refusal to subjectively assume what I know” (61). Commodity fetishism increases when the consumer knows about the adverse consequences yet denies this knowledge so that he does not have to act accordingly.

Commodity fetishism still does not account for the sadistic nature of the snuff viewer’s actions, which would seem to differentiate him from someone who consumes a manufactured good. Freud’s theorization of narcissism sheds light on this dark side of consumerism, which he links with narcissism: a redirection of desire onto the self (“On Narcissism” 75). Because the narcissist rarely finds satisfaction of these desires on his own, he attaches such desires to external objects (85). Consumption offers a socially acceptable outlet for expressing these narcissistic desires. To explain this, Freud gives the example of parents who, when purchasing items for their children, satisfy not only their children’s desires, but also their own: not only do they make up for desires they were forced to inhibit when they were children, but they also add to their idealized image of themselves because they see themselves as acting out of selfless love. More generally, consumption can be understood as a practice determined by self-interest. Coupled with Freud’s view of the human being, which in Civilization and Its Discontents he characterizes as a being who tends to view his neighbor as a target for satisfying his powerful aggressive drive by exploiting her, using her sexually without consent, humiliating her, causing her pain, torturing or killing her, it is easy to see how this narcissism can subsume sadism (103-104). Cluley and Dunne synthesize these readings on narcissism and fetishism, noting that “the knowledge of the reality of production, its exploitative nature … , which we would rather deny at the moment of
consumption, is actually part of what compels us to consume in the first place. … The knowledge of other people’s suffering that our consumption perpetuates is precisely what satisfies our destructive and narcissistic desires” (260). Commodity fetishism, functioning as described by Žižek above, then permits the consumer to disavow his own narcissism.

“La parte de los crímenes” plays with these fetishistic and narcissistic tendencies. It conceals the suffering that the reader is most directly involved in perpetuating – the exploitation of the worker within the maquiladora – and lets the reader believe that the real problem is beyond his control – a serial killer that rapes and murders hundreds of Mexican woman. Yet the text only entertains this deflection to a certain extent, and only to draw attention to the reader’s complicity with the neoliberal system. The inclusion of the snuff story line is one of the breaking points that invite the reader to reconsider his own habits of consumption. While reading this tangent, it becomes apparent that very little separates the novel itself from a snuff film. The marketing of the novel, especially in the United States, advertised it as being about the femicides in Ciudad Juárez, which would mean that the fictional dead female bodies found in the fictional Santa Teresa correspond to the real dead female bodies found in the real Ciudad Juárez. The reader hopes to witness the deaths which presume to be real-life murders, just as the snuff viewer hopes to see a real death captured on film. Nonetheless, the use of sterilized language and the omission of the scenes of rape and murder keep the narration from turning into a violent pornography that would satisfy the audience’s sadistic desires. Even though 2666 fails to become a snuff film in written form, its self-awareness makes the reader realize his susceptibility to the consumption of other people’s suffering.
Yet the statement that the text sterilizes its language and omits violent scenes is analogous to the narrator’s declaration that there were no deaths in January and February of 1997: it does not tell the whole truth. There are no passages that recount the details of the crimes perpetrated against the women. Similarly, the reader never catches a glimpse of the snuff films discussed in the text. Nevertheless, there is one moment in which “La parte de los crímenes” borders on becoming a written equivalent of a snuff film: the torture of Chimal and other members of the Cacique gang in the Santa Teresa penitentiary. Before recounting what the other prisoners do to these men, the narrator remarks that the prison guards are watching, and that one also has a camera (652). In perhaps the most explicitly violent passage of the entire novel, the reader witnesses the castration of two Caciques. The narrator makes it clear that the prisoners will continue raping the rest of the men and later murder them, and then cuts off the passage without providing any more details. Even so, the reader can be certain that everything that happens during this silence will be watched by guards and prisoners and documented on film, making the scenario a creation of a “real” snuff film. Nevertheless, because the reader is witnessing the castration of two men instead of “consumable images of dead women,” the desire to view snuff is frustrated. In this way, 2666 continues to assert the difference between its prose that borders on snuff and the snuff descriptions found in texts like Victor Ronquillo’s Las muertas de Juárez, which have been condemned for “emotionally engag[ing] readers pleasurably, but also represent women as fetish objects, consequently feeding an audience that empathizes with the real pleasure of causing their torture” (Huerta Moreno 65-66).

The torture of Chimal and his associates has a double function in the narrative: first, it subverts the reader’s desires in hopes of generating more self-awareness about said desire, and
secondly it reinforces the boundaries of disposable life, limited to those who do not have the relative economic power necessary to compete and win in the neoliberal market. Unlike other bodies in *2666*, Chimal and his associates are not examples of *homo sacer*, because their deaths serve a ritual or sacrificial purpose. As Vena Daas explains in “Language of Sacrifice,” anthropological discourse assumes that the sacrificial cult provides a way to cleanse the social body of the pollution, sin, or guilt that the sacrificator bears (445). Chimal and the Caciques committed the sin of killing a wealthy girl, a woman who did not fall under the category of disposable life. Consequently, their torture and murder is a way of reaffirming the social order in Santa Teresa. The ritual nature of these crimes grants the aggressors’ impunity. Despite the presence of the gaze of the guards and their cameras, reports about the deaths claim that no one knows who is responsible for the crimes.

For as much as *2666* criticizes neoliberal practices and invites its readers to reconsider how their decisions contribute to the violence such practices encourage, what it lacks is any proposal for actions to disrupt this hegemonic worldview in a tangible way. Not only does the text shun more traditional forms of political or committed literature—neither exposing abhorrent working conditions in the *maquiladora* like a *novela de denuncia* nor attempting to give a voice to subaltern groups such as the *testimonio*—but it also questions whether traditional manifestations of political resistance can even be effective at all in the neoliberal atmosphere of Santa Teresa. In one of the more enigmatic remarks about the *femicides*, the statement that grabs Oscar Fate’s interest in the crimes is when Chucho Flores refers to them as “una huelga, amigo, una jodida huelga salvaje” (362). Flores never clarifies what he means by this, but, even if the murders can be considered a strike in the sense of a stoppage of production, the irony of Flores’
comment is that the murders as strike have become as ineffectual as the strike itself in the neoliberal age. Just as the murders-as-strike are incapable of stopping business as usual, strikes have been rendered ineffective—typically by preemptive measures to ensure that they never gain the necessary support.

Insofar as 2666 does not espouse conventional modes of resistance, the text’s political dimension reflects an opinion Bolaño once expressed when interviewed about literature related to another political issue: the forced disappearances most commonly associated with the dictatorships of the Southern Cone in the 1970s and 80s. When asked about the possibility of writing a novel about the desaparecidos, he replied, “Sí, es posible. El único problema es quién y cómo. Porque escribir sobre ese tema para que al final tengamos, por ejemplo, una novela de las así llamadas de denuncia, bueno, mejor no escribir nada … Para escribir sobre eso sería necesario que el novelista se planteara, dentro de la misma novela, el actual vacío en el discurso de la izquierda o la necesidad de reformular ese discurso” (Braithwaite 75-76). 2666, by not offering a plan of action that would appear to provide an easy solution, and in fact by not offering any solutions to the murders at all, conveys this void and the urgent need for a new approach to resisting the excesses of neoliberal capitalism.
CHAPTER IV: LAS MUERTES HABITUALES: DISPOSABLE MEN IN LA VIRGEN DE LOS SICARIOS AND O MATADOR

Texts such as 2666 and María llena eres de gracia primarily portray women as those who have been transformed into disposable life by neoliberal economic policies. Although “La parte de los crímenes” suggests that male bodies can be equally as disposable as female ones, male bodies are only present in their absence. Those un-cinematic deaths that everyone expects are not represented on the page. Yet the heightened visibility of women as individuals made vulnerable by the global neoliberal economy should not suggest that male bodies are not also made into homo sacer by that same system. As Mary Beth Mills has pointed out, “gendered struggles in the global economy are not only contests about norms and practices of femininity; they are also about meanings and experiences of masculinity” (52). Two novels whose pages are filled mostly with dead male bodies, La Virgen de los sicarios by Fernando Vallejo and O Matador by Patrícia Melo, make visible the ways neoliberal regimes make male bodies disposable.

In addition to their focus on almost exclusively male bodies, these texts differ from 2666 and María llena eres de gracia in that they explicitly represent violent scenes. Whereas the camera in María llena eres de gracia hides the circumstances of Lucy’s death, showing only the bloody bathroom after Lucy and the male handlers disappear, and the narrator in “La parte de los crímenes” does not speculate on the circumstances of the women’s deaths, describing only their cadavers, the narrators of La Virgen de los sicarios and O Matador routinely describe death scenes. In this sense, they seem to indulge the readers’ desire to consume other people’s suffering, the very desire that “La parte de los crímenes” in particular criticizes.
Despite these differences from 2666 and *María llena eres de gracia*, *La Virgen de los sicarios* and *O Matador* share many of the same concerns about neoliberal theory and the impact of its practice on vulnerable populations. In representing the business of murder for hire, the novels show the dangers of the neoliberal values of non-interference with business, proliferation of market transactions, and privatization by taking them to an extreme. The novels illustrate how the category of *homo sacer* has expanded under neoliberalism, both through their recounting of the murders and their portrayal of *sicarios* (hitmen) who prove to be just as disposable as the people that they kill. These texts also stress, perhaps even more than 2666 and *María llena eres de gracia*, the biopolitical nature of neoliberal regimes. Lastly, unlike many other *sicario* narratives that tend to present violence as endemic to the poor, both novels emphasize the role played by the middle and upper classes in the production of disposable life and its elimination through violent means.

Of the two novels, *La Virgen de los sicarios* has received more attention. Adriana Jastrzębska describes it as the first *sicario* novel that became widely known internationally, having been adapted into a film in 2000 and translated into several languages (194-95). A great deal of scholarship on the novel has been produced, with some of the more common topics of analysis including violence (Von der Walde, López Bernasocchi, Buschmann, Santos, Goodbody, Serra, Camacho Delgado), the novel as *narcoficción* (Buschmann, Santos, Camacho Delgado), the novel as *testimonio* (Barros, Serra), and its representation of the intellectual

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17 This analysis will focus on the novel and not the film adaptation due to the film’s myopic presentation of the *sicario*. As Fernández L’Hoeste remarks in his appraisal of *La Virgen de los sicarios* in relation to other *sicario* films, the film fails to connect the “whirlwind of violence” that is Medellín with the broader transnational context, thereby suggesting that such violence is simply a local problem, unrelated to the consumption habits of those who reside elsewhere (550).
(Lander, Sarabia). In contrast, *O Matador* has received little attention outside of Brazil. Cláudia Castanheira attributes this in part to the narrative’s exploration of the culture industry, which has led critics to dismiss Melo’s writing style as a formulaic way to gain best-seller status (2). Among the articles about *O Matador* that have been published, the vast majority approach the text through the lens of adaptation, analyzing it alongside either Rubem Fonseca’s 1979 short story “O Cobrador” (Dantas, de Lima) or the film *O Homem do Ano* (de Lourdes Teles and Munhoz de Omena, Rodolfo)—an adaptation of the novel whose screenplay was written by Fonseca. While many critics have analyzed violence in *La Virgen de los sicarios*, *O Matador*, and their adaptations at depth, and a few even have discussed the representations of the *homo sacer* or disposable life, the role of neoliberal discourse in provoking this violence has not been as fully explored.

*La Virgen de los sicarios* and *O Matador* are thematically quite similar, focusing on the life and work of one or more *sicarios*. *La Virgen de los sicarios* follows its narrator’s romantic involvement with a young *sicario* named Alexis and, afterwards, with Wilmar, the *sicario* who murders Alexis. *O Matador* is also narrated in the first person by its protagonist, Máiquel, who tells the reader the tale of how he became a professional killer. Both narratives recount a number of the *sicarios*’ kills before ultimately showing how the *sicarios* themselves are as disposable as the men they have killed. In the former, both Alexis and Wilmar die at the hands of other *sicarios*, whereas in the latter Máiquel survives a murder attempt.

At the same time, there are several important differences between the two texts that affect their critiques of neoliberalism. The first has pertains to perspective. The narrator of *La Virgen
*de los sicarios*, whose name is revealed to be named Fernando\textsuperscript{18} halfway through the novel, is an outsider to the world he describes. While his *sicario* lovers come from the *comunas*, the poorest, most marginalized neighborhoods of Medellín, Fernando represents the educated, traditional upper class of Antioquia, the region where Medellín is located. His narrative is completely monologic; he refuses to give the *sicarios* any chance to express their own point of view. Fernando intersperses the story of his relationships with Alexis and Wílmar with diatribes about language, politics, and the past, present, and future of Colombia. Consequently, his focus on the *sicarios* takes on a highly symbolic function, used in a metaphorical sense to illustrate criticisms of neoliberal Colombia. In this sense, the *sicarios* in the novel are not realistic representatives of a sociological phenomenon. On the other hand, the narrator of *O Matador*, Máiquez, belongs to the working class, as indicated by his jobs before becoming a killer (used-car salesman, pet store employee), his complaints that he often does not have the money to buy certain items he wants, and the language he uses. Although at the beginning of his narrative he has never killed anyone, he does not remain an outsider to the business of contract killing for long. After killing an acquaintance for personal reasons, he starts receiving propositions from wealthy clients who are willing to pay him to murder individuals who inconvenience them in some way. Unlike Fernando, Máiquez does incorporate other voices into his narrative, notably those of his clients, who represent the wealthier classes. Additionally, as to be expected from his role as the narrator, Máiquez’s subjectivity is much more developed than that of Alexis or Wílmar.

\textsuperscript{18} *La Virgen de los sicarios* has been labeled a semi-autobiographical novel due to the protagonist’s having the same given name as Vallejo and the degree of overlap between the character’s background and the author’s biography. Biographical similarities aside, Fernando remains a fictional character separate from the author’s identity. To this end, any mention of Fernando here refers strictly to the character.
Given the novels’ concern with the business of contract killing, it is perhaps not surprising that both texts focus on predominantly masculine environments, since the *sicario* profession is most commonly associated with adolescent boys and young men. Yet even those killed by Alexis, Wilmar, and Máiquel tend to be men, with a few important exceptions. In *La Virgen de los sicarios*, Alexis and Wilmar kill women on occasion, in most cases pregnant women or mothers. In *O Matador*, Máiquel kills only one woman, his wife Cledir, but her murder is a personal matter, not a professional contract; he strangles her out of frustration that his lover Érica might leave him. The near complete absence of female characters in *La Virgen de los sicarios*, and the representation of *homo sacer* as a phenomenon that affects only masculine bodies in *O Matador*, should not be read as an implication that neoliberal economics do not make female bodies disposable, but rather responds to the fact that neoliberal regimes’ effects on male bodies and masculinity have not been as visible as their effects on female bodies. The two texts certainly present masculinity and femininity in distinct fashions: Fernando exhibits an outright hostility towards all women whereas Máiquel has more nuanced relationships with the women in his life. Even so, both exhibit a crisis in masculinity provoked by the consumerism that characterizes neoliberalism.

Both narratives also take place in markedly neoliberal environments, though neither makes reference to industries commonly associated with neoliberal economics, like the flower exportation business in Colombia in *Maria llena eres de gracia* or *maquiladora* manufacturing in “La parte de los crímenes” of *2666*. While contract killing is not a market that advocates of neoliberalism would condone, it is an example of what could happen when neoliberal theory is taken to the extreme in practice. As a doctrine, neoliberalism affirms that the expansion of free
markets equate to the maximization of the social good. Consequently, markets should be created where they previously did not exist. Sicarios, then, are simply responding to their clients’ demand in exchange for monetary compensation, a market transaction that is economically the same as any other market transaction.

Furthermore, both texts note the relationship between the neoliberal practice of privatization and the work of the sicarios. In La Virgen de los sicarios, Fernando attributes the high murder rate of Medellín to a sort of privatization. After the death of Pablo Escobar, the head of the Medellin drug cartel, the work of the sicario has been decentralized. Each young boy now works independently, creating a system of free enterprise. In O Matador, privatization is not mentioned directly, but Máiquel’s business forms in response to distrust for publicly-provided security services. His clients pay him to murder those they perceive as criminals because they believe that the police does not provide adequate services to protect their families and business. The wealth essentially take it upon themselves to privatize security through private initiative, and they seek out men like Máiquel to maintain order.

In the neoliberal environment, contract killing is a business. When considering sicario narratives from this perspective, the primary focus is not violence nor its connections with drug trafficking. Instead, the hitmen in these two texts can been seen as rational economic actors, much like those analyzed by Rebecca E. Biron in her study of sicarios in Mexican cultural studies. As Biron explains:

Hit men … engage in paid labor at the extreme end of capitalist exploitation. By “extreme end,” I mean the period of later hyper-capitalism in which transnational profit seeking trumps national as well as international regulatory systems designed to serve
broad social stability. I also mean the outer limits of how capitalist interests use (up) human beings; the sicarios enact on the bodies of their victims the logical end point of dehumanizing economic relations. The sicario not only makes a living by killing; he also “makes a killing” when he is particularly successful at profiting monetarily from the calculated risks he takes. Living people are the raw material for the work of sicarios, and dead bodies are the product. (820)

Thus the work of the sicario operates on two levels. Symbolically, his transformation of a human being into a corpse reflects the dehumanization of neoliberal capitalism. More concretely, the sicario is an entrepreneur, providing a service that is in demand and profiting from the risks that providing that service entails.

In Biron’s analysis of the sicario in Mexican texts, she identifies two separate yet complementary visions of the sicario. The first, reflected in the citation above, explores the economic causes of the dehumanization of sicarios. From this perspective, sicarios are rational actors in a global market. Due to the primacy of market logic, workers must abandon morality, and thus sicarios represent “the final step in the complete instrumentalization of human life” (Biron 821). The representation of the sicarios in La Virgen de los sicarios most closely matches this first vision. Alexis and Wilmar are not developed as characters, but are depicted as instruments that satisfy Fernando’s desire to kill off those antioqueños that he considers unworthy of life and his desire for sexual satisfaction.

On the other hand, the assessment of sicarios as rational economic actors does not view the work of the sicario as dehumanizing in itself. According to this view, the sicario’s morality is replaced with professionalism, and the work of assassination can be productive of meaning.
This emphasis on professionalism coincides with the representation of the *sicario* in *O Matador*: Máiqueł starts out as an amateur, but his material success owes to his ability to professionalize. However, when the *sicario* is considered to be a professional trade, the victimization of *sicarios* occurs when their professional status is diminished because of the participation of amateurs in this line of work. In Biron’s words, “murder has been cheapened to the point that it loses its status as labor and product; it has become simply a way of life” (821). Again, this viewpoint is echoed by Fernando in *La Virgen de los sicarios*. He frequently states that human life has no value in Medellín, and he expresses a sort of regret that the boys now work as independent contractors.

If reading the *sicarios* as neoliberal economic actors deemphasizes the idea of individual moral responsibility, it is because traditional moral codes are displaced in the neoliberal system. As an economic system in which profitable ends justify any means, neoliberalism promotes an indifference to the consequences of one’s actions. As a discourse that holds individuals ultimately responsible for their success or their failure to insert themselves properly into the market, neoliberalism erodes morality. John Dixon has pointed out that, according to those who espouse a neoliberal mindset, those living in poverty are not permitted to decide against taking a job “because it is contrary to their moral obligations or duties to significant others; because it is contrary to the course of action that a virtuous person would choose to follow; or because in their opinion it is not ... morally appropriate” (11). Stepping beyond an analysis of how the culture of neoliberalism erodes morality by promoting selfishness, John Bone has argued that neoliberal practices of deregulation weaken “personal brakes on socially and economically undesirable practices” (660).
Both *La Virgen de los sicarios* and *O Matador* downplay the moral responsibility of the *sicario* characters, albeit to different extents. An anecdote that Fernando includes in his monologue tells of a young *sicario* who goes to confession but only confesses to extramarital sex with his girlfriend. When confronted by the priest about his profession, the *sicario* replies, “Que se confesara de ellos el que los mandó matar. De ése era el pecado, no de él que simplemente estaba haciendo un trabajo, un ‘camello’” (Vallejo 32). By contrast, during the first part of *O Matador*, Máique does feel guilty for his actions. After his first kill, he fully expects that the police will arrest him and send him to prison or his crime. Then, as he kills a second man, he makes empty promises to take care of the deceased’s mother as a way of assuaging his guilt. Only later does he become desensitized to violence. Absolving the *sicarios* of moral responsibility simply because they are carrying out a crime that someone else ordered is certainly problematic. Yet by not holding the *sicarios* morally responsible for their actions, these texts signal the role of the consumer classes in creating the violence that those very classes typically consider to be nothing more than a question of uncivilized men senselessly killing each other.

From this perspective, *sicarios* are not violent men who senselessly kill, but rather just another manifestation of the *homo economicus*, the neoliberal agent succinctly described by John Dixon as “free individuals who are universally, constantly, and predictably seeking to pursue self-interestedly their own material well-being” (5). Of course, as they pursue their material well-being, they confront many risks: killing the wrong person, being killed by someone seeking vengeance for a previous murder, etc. However, as Pat O’Malley explains, “risk is a source or condition of opportunity, an avenue for enterprise and the creation of wealth, and thus an unavoidable and invaluable part of a progressive environment. Without risk, wealth would not
be created, innovation would be stultified, individuals would lose a spurt to action and a crucial condition for generating responsibility” (204). Therefore, by practicing a profession that inevitably entails a high degree of risk, the sicarios profit from the work of murder.

In *La Virgen de los sicarios* and *O Matador*, compensation does not always involve a monetary exchange, but instead takes form of gifts or a bartering arrangement. In Melo’s novel, Máiqueł starts out in his new career by exchanging services, receiving dental care as compensation for murder. At no point in Vallejo’s novel does Fernando pay Alexis or Wilmar for a murder. Instead, he buys them clothing, televisions, or other consumer goods. Since Fernando disavows any involvement in the killings, he portrays these exchanges as giving gifts to loved ones. But regardless of the form that the profits take, Alexis, Wilmar, and Máiqueł are all profiting, in one way or another, from the risks that they take.

Both texts present the sicarios as economic agents, similarly to *María llena eres de gracia*, which presents its protagonist María as a model neoliberal actor. Foucault describes the neoliberal worker as an “entrepreneur of himself, being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of [his] earnings” (*Birth* 226). Fernando describes the sicarios in practically the same terms when he discusses what he perceives as the privatization of the industry: “[S]icario que trabaja solo por su cuenta y riesgo ya no es sicario: es libre empresa, la iniciativa privada” (Vallejo 34). *O Matador*, on the other hand, emphasizes that contract killing is analogous to any other business by showing how Máiqueł’s dealings with Dr. Carvalho allow him to network with other clients, ultimately leading to the establishment of a formal security services company.
At the same time, neither text portrays its *sicarios* as successful entrepreneurs, like María. Fernando views Alexis and Wilmar in a very neoliberal way—considering the individuals to be essentially businesses on a smaller scale—but his voice dominates the novel so much that the reader never really has any access to Alexis’s and Wilmar’s motivations for becoming *sicarios* or their reactions to their profession. As Leticia Nini Villaseñor has also pointed out, the *sicarios* are empty vessels, “having no voice outside of the narrator” (21). The audience does not know if the boys are weighing their options and taking calculated risks, like the ideal neoliberal agent would. The only insights offered into their motivations suggest that they kill so that they can possess consumer goods that they otherwise would have not been able to own: Fernando gives Alexis a TV, while Wilmar asks for name-brand clothing and a refrigerator for his mother. Yet even these glimpses into possible motivations cannot be trusted entirely; like all of the narrative, these interpretations of the boys’ motivations are mediated through Fernando, a character who neither belongs to the same world nor values those who come from the *comunas* as anything more than instruments for social cleansing and sexual pleasure.

As the narrator of his own story, Máiqueł is much more developed as a character than either Alexis or Wilmar. Máiqueł does not always directly state his motivations, but the reader can identify what brings him to kill. His first kill is for personal reasons, and his second kill is out of necessity, but as he climbs the professional ladder it later becomes apparent that one of his principal motivations for becoming a professional killer is his desire to attain the purchasing power that would allow him to participate more fully in consumer society. At the same time, *O Matador* depicts Máiqueł as a bad entrepreneur. Santana makes clear Máiqueł’s failures as an
entrepreneur of self when he approaches Máiquel about establishing _Ombra – Serviços de Segurança e Vigilância Patriominal S. C. Ltda:_

As pessoas aqui do bairro te adoram e você sabe disso. Os comerciantes te respeitam. A polícia te respeita. As donas de casa te respeitam. E o que você faz, Máiquel? … 

Filantropia para a polícia, é isso o que você faz...é filantropia...só que neste país não se deve fazer filantropia, cobre sempre, cobre tudo, eu cobro, eu disse, cobra pouco, ele disse, cobra muito pouco, ninguém quer sujar as mãos, ele disse, há um bom mercado, ele disse, um mercado muito bom mesmo, pode-se ganhar muito dinheiro com isso. (Melo 123)

As Santana points out, Máiquel fails to take into account market demand when setting the price for his services, and consequently does not profit enough from the risks he takes as a professional killer.

While _María llena eres de gracia_ constructs María as a model neoliberal worker in order to challenge the neoliberal assumption that individuals are wholly responsible for their success or failure, _La Virgen de los sicarios_ and _O Matador_ represent their _sicario_ characters in a way that downplays any entrepreneurial skill or ability to make calculated decisions in order to pursue economic wellbeing. Consequently, the representation of the _sicarios_ does not primarily seek to challenge Bourdieu’s description of the ideology of competence: the beliefs that the best and the brightest triumph, while those who fail do so due to their own faults. Instead, by not portraying the _sicarios_ as economic agents who constantly calculate how their decisions can lead to the highest profit, _La Virgen de los sicarios_ and _O Matador_ depict the _sicarios_ as instruments used by the wealthy in efforts of social cleansing. The portrayal of the _sicarios_ as “bad” entrepreneurs
is one of the ways that these texts implicate the upper, allegedly civilized classes in the production of violence that eliminates those bodies that the wealthy deem to be *homo sacer*.

Most of the men and women killed by Alexis, Wilmar, and Máiquel, as well as the *sicarios* themselves, are best described by this concept of *homo sacer*, a figure from antiquity that denoted a man who could be killed but not sacrificed. As Giorgio Agamben has argued, *homo sacer* represents life that has no value in any social sphere. The bodies found in the pages of *La Virgen de los sicarios* and *O Matador*, like those male bodies not found in the pages of “La parte de los crímenes,” represent bare life because those who murder them are outside of the realm of punishment. In fact, society does not even notice their deaths at all. As Fernando notes after Alexis murders three soldiers, the newspaper does not even mention the deaths (Vallejo 39). Likewise, Máiquel’s acquaintances can openly tell the police that he murdered a man, and all the policemen do is congratulate him for his bravery (Melo 20). So long as the *sicarios* limit their work to those considered to be disposable life, they can murder with impunity, because the men and women they kill are so valueless to society that their deaths have no impact on society at all.

In fact, given the biopolitical nature of the societies depicted in *La Virgen de los sicarios* and *O Matador*, so-called civilized society believes that it benefits from each time the *sicarios* kill someone who falls into the category of *homo sacer*. At first, this may seem contradictory. When Michel Foucault coined the term biopolitics, he used it to refer to a regime that took it upon itself to regulate the biological life of its citizens; the biopolitical state does not just exercise the original sovereign right “to take life or let live,” but also its opposite, “the power to ‘make’ live and ‘let’ die” (*Society* 247). Once the state assumed these new responsibilities, it became necessary for it to reconcile its contradictory roles. As Foucault points out, “how can a
power such as this kill, if it is true that its basic function is to improve life [...]? How, under these conditions, is it possible for a political power to kill, to call for deaths, to demand deaths, to give the order to kill, and to expose not only its enemies but its own citizens to the risk of death? (Society 254) If the role of the state is now to protect life, how can it still claim the original and opposite right, that of taking life away? To resolve this problem, a biopolitical regime must establish a biological relationship between one person’s life and another person’s death; the state can take away life so long as the life taken away represents some sort of threat to the biological health of the population as a whole. Foucault illustrates this point in terms of racism and war. He notes that biopolitics transforms the relationship of war—“If you want to live, the other must die”—into a biological-type relationship:

The more inferior species die out, the more abnormal individuals are eliminated, the fewer degenerates there will be in the species as a whole, and the more I—as species rather than individual—can live, the stronger I will be [...].” The fact that the other dies does not mean simply that I live in the sense that his death guarantees my safety; the death of the other, the death of the bad race, of the inferior race...is something that will make life in general healthier: healthier and purer. (Society 255)

For Foucault, biopolitical logic only deems killing acceptable when it contributes to the elimination of a biopolitical threat and therefore the improvement of the species or race.

Although Foucault concludes his discussion of biopolitics, warfare, and racism with a brief analysis of the mechanisms of biopower that operated in the Nazi state, other scholars have discussed how this aspect of biopolitics characterizes the global, neoliberal state. Foucault’s conceptualization of biopolitics and Agamben’s theorization of the homo sacer are based on a
notion of sovereignty that may no longer seem applicable as multinational companies are often more powerful than nations and the market becomes the guiding principle for all decisions, not just economic ones. Regardless, the neoliberal state is fundamentally biopolitical, and although there may be no designated sovereign who determines which individuals can be eliminated without repercussions, that is only because, as Agamben has pointed out, “if today there is no longer any one clear figure of the sacred man, it is perhaps because we are all virtually homines sacri” (115). Foucault alluded to the relationship between neoliberalism and biopolitics; his series of lectures entitled The Birth of Biopolitics primarily focuses on the development of neoliberalism, even though he ends the semester without having clarified the connections between the two. Agamben suggests that not just political regimes but also economic systems may mark certain bodies as homines sacri when he mentions that the democratic-capitalist project of international economic development has transformed the population of the Third World into bare life due to the fact that it frames poverty, and consequently members of the poorer classes, as something that must be eliminated (180).

Brett Levinson has developed further these connections between economics and biopolitics, though he uses the synonymous term “discardable life” instead of “bare life”. For Levinson, the globalized market is the economic system that creates “discardable life.” To explain how this happens, Levinson begins with what he identifies as the main thesis of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s Empire: “the global includes (so as to build a controlling pluralism) while the state excludes (so as to maintain homogeneity)” (Biopolitics 67). However, inclusion is not possible without exclusion. Therefore, the global market must exclude as well. Levinson argues that what is excluded “is not the foreigner or outsider…but death…and more tangibly, the
peoples who embody death” (67). Biopolitics is fundamentally a question of hygiene, and the point of regulation is “the murder of the dying that some other embodies” (Market 51). This other does not have to be racially different; it could be an immigrant, a transsexual, or any other category of person that incites the paranoia that the biological well-being of the species or even of humanity is compromised by their existence. For the global neoliberal system, those who embody this dying are “the utterly impoverished (so near absolute loss, so close to existing outside the range of choices that sustains the market), the homeless,” “the ones imagined to be unable to insert themselves, properly, into the field of exchange,” those “who possess nothing to offer (for sale),” and those nations “that cannot insert themselves into ‘proper capitalist commerce’” (Biopolitics 68). In short, those who embody homo sacer in the neoliberal context are any individuals who can be eliminated without loss to the market. This form of disposable life is especially clear when analyzing what types of individuals are killed by Alexis, Wilmar, and Máiquel, who are often homeless, unemployed, or alleged criminals who make a living off of others, scavenging instead of living productive economic lives.

Given Levinson’s reformulation of Agamben’s homo sacer as an individual who does not seem to have any value for the capitalist market, the category of disposable life may seem to be a reversible category. If what makes an individual disposable in neoliberal society is a perceived inability to make a meaningful contribution to the market, could that person escape the condition of homo sacer by simply proving that he can insert himself properly into the capitalist market? In fact, Alexis, Wilmar, and Máiquel all move out of the category of disposable life, albeit temporarily. As members of lower social classes, all three inhabit the margins of neoliberal society until they prove that they have a valuable service to offer: their ability and willingness to
kill those who pose a threat to decent society. By eliminating those individuals who do not properly insert themselves into the market, the sicarios in La Virgen de los sicarios and O Matador fulfill a biopolitical function. In disposing of those individuals who are perceived to be inferior beings, they guarantee the safety of those considered to be lives worth living and improve the biological health of the species as a whole. But appealing to one’s ability to contribute to the market as a way to reverse disposability is a problematic solution, as it would ultimately mean accepting the market as the arbiter of the value of human life and thus condoning the commodification of human beings. However, neither La virgen de los sicarios nor O Matador presents this scenario—reversing one’s disposability by asserting that one can make a valuable contribution to the neoliberal market—as a solution for restoring value to those who have been marked homo sacer, because both show that Alexis, Wílmar, and Máiquéel cannot permanently escape their own condition of homo sacer, despite carrying out a social cleansing that is deemed to protect and even enhance society. Useful to the wealthy so long as they continue to murder those considered disposable life, the sicarios end up being as disposable as those they kill. Although the presentation of bare life in these novels suggests that it is not an ontological category, but rather a contextual one, they do not clarify a viable path to restoring value to those who have been marginalized by neoliberal society.

However, the cultural criticism in La Virgen de los sicarios and O Matador goes beyond their portrayal of the sicarios and those killed by them as the modern-day embodiment of the homo sacer. The two texts are far from the only Latin American cultural objects to use portrayals of sicarios to explore urban violence and how members of the impoverished classes are transformed into disposable life. With reason, Lidia Santos points to urban violence as an
obvious commonplace between the national literatures of Colombia and Brazil. In Colombian literature, the figure of the sicario became so prominent in the 1990s that many critics started to identify the novela sicaresca as a sub-genre. As Héctor Fernández L’Hoeste explains, the term sicaresca, a word combining the Colombian word for a young hit man with the Spanish word for picaresque, became popular in Colombia in academic discussions starting with two texts in particular: Víctor Gaviria’s neorealist film Rodrigo D.: No futuro, released in 1989, and Alonso Salazar’s No nacimos pa’ semilla, a 1990 testimonio based on interviews with juvenile gang members in Medellín (543). Several narratives published in Colombia during the 1990s and early 2000s fit into this subgenre, including La Virgen de los sicarios, Víctor Gaviria’s El pelaíto que no duró nada, Jorge Franco’s Rosario Tijeras, and Arturo Alape’s Sangre ajena. The sicario has also been a recurring character in Colombian cinema, notably including not only the adaptation of Vallejo’s novel, Our Lady of the Assassins, directed by Barbet Schroeder, but an adaptation of Franco’s novel as well, Rosario Tijeras, directed by Emilio Maillé. While there is no equivalent subgenre in Brazilian literature, O Matador forms part of a wave of novels published in the 1990s that dealt with the issue of urban violence. As for Brazilian cinema, as Álvaro Baquero Pecino notes, the figure of the contract killer in particular has gained importance through titles such as Os Matadores, Beto Brant’s O Invasor, and the aforementioned cinematic adaptation of O Matador, José Henrique Fonseca’s O Homem do Ano.

What makes La Virgen de los sicarios and O Matador stand out, however, from the number of texts with similar thematic concerns is their emphasis on the participation of the upper class and of consumer society in the production of disposable life and its elimination through violent means. Unlike many other texts featuring sicarios, these two novels do not take the form
of a testimonio nor do they attempt to portray the contract killer from a sociological approach. Especially in the Colombian context, many novelas sicarescas are testimonios or pseudo-testimonios that feign to give a voice to those subaltern classes that provide the bodies that become sicarios. The downfall of the testimonial approach has already been discussed by Jean Franco in her appraisal of No nacimos pa’ semilla:

“They know they are ‘disposable,’” Salazar wrote, “so that when they join a group they start to think of death as something completely natural.” Yet we need to tread carefully here, for Alonso Salazar’s Born to Die in Medellín is addressed to a public for whom the personal accounts of young killers, their associates, their women, and other members of the community may encourage the notion that they are conspiring in their own destruction, which perhaps in turn nourishes the wish fulfillment of the civilized who would be only too happy for them to self-destruct. A comforting thought. Meanwhile let’s have some vicarious pleasure. (223-24)

In Franco’s appraisal, the testimonial representation of the sicario and the depiction of his crimes risks becoming analogous to what James A. Tyner has called “consumable images of dead women.” For Tyner, such images allow readers to voyeuristically enjoy brutal acts secure in their knowledge that the perpetrators of such crimes have been caught (121). In these testimonios, readers are secure in their knowledge that they, the civilized classes, are not in any way responsible for a violence that ravages the uncivilized classes but will never reach them.

Thus, La Virgen de los sicarios and O Matador face a challenge similar to the one faced by 2666 in its representation of the feminicidios in Santa Teresa/Ciudad Juárez: how depict these manifestations of violence in such a way that prevents the reader from enjoying such scenes for
entertainment and then writing them off as a phenomenon completely divorced from the reader’s existence. Whereas 2666 forgoes depicting the murders and leaves the question of who is perpetrating the crimes unsolved in order to unsettle its readers, La Virgen de los sicarios and O Matador employ other strategies. Both novels avoid representing sicarios as uncivilized, violent men who are the only ones responsible for their own destruction by emphasizing that the sicarios are not typically the intellectual authors of their crimes. To the contrary, violence and murder are portrayed as resulting from consumer class desire instead of originating with the sicarios themselves. In La Virgen de los sicarios, the representation both of the sicarios and of the narrator are the key ways the novel differentiates itself from other novelas sicarescas and avoids perpetuating the image that only the poor are responsible for this violence. Given that the narrator of O Matador is a contract killer himself, the representation of Máïquel is also central to this process, but the text must use other methods to alert readers to the relationship between consumer society and disposable life.

With regard to La Virgen de los sicarios, Albrecht Buschmann has noted that the characterization of Alexis differs greatly from the standard representation of the sicario. Basing his definition on a study by the Colombian Comisión de Estudios sobre la Violencia and the testimonial accounts of No nacimos pa’ semilla, Buschmann defines the sicario, particularly as represented in the early 1990s, as an under-25 heterosexual male, often a drug addict, who is integrated in a gang, makes a living off of killing, but only receives orders through intermediaries (139). For Buschmann, the representation of Alexis inverts these characteristics: “Alexis es homosexual…, no consume drogas, no le vemos actuar dentro de ninguna banda y, sobre todo, asesina sin encargo y sin ganar dinero por ello” (139).
Nonetheless, the novel does indicate that Alexis receives compensation for murdering individuals whom someone else wants dead. Alexis may never receive cash payments for the murders he commits while he is Fernando’s lover, but as their relationship progresses, Fernando takes on the role of his patron. Many of Alexis’s murders target people who have offended Fernando in some way: his “hippie” neighbor who plays his music too loud, a rude taxi driver, and a waitress who does not bring them the napkins that Fernando requested, among others. By Fernando’s own estimation, he never explicitly orders these murders, but Alexis carries them out because he believes that it will please Fernando. It does. As for remuneration, Fernando does not typically pay Alexis a cash wage, but he does compensate him by providing for him and buying supplies and consumer goods. As Diana Lucía Sarabia has also noted, Alexis’s and Wilmar’s relationships with Fernando provide them with economic security in a period of unemployment (37). Although Buschmann does not make this observation, interpreting Fernando as Alexis’s new “patron” supports Buschmann’s overarching argument that the novel emphasizes the responsibility of the upper classes of Colombian society for the violence that is typically blamed on the lower classes.

Though *La Virgen de los sicarios* depicts the work of Alexis, and later Wilmar, as a sort of bartering arrangement, in a sense distancing the murder for hire market from neoliberalism, this unconventional portrayal allows the novel to criticize one of the tenets of neoliberal economic policy: privatization. Within the text, Fernando explains why Alexis seemingly kills on his own accord and without compensation. After the death of Escobar:

Aquí prácticamente la profesión de sicario se acabó. Muerto el santo se acabó el milagro.

Sin trabajo fijo, se dispersaron por la ciudad y se pusieron a secuestrar, a atracar, a robar.
Where the business of murder for hire was once centralized, Escobar’s death has thrown the market into crisis and led to a privatization of the *sicarios*. This privatization leads to an increase in violence. Unregulated and working independently, the *sicarios* attack indiscriminately instead of killing specific individuals targeted by the cartel, generating more violence and instability.

*La virgen de los sicarios* does not discuss at depth the historical processes of privatization in Colombia, such as the *Apertura* economic liberalization program of 1990 or the incorporation of provisions for privatization in the 1991 Constitution. Instead, Fernando uses the privatization of the *sicario* as a stand-in for the privatization of other industries. Just as the decentralization of murder for hire has resulted in unemployment and instability, analogous processes that handed state-run services and industries to private actors have had similar results. Furthermore, by referring to the *sicario* as another national institution that Colombia has lost, the narrator insinuates that the trend of privatization is in itself a threat to national identity.

While the neoliberal nature of murder for hire is understated, Fernando’s reaction to the deaths of these individuals makes the biopolitical nature of the work of the *sicario* stand out. As Levinson suggests, biopolitics is a question of hygiene, with murder in this context representing a way of regulating society, improving the health of the species by removing those who embody death because they cannot properly insert themselves into the neoliberal economic regime. The people killed by Alexis and then Wilmar show the variety of forms that the embodiment this dying can take. Hermann Herlinghaus classifies the *sicarios’* targets as a “matter of poverty and
procreation” (Violence 153). Certainly, many of those who die in La Virgen de los sicarios fit into one of these two categories: the bodies include two pregnant women, a breast-feeding mother, a beggar, a mime, and three other sicarios. Yet many are also just passers-by or bystanders, about whom virtually no information is given. Given that these individuals do not fall into one single category, the text evokes Agamben’s statement that “if today there is no longer any one clear figure of the sacred man, it is perhaps because we are all virtually homines sacri” (115).

Although the deaths cannot all be explained by the categories of poverty and procreation, Fernando’s biopolitical paranoia does center on these two issues, which for him are inextricably tied. In one of his diatribes, he condemns the actions of a priest who used a television show to raise money to give to the poor. For Fernando, the priest’s actions were highly detrimental to the nation; charity only perpetuates poverty, and the poor procreate at an incredibly high rate (Vallejo 68). With the poor reproducing at an exponential rate, these undeserving Colombians, in Fernando’s estimation, quickly outnumber the deserving Colombians, casting the well-being of the species into crisis. Just as Alexis and Wílmar do not only kill the poor and the reproductive, Fernando’s paranoia extends to the point where anyone can be seen as a threat to the Colombian nation. His most forthright biopolitical rant follows the murder of a passerby who refers to Alexis and Fernando as “maricas” and rudely tells them to learn how to walk. Fernando then reflects:

¿Estuvo bien este último “cascado” de Alexis, el transeúnte boquisucio? ¡Claro que sí, yo lo apruebo! Hay que enseñarle a esta gentuza alzada la tolerancia, hay que erradicar el odio. […] Sí me parece bien lo que hiciste, aunque de malgenio en malgenio, de grosero
en grosero vamos acabando con Medellín. Hay que desocupar a Antioquia de antioqueños malos y repoblarla de antioqueños buenos (41-42).

Even though Fernando views the poor and women as primary targets of this social cleansing, anyone who does even the slightest thing to offend him becomes an example of the bad element that destroys his people. They all embody the “dying” that he perceives as having been destroying Medellín. For him, their murder is the only way to save the species, to make sure that only the good antioqueños survive so that the race can be redeemed.

Women do not have a place in Fernando’s vision of an ideal society. With the exception of some mothers and a waitress who are included in Alexis and Wilmar’s collective body count and the figures of the virgins that are the object of adoration of the sicarios, women are almost entirely absent in the textual world of La Virgen de los sicarios. Fernando certainly associates femininity with procreation, which is why women are a particular target of the narrator’s diatribes. Chloe Rutter has discussed the novel’s implicit approval of non-reproductive women, as expressed in the title as well as in the predominance of the Virgin figure in the text, but astutely emphasizes that the novel’s overall negation of women is a contestation of heterosexual reproduction. Dominant masculinity is associated with the heterosexual male, and the narrator’s rejection of reproduction, and women as its symbols, is an effort to reclaim masculinity for homosexual men. Alexis is a hypermasculine character, yet Fernando lauds him as perfect since he has never had contact with a woman. Rutter comments that the sicario displays that “masculinity does not belong exclusively to heterosexual men” (48). Nonetheless, the novel’s understanding of masculinity is problematic, as performing masculinity is synonymous with performing violence (49). This understanding of violence as a way to reaffirm masculinity is
also present in *O Matador*, though in that case the perceived need to perform masculinity does not result from the rejection of a heteronormative understanding of masculinity, but rather the feminization of men as they embrace the role of a consumer. Here, the *sicario*’s successful performance of masculinity vis-à-vis violence also compensates for behavior traditionally considered to be unmasculine, but at the textual level there is no tension between homosexuality and masculinity. Of course, the narrative constructs the *sicarios* in this way to confront an audience that likely does consider the *sicarios*’ masculinity and homosexuality contradictory. Rutter summarizes the contradictions of reception: “this novel by a gay male writer about gay sex reached the bestseller list, and is in its sixth printing. This last fact becomes noteworthy when one considers that Colombia is a country that officially ‘ignores’, or even passively encourages, the harsh practice of ‘social cleansing’” (50).19

By not demanding punishment for those who kill certain people, primarily the poor and the deviant, society as portrayed in *La Virgen de los sicarios* makes a value judgment as to which lives are worth living and which lives are not, in other words, what is the *homo sacer*. These disposable individuals are seen as a direct threat to those who are living lives worth living. Thus their murder is absolved as a method to protect those citizens who do have value. However, upon deciding that some individuals are bare life that should be eliminated, these societies produce more bare life: the *sicarios* themselves. The *sicarios* fill the biopolitical needs of

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19 Rutter’s claim that the Colombian government encourages social cleansing is exaggerated but does have some basis in fact. Elizabeth F. Schwartz indicates that approximately 20,000 Colombians died in extrajudicial killings by security forces from 1986 to 1993 (383). Though indigent street children are the primary target of social cleansing efforts, gay individuals are targeted as well. Schwartz cites estimates that three individuals who admit to being sexual minorities were killed each week in that same time period (390).
society—as a sort of garbage men removing human waste—yet while they do so they cannot overcome their status of *homo sacer*.

Herlinghaus notes that Alexis’s inability to transcend the category of disposable life is foreshadowed in Vallejo’s allusions to classical literature with Alexis’s name. He points out that the scene in which José Antonio introduces Fernando to Alexis resembles a scene from Virgil’s *Eclogues* in which the beautiful slave Alexis is given to the homosexual lover Corydon, who represents Virgil himself. For Herlinghaus, the most important aspect of this classical allusion is the differences that Vallejo introduces. While in Virgil, Alexis is transformed from bare life (*zōē*) to qualified life (*bios*), in the novel “Alexis is removed from his social background yet is not absolved from bare life” (*Violence* 153). His inescapable disposability becomes apparent towards the end of the novel, after Fernando watches as Alexis is murdered by another *sicario*, later revealed to be Wilmar, Fernando’s next lover. Despite all of Fernando’s claims that he loved Alexis, he quickly replaces the boy with another young *sicario*. The two boys are similar in appearance, mannerisms, and the role that they play in Fernando’s life, so much so that the narrator himself sometimes confuses their names. When Fernando eventually discovers that Wilmar is the assassin that killed Alexis, he does not end their relationship. Fernando treats these boys with the same instrumental logic with which the drug traffickers treat the drug mules in *María llena eres de gracia*; their bodies are interchangeable so long as Fernando’s needs—sexual satisfaction and social cleansing—are being fulfilled. However, despite how well they may fulfill those needs, the boys never achieve the status of life worth living. They remain disposable.
In *La Virgen de los sicarios*, the main mechanism through which the novel acknowledges upper class involvement in the violence that plagues Medellín is its narrator, Fernando. As a wealthy, educated man, Fernando represents the intellectuals of Colombian society, precisely the opposite of the *sicarios*, young boys from the *comunas*, the most marginalized areas of the city. As an intellectual, he is a modern manifestation of the *letrado* from Ángel Rama’s *La ciudad letrada*, the intellectual with close ties to political power, who exercises his own power through his control of national discourse. Between the *letrado* Fernando and the *sicarios*, the reader will more closely identify with the former, but as the story unfolds, the reader is forced to confront the fact that the intellectual is advocating a biopolitical racial cleansing of all of those individuals whom he deems to be disposable life. As Jean Franco states, “As a *letrado*, he is ‘our’ ally. The question is whether he is deliberately forcing us to face the ‘fascist within’ or whether he expects our complicity” (225). Fernando as a character expects his readers’ complicity, but upon further consideration of how the text portrays its protagonist and his relationship with the reader, the novel as a whole compels the audience to acknowledge how they also contribute to an atmosphere in which individuals marked as unproductive are victimized.

As the novel progresses, it becomes increasingly impossible to deny Fernando’s role in the violence. At first, his contribution to it occurs on a discursive level. Fernando’s speech is violent, and it also directly instigates the actual acts of violence perpetrated by the *sicarios*. His neighbor who plays music too loud, the rude taxi driver who won’t turn down the radio, the waitress who brings napkins that are too small, and the mother on the bus who does not stop her child from misbehaving—all of these people are killed because they do something that upsets Fernando or because Alexis or Wílmar perceive that their deaths will please Fernando. Of
course, Fernando tries to deny the fact that he is involved in the *sicarios’* crimes. As Maria Fernanda Lander has explained, “Fernando’s story is not a confession, but a convenient recounting of events in which he emphasizes his role as ‘merely’ that of a witness” (81). After the murder of Fernando’s neighbor, the first time when Alexis murders someone specifically to please the older man, the narrator claims that he is innocent: “¿De quién es el pecado de la muerte del hippie? ¿De Alexis? ¿Mío? De Alexis no porque no lo odiaba… ¿Mío entonces? Tampoco. Que no lo quería, confieso. ¿Pero que lo mandé matar? ¡Nunca! Jamás de los jamases. Jamás le dije a Alexis: ‘Quebráme a éste’. Lo que yo dije y ustedes son testigos: ‘Lo quisiera matar’ y se lo dije al viento” (Vallejo 33). Even if he discursively tries to distance himself from the crime, he remains the intellectual author. As Lander points out, Fernando is both the intellectual author of the crimes and the author of “the very discourse of violence that translates into concrete, material violence (81). Villaseñor also points to Fernando as the intellectual author of the violence he describes. With the *sicarios* being essentially empty characters in the narrative, Fernando is at the core of the narrated events and outcomes, “cleverly manipulat[ing] the *sicarios* as pawns in his personal quest to eradicate what he sees as the filth of human existence” (21). Fernando refuses to acknowledge the role he plays in Alexis’s destruction of disposable life, thereby representing the elites’ disavowal of their own responsibility for the violence that plagues Medellín and ultimately places every individual at risk of becoming disposable life. Yet the *sicarios* are aware, to a certain extent, that they are only instruments that carry out the wishes of the rich and powerful, as reflected in the anecdote about the *sicario* at confession.
In addition to indirectly ordering certain deaths, Fernando becomes increasingly involved in *sicarios*’ murders as the novel progresses. The way he narrates his story reflects his more active participation in the crimes. When he first obtains bullets for Alexis, providing the boy with the means through which he can exercise his profession, he still distances himself discursively from the boy’s profession: “[El sargento me] las vendió: un paquetote pesado. ‘¡Uy, vos si sos un verraco!—me dijo Alexis—. Consigámonos una subametralladora’. ‘Niño, ‘consigámonos’ somos muchos. A mí no me incluyas’” (37). Here, Fernando still tries to maintain certain distance from the *sicario* through the use of pronouns, protesting the use of the first person plural when speaking about weapons. Regardless, as the novel continues, his speech changes, as he incorporates more and more slang used by the *sicarios* and his language erases the distance he once insisted existed between him and the murders. Describing the murder of a taxi driver who witnessed Alexis murder a trash collector because Fernando believes he exploits his horse, Fernando says, “Por cuanto a nuestro taxista se refiere, siguió el mismo camino del conductor de carretas, en caída libre tumbo a la eternidad como quien baja sin frenos por la pendiente de Robledo. La aplicamos su marquito frontal visto que nos quedó conociendo” (75). Here, instead of insinuating that he has nothing to do with Alexis’s crimes, Fernando acknowledges his participation by using the first person plural pronoun.

Given that Fernando’s social status and education make him a symbol of the Colombian elites, Fernando’s use of the *nosotros* form not only emphasizes his participation in the crimes, but also implicates the upper classes as a whole for their role in the violence that has ravaged the nation. As Bauschmann argues:
La consecuencia es que el “nosotros” que el narrador en primera persona crea con el lector, nos traslada afectivamente cerca de la violencia. Nos encontramos en esta novela a un sicario que no es real ni creíble, sino muy improbable, pero semánticamente muy productivo: acerca al lector al fenómeno de la violencia poniéndolo a una distancia corta poco habitual para él…Lo que hace que la novela sea tan provocadora [es] la cercanía afectiva que se crea con los asesinos…Esta cercanía contiene una tesis fundamental en relación con la violencia en Colombia, en la que subraya la responsabilidad común de todos los colombianos. (140)

Lidia Santos further comments on how the text utilizes Fernando to symbolically indict the wealthy for their participation in the violence associated with the poor in her discussion of the allegorical nature of La virgen de los sicarios: “se puede afirmar que la hospitalidad absoluta ofrecida por el narrador Fernando a los sicarios Alexis y Wilmar [sic] alegoriza la convivencia, cada vez más estrecha, de la clase hegemónica de Colombia con el narcotráfico” (561). This observation can be taken further, especially considering that the business of drug trafficking is not the novel’s main focus. The close relationship between Fernando and the sicarios shows that the Colombian elites are complicit with the violent elimination of those considered to be homo sacer. In fact, considering that Fernando’s name is not revealed until Alexis calls it out to warn him to take cover as he is killed by another sicario—“¡Cuidado! ¡Fernando!’ alcanzó a gritarme Alexis en el momento en que los de la moto disparaban. Fue lo último que dijo, mi nombre, que nunca antes había pronunciado” (78)—the novel suggests that the sicarios and the biopolitical violence that they carry out are fundamental to the identity of the elites and their very existence.
Yet this closeness that the novel creates between the reader and the violence is not just limited to Colombians. At times Fernando speaks to a Colombian audience, but at other times his explanations are directed to an international audience: “le voy a explicar a usted porque es turista extranjero” (38). By establishing this closeness with readers from all over the world, *La Virgen de los sicarios* attempts to also break down the distance that foreigners place between themselves and violence elsewhere. Thus, the answer to Franco’s question of whether the narrator expects readers to be complicit with his crimes or to confront their own “fascist within” is perhaps not just one or the other. Given the way Fernando speaks to his audience, he would expect complicity, but the way his narrative pulls the readers into this world of violence attempts to force readers to recognize that this epidemic of social violence cannot be written off as the mere self-destruction of the uncivilized, disposable sicarios.

Since the narrator of *O Matador* is himself the contract killer, coming from a working class background, *O Matador* cannot use the role of the narrator to break down the distance between its presumably non-working class readers and the violence that unfolds in its pages. In fact, the distance between the audience and Máiquel is even acknowledged in the paratexts, as the back cover of the book reads: “Conheça Máiquel. Conheça a filosofia de vida de Máiquel. Observe Máiquel transformar-se em herói […] Sobretudo, trate de entender Máiquel (se conseguir).” These words make up a challenge, but also suggest that the reader will fail to understand the protagonist, perhaps precisely because of the distance between reader and character. Not being able to use the narrator-device to signal complicity, the novel must rely on its representation of its protagonist, his motivations, and the outcome of his story to make readers
aware of the connections between consumer society and the violence typically attributed to the poor.\textsuperscript{20}

The depiction of disposable life in \textit{O Matador} is quite similar to that in \textit{La Virgen de los sicarios}, in the sense that the condition is first applied to those individuals Máiqel kills but later expanded, with the killer ultimately proving to be just another manifestation of the \textit{homo sacer}. \textit{O Matador} follows Máiqel’s increasing involvement in the business of contract killing. The first time he kills someone, he does so for personal reasons. After an acquaintance, Suel, insults his new hair color, Máiqel challenges him to a duel and kills him. Although he initially worries that he will be punished for his crime, he soon discovers that practically everyone is happy that Suel is dead. When a bad toothache leads him to Dr. Carvalho’s office, the dentist offers Máiqel free dental care on the condition that Máiqel kill Ezequiel, the man who allegedly raped Dr. Carvalho’s daughter. After killing Ezequiel, Máiqel resists becoming a professional killer despite the fact that Dr. Carvalho and his friends have more work to be done. His desire to become normal leads him to marry his pregnant girlfriend Cledir and take Ezequiel’s old job at a pet store. Soon, he becomes frustrated with the amount of money he is earning, so he decides to become a professional killer, meeting new clients through Dr. Carvalho. As his business improves, his personal life worsens, and Máiqel eventually kills Cledir and moves in with his new lover Érica, but that relationship also falls apart as Érica feels guilty for Cledir’s murder. Just after Máiqel reaches the height of his success, receiving a “Citizen of the Year” award in recognition of the services he provides to the community, everything falls apart; police discover

\textsuperscript{20} With regard to Máiqel’s motivations and the outcome of his story, \textit{O Matador} also establishes an intertextuality with the short story it was based on, Fonseca’s “O Cobrador,” to further indict consumer society for its participation, albeit indirectly, in the creation and elimination of disposable life in neoliberal Brazil.
Cledir’s body, Érica runs away with his daughter Samantha, and he murders the wrong person, which costs him the support of all of his influential friends.

While *La Virgen de los sicarios* portrays the contract killing industry in economic crisis, Máiqueł conducts his affairs in a much more favorable economic environment. As Dr. Carvalho explains, the market for security systems has been growing rapidly, but even the most recent technological advancements in alarm systems do not effectively deter crime. The wealthy do not consider the state to be capable of providing effective security services. When Dr. Carvalho first tries to convince Máiqueł to expand his business beyond the one-time bartering deal, he stresses that “o importante é que a gente não esperar nada da polícia” (63). Having lost confidence in the government’s ability to keep its population safe, they are willing to spend whatever it takes to ensure that their businesses and families remain safe, essentially privatizing society’s security function. This privatization of law enforcement is similar to the one depicted in *Central do Brasil*. In the film’s only sequence that shows explicit violence, a young man steals from a shop in the train station and the private security guard Pedrão chases him down. When he catches the shoplifter, the boy begs for his life, but Pedrão executes him on the spot instead of turning him into the authorities. Following the sound of gunshots, the film then cuts to a scene in which Pedrão returns the merchandise and the owner graciously thanks him. For the wealthy, hiring professional killers is a logical step to take to ensure security where both the state and technology have failed.

Despite his initial resistance, Máiqueł eventually agrees to become a professional killer because he needs the money. At first he does not profit enough from the high demand for his services. The last step of his professionalization occurs after Dr. Carvalho introduces him to a
deputy named Santana, who suggests that Máiqueł turn his one-man operation into a corporation. During their first conversation, Santana points out that everyone in the neighborhood appreciates that Máiqueł is killing those men. With security services in such high demand, Santana reasons, Máiqueł and he could start a business and make money off of everyone, from those living in the *favelas* to business owners. By the beginning of the second half of the novel, Máiqueł has taken Santana up on his offer to start a partnership, and the two men have established *Ombra, Serviços de Segurança e Vigilância Patrimonial S.C. Ltda*. Ombra is, by all appearances, a legitimate operation, with an office, a logo, and numerous employees. As the manager, Máiqueł hardly ever has to go out “para serviços da rua” (133), instead subcontracting the work to others. By the end of the process of professionalization, Máiqueł has a new relationship to the market. He fulfills the role of a capitalist, profiting off of his employees’ labor.

While Máiqueł, as the narrator of his own story, is a much more fully-developed character than either Alexis or Wilmar, the text does not present his character as the embodiment of the neoliberal agent, like the character of María in *María llena eres de gracia*. To the contrary, Máiqueł often comes off not as an entrepreneurial individual, but someone who does not really control his own destiny. Instead, he follows along with what other people, namely Dr. Carvalho and his acquaintances, want him to do. Even after he makes conscious decisions not to continue killing for money, he ends up becoming a killer regardless. After a fight with Cledir, he shows up at Dr. Carvalho’s house, and his agreement to take the job is a sort of automatic, unconscious reaction:

Saí de lá descalço e fui andando, ... fui andando sem saber para onde, quando vi, estava em frente à casa do dr. Carvalho...Você pensou melhor na proposta do Sílvio? Fiz que
Instead of making rational decisions to improve his life, Máiquel seems to stumble into opportunities for economic advancement. At the same time, one of the key differences between Máiquel and María is the fact that the killer is successful, if only for a short time, while the drug mule plays the neoliberal game but her fate is uncertain. So where the neoliberal characteristics of María’s personality must be stressed to denaturalize the neoliberal assumption that individuals are solely responsible for their successes and failures, Máiquel’s lack of positive entrepreneurial qualities challenges that assumption from the opposite end. While the construction of María as an ideal neoliberal agent challenges the notion of the undeserving poor, the construction of Máiquel as the opposite challenges the notion of the deserving rich.

The text insinuates the role of consumer society in producing violence through its depiction of Máiquel’s hesitation to become a killer but ultimate surrender to the profession. Here, the differences it introduces to the story that inspired it, Rubem Fonseca’s “O Cobrador,” are key. In “O Cobrador,” the unnamed narrator visits the dentist, Dr. Carvalho, to get a tooth pulled. When the dentist says how much the visit will cost, the young man yells that he refuses to pay for anything anymore, and he shoots the dentist in the knee. This interaction inspires the young man to declare his revolt against capitalism and start a war between the classes: he, the representative of the poor and marginalized, targets the wealthy in his acts of violence. In contrast, for the majority of O Matador’s storyline, the interaction between the killer (Máiquel) and the bourgeoisie (Dr. Carvalho and associates) is the inverse. Instead of rebelling against the
wealthy and the capitalist system, the killer buys into the system and becomes the weapon of the upper classes against the marginalized.

This inversion is developed through the depiction of how Máique reverses his initial decision to exit the contract killing industry in favor of a traditional job at the pet store. As noted earlier, the moment Máique agrees to become the upper classes’ paid killer at first appears to be a sort of irrational, reflexive decision. Yet other moments in the novel reveal a desire to be able to more fully participate in consumer society. His shoes, for example, become the symbol for his inability to fully participate in the consumerist order and his desire to do so. During a dinner with Dr. Carvalho at which the dentist introduces him to Sílvio, who will become his first paying client, Máique fixates on the other people’s shoes: “[E]u não parava de olhar os sapatos, fingia que estava olhando o meu prato, mas olhava os sapatos, pratos, o do dr. Carvalho tinha um penduralho de couro, o do dr. Sílvio era de amarrar, as solas grossas de borracha, a esposa usava sapatilhas de pelica, todos engraxados, brilhando, e o meu sapato parecia que tinha dormido dentro da privada, parecia um barco, afunde!” (61). Máique is clearly ashamed that he cannot exercise the same purchasing power as his clients and their families.

Later that evening, Máique verbalizes his longing to be a consumer. After Sílvio first asks him to kill Neno, he becomes physically ill and goes to the bathroom. As he vomits, he thinks of all of the things he could buy with the money:


Máiquele recognizes that becoming a professional killer is the solution to his financial problems and his ticket to being able to afford all of the material objects he has always wanted. Even so, he does not initially accept Sílvio’s offer. The allure of inserting himself into capitalist society as a consumer is not initially enough to make him abandon his instinct to pursue a decent, normal life. Instead, he accepts the job at the pet store and marries Cledir in an attempt to return to the ordinary existence he led before he became a killer.

What ultimately acts as a trigger and pushes Máiquele to go back to Dr. Carvalho and complete his transformation into a sicario is a conflict between this desire to be a consumer and his masculinity. Máiquele’s decision is shown to be reflexive, not rational, but it is instigated by Cledir upsetting Máiquele at a birthday dinner. Máiquele becomes enraged for two reasons. First, his wife kills his pet pig, Gorba, to serve him for dinner. The second reason, which is never directly stated, has to do with Cledir threatening Máiquele’s masculinity by presenting herself as the family breadwinner. As they eat dinner, Cledir strikes up a conversation with their guests about money: “o salário do Máiquele é uma porcaria...eu ganho mais do que ele...eu sustento a casa” (82). Although he may not admit it explicitly, Máiquele feels emasculated because his wife is making more money than him and therefore can more readily purchase the consumer goods that he also wants.

His emasculation is complete because Cledir is the one who buys him the new shoes he coveted, and she reveals this to their guests:
O Mappin paga bem, ela disse...mas é difícil segurar as pontas sozinha...imaginem se a gente tivesse que pagar aluguel? Claro, o salário do Máiquel ajuda, e comendo o meu porco, meu próprio porco, e falando mal de mim, do meu trabalho, me humilhando, e meu amor, quer mais querido? Comprei um par de sapatos para ele, mostra os sapatos, meu amor, não são lindos? (82).

This moment is especially threatening to Máiquel’s sense of masculinity because of his desire to assume the role of a consumer, traditionally considered to be a feminine role. As Deborah Tudor acknowledges, under neoliberalism, men are not only permitted but also required to “embrace the previously derided feminized position of consumer” (62). This economic demand for men to be consumers requires men to reassert authority and control with regards to production in order to avoid becoming overly “feminized.” With regards to production, R.W. Connell notes that masculinity is associated with being a breadwinner, even as socio-economic changes often make it impossible for men to fulfill this role (90). At this juncture of the story, this is the situation Máiquel is in: he wants to be a proper consumer and has been humiliated because he can only achieve this through his wife’s salary. Thus, he is subconsciously driven to a profession that simultaneously provides him with the capital to be the breadwinner but also allows him to perform other attributes associated with masculinity. So rather than turning his frustration against the capitalist system, like the anonymous narrator of “O Cobrador,” and destroying the very consumerist order that is the root of his emasculation, Máiquel turns into a killer. In doing so, he is co-opted to serve the interests of the wealthy classes.

Just like in La Virgen de los sicarios, the way O Matador presents disposable life initially suggests that the category is applied only to those who have certain characteristics. In the case of
those whom Máique murders, they do not represent poverty and procreation, but rather are singled out due to their race or their perceived criminality. On the first page of the novel, even before Máique kills for the first time, the text suggests a link between race and the condition of *homo sacer*. Máique temporarily reverses his own status of being valueless life when he undergoes an unplanned physical transformation. Having lost a bet, he dyes his hair blonde. This change in appearance leads to his transformation into a professional killer; his blonde hair not only improves his self-esteem—“Sempre me achei um homem feio…Não era só o cabelo que tinha ficado mais claro. A pele, os olhos, tudo tinha uma luz” (10)—but also, as Ana Cláudia Giassone has pointed out, it changes his notion of his social position (71). As a blond, Máique aspires to a higher social class and targets those persons who embody poverty and blackness.

After his first kill, Máique worries that he will be punished for murdering Suel, showing that he is unaware of the unwritten code that makes some people disposable and, consequently, some murders acceptable. Soon afterwards, a police officer tells him, “[T]udo bem, você matou o Suel, quem se importa? Quem se importa com un negro?” (22). The racial angle of the question of bare life is once again repeated at the end of the novel, after Máique’s friend Marcão is arrested for possession of cocaine. When Máique visits him in prison, Marcão claims that someone had it out for him:

Certeza absoluta, alguém me dedurou, continuou Marcão. Que iria te deduarar?, eu perguntei. Sei la, alguém que quer me foder...se há uma coisa que ninguém suporta em nenhuma parte do mundo é ver uma cara se dando bem na vida...Eu venci, ele falou, eu tenho um carro bacana, eu tenho dinheiro, ninguém suporta isso, um preto com dinheiro...eles não toleram. (137)
These statements acknowledge that race is still a factor in determining whether or not a murder is socially acceptable, but Máique’s ultimate return to the status of disposable life indicates that it is not the only factor.

Beyond race, disposable life in *O Matador* also seems to be a function of criminality. While Fernando is the spokesman for the biopolitical viewpoint in *La Virgen de los sicarios*, that role in *O Matador* is played by Máique’s first boss, Dr. Carvalho. In a long monologue about the death penalty, he explains “Essa história de direitos humanos é uma piada. Eles não são humanos, os estupradores, os seqüeiadores, eles não são humanos...A pena de morte...é um direito da sociedade, não é um crime” (30-31). By his reasoning, criminals are not human, for all they do is threaten the health and safety of contributing members of society. At first, all of the men whom Máique murders are portrayed as criminals. Suel steals CD players from cars, Ezequiel rapes Dr. Carvalho’s daughter, and Neno refuses to take protection money because he prefers to steal from Sílvio’s business. Society reacts to the murder of these men not with outrage, but with gratitude and relief. After Máique’s first murder, he is rewarded instead of punished. Police offers admire him for what he did, and many people send him gifts: “Quando abri a porta, encontrei um monte de pacotes na soleira: cigarros, carne moida, cerveja, pinga e flores. Tinha um bilhete também, com letra de criança: Obrigado, Máique. Outro: Bem feito para o Suel, letra de mulher. Bandido tem que morrer, letra de homem. Morreu porque não servia para a sociedade, à maquina” (23-24). While Máique considers himself to be a criminal, he soon realizes that practically everyone—suggested by the handwriting from different notes being perceived to be a man’s, a woman’s, and a child’s—considers him to have provided a valuable
service to the community by eliminating someone who is perceived as a threat to the social order.

As with *La Virgen de los sicarios*, *O Matador* seems to suggest that disposability is a condition applied to certain individuals. Upon further analysis reveals that anyone may become disposable in a biopolitical neoliberal environment. Although she never explicitly mentions disposable life or biopolitics, Glaucia Mirian Silva Vaz characterizes the dead bodies of *O Matador* in terms of purity and filth. When she discusses the idea of purity, Silva Vaz refers to Zygmunt Bauman, for whom the pure is related to order (49). When something is out of place, it becomes impure, a polluting agent, and must be moved to its proper place so that order is reestablished. However, some things or people are always out of place, and therefore must be eliminated (50). In the context of *O Matador*, those whom Máiquel kills belong to this category, primarily because they cannot insert themselves within the consumerist order, “ou porque a negam o porque não têm condições de assim o realizar” (Silva Vaz 85). In most cases, Máiquel can kill with impunity not because those whom he kills are criminals, which will prove to be a relative term, but because they lack the capital to participate in consumer society.

Criminality is a relative term precisely because the characterization of Máiquel signals to the reader the arbitrariness of the boundary between disposable life and life worth living. Throughout the text, it is clear that the men who are killed have committed crimes that are no worse than what Máiquel has done. Suel was accused of being a thief, yet Máiquel steals too, “borrowing” cars when he works as a used-car salesman and stealing Dr. Carvalho’s checkbook. Dr. Carvalho wants Ezequiel killed for allegedly raping his daughter, but Máiquel is guilty of the same crime: he rapes Cledir shortly before he meets Dr. Carvalho. As Máiquel describes what
he learns about Ezequiel, the stream of consciousness quality of the prose accentuates the similarities between the two men: “Ezequiel era um estuprador, diziam...Estuprou uma estudante. Estuprou uma loira. Estuprou uma bancária. Estuprou uma dona de casa. Estuprei uma vendedora do Mappin” (37). His security company, Ombra, protects businesses from criminals for a fee, but on at least one occasion when a business owner does not purchase his services, he instructs another criminal to rob the business, kill the security guards, and give Máiquel a share of the winnings (134). Máiquel’s actions parallel those of the men he kills, making it clear that the only thing separating Máiquel from the condition of disposable life is that he is considered useful by the wealthy and the powerful.

Máiquel becomes aware of his own disposability in the second half of O Matador. While the first half documents his ascent from salesman to business owner, the second half traces his downfall. Two events in particular precipitate his ruination. First, police arrest his friend Marcão, which leads to the discovery of Cledir’s body, which Máiquel buried underneath Marcão’s driveway. Second, Máiquel murders a young man from a wealthy family, who, like Linda Vásquez in 2666, does not belong to the category of disposable life. In the second half of the novel, Máiquel is clearly conscious of the fact that he is being used by the wealthy for their benefit, unlike the Máiquel of the first half who seemingly blindly follows those interests. In one of his self-aware moments, Máiquel foreshadows what will eventually happen to him. He explains:

Eu não estava muito longe de entender que existe o lado de lá e o lado de cá, e que não se muda de lado. Nunca. Você pode até pensar que mudou, eles fazem você pensar isso, entre e feche a porta, eles dizem, você entra, você acha que está ali, você fecha a porta,
você acha que mudou, mas não, na verdade não é uma mudança, se você está do lado de lá é porque eles estão precisando de alguém para lavar o banheiro de mármore deles. É isso simplesmente. (180)

His success, both material, evidenced by his acquisition of a bigger house and more consumer goods, and immaterial, culminating in the moment he receives the “Man of the Year” award, is fleeting. After he kills the wrong individual—one whose family’s wealth excludes him from the categories of criminal and disposable life—his clients are quick to break all ties with him. They even hire someone to try to kill him in prison so he cannot reveal their complicity in the murders. Máiquel eventually understands that social mobility in this context is an illusion. After all, his clients consider him to be nothing other than a tool for cleaning up messes. Once he has outlived his perceived utility, they want to dispose of him just like all the other human trash that they had hired him to eliminate.

The most remarkable aspect about Máiquel’s brief imprisonment is not his former clients’ attempts to distance themselves from his crimes, but rather how the public reacts. His clients’ disavowal of him is perhaps unsurprising, since they would prefer to avoid both negative press and potential punishment for their role in the murders. On the other hand, the public still widely approves of his actions. Similar to when Máiquel receives letters of gratitude after he kills Suel, he receives correspondence in prison: “Cartas chegavam aos montes. Coisas assim: Agora que você não está mais aqui, eles, aqueles bandidos canalhas, ficam passando em frente ao meu bar rodando o revólver na mão. Outra: Soltem este santo homem, ele só faz bem para as pessoas. Outra: A sua prisão foi uma grande sacanagem, você é um mal necessário. Cara idiota, mal necessário é a mãe dele” (187). Thus, even when Máiquel has outlived his usefulness in the eyes
of his wealthy and powerful clients, society as a whole still demands his services. This is the moment that the text inculpates members of the consumer class for their indirect participation in creating an environment in which those who are perceived to lack value on the market can be eliminated with impunity. Even if Máiquel were to stop killing these accused criminals, there would still be public demand for someone else to fulfil that role. The reader, who does not identify with Máiquel, because of class differences, or with Dr. Carvalho or Santana, who as secondary characters are more distant from the reader than Fernando and therefore cannot create the same sense of complicity with the audience, is inscribed in this reference to the general public. While not directly responsible for any individual criminal act, the reader contributes to the environment in which such criminal acts are expected and rewarded. This reference to reader complicity is not as developed as in La virgen de los sicarios or 2666, but it does clearly demonstrate that this violence associated with the lower classes exists in large part for the benefit of the consumer classes.

O Matador also acknowledges, albeit briefly, that violence among the poor is a consumer good for the middle and upper classes. Initially Santana tells Máiquel that he will help secure his release from prison as soon as the media forgets about the case, which is only a matter of time. Soon another crime will make everyone forget that Máiquel killed the son of a wealthy family. Santana explains, “Porque o que eles precisam é de um grande crime, ou pelo menos um crime decente, todo dia a gente tem que dar um bom crime para eles terem o que conversar a hora do jantar” (188). Like the feminicidios in 2666 but on a smaller scale, these murders sell newspapers and provide entertainment for those who feel secure in knowing that such violence will most likely not affect their lives. Of course, even as O Matador critiques this in passing, it
too is a cultural object that profits off the same demand for consumable images of other people’s suffering.

Despite the continued support he receives from the public, by the time Máique turns he is no longer willing to continue killing those who are deemed a threat to decent society. At the end of the novel, Máique engages in an act of rebellion like the anonymous narrator of “O Cobrador,” but his rebellion is one of personal revenge: he kills Santana, humiliates Dr. Carvalho’s daughter Gabriela, and shoots Dr. Carvalho in the stomach before fleeing the city to go into hiding. This ending does suggest that the current state of affairs, in which neoliberal markets deem certain individuals as disposable and permit their elimination through violent means to protect the status quo, is unsustainable. However, closing with the uncertain fate of Máique on the run does not offer any suggestions for revaluing those who have become disposable life or disrupting the neoliberal biopolitical system that increases their vulnerability.

By focusing on the industry of murder for hire, La Virgen de los sicarios and O Matador explore one of the ways men in particular become disposable life in the neoliberal system. While the texts do not comment on the economic processes that create situations in which lower-class men lack viable opportunities for economic advancement, they do capture how poor male bodies are dismissed as criminal, resulting in a complete lack of uproar when they become victims of a violence for which they themselves are blamed. Both texts, unlike other examples of the novela sicaresca, attempt to portray this world in such a way that encourages greater reflection on the part of the reader upon the ways that the middle and upper classes directly and indirectly contribute to the proliferation in violence. To do so, the two novels emphasize the
professional nature of the sicario. *La Virgen de los Sicarios* uses the intellectual-narrator to force readers to reflect on complicity, while *O Matador* simply places more emphasis on upper class characters, and Brazilian society as a whole, as the source of demand for the deaths of those perceived to be criminals.
AFTERWORD

There are many differences among *Central do Brasil*, *Morena en rojo*, *Cronicamente Inviável*, *Maria llena eres de gracia*, *2666*, *La Virgen de los sicarios*, and *O Matador*, ranging from their national origin to their genre to the types of bodies depicted as subject to neoliberal commodification. Regardless, a commonality to all of these texts is their portrayal of bodies as contemporary manifestations of the *homo sacer*. Furthermore, all point to neoliberalism, both in as practice and as ideology, as what makes these bodies disposable. In this sense, they differ from earlier representations of bare life in Latin American literature, which tended to attribute the vulnerability of certain bodies to either excessive state power or exploitation carried out by foreign actors, such as multinational companies based in the first world.

The spotlight on private, local actors in these texts points to another commonality: the question of audience complicity with the neoliberal system that exploits and endangers human life. This focus on complicity is a necessary component of a critique of neoliberal governmentality. Neoliberal systems control the actions of their subjects by imposing the neoliberal worldview of individuals as *homo economicus* or even *homo entrepreneur*. Once this view of human nature is widely accepted as natural or common sense, subjects of neoliberal systems have difficulty imagining alternatives to neoliberalism. Thus a first step in countering neoliberal discourse is forcing individuals to recognize how they have been shaped by this ideology.

Each of these texts addresses complicity in different ways, focusing on different aspects of neoliberal ideology. *Central do Brasil*, *Morena en rojo*, and *Cronicamente Inviável* illustrate how the expansion of market principles to all areas of life promotes amorality, while the
simultaneous privatization of everything makes it difficult for opponents of neoliberalism to articulate alternatives. *María llena eres de gracia* challenges the neoliberal idea of meritocracy and contests the idea of the deserving rich and the underserving poor by showing how even someone who plays according to the rules of the neoliberal system cannot definitively secure a better life for herself and her family. The self-concious portrayal of the dead women of Santa Teresa in *2666*, drawing a parallel with snuff pornography, invites readers to reconsider how seemingly benign acts of consumption place others at risk of physical harm. Lastly, *La Virgen de los sicarios* and *O Matador* illustrate how consumer society produces violence typically attributed to the poor. In doing so, they call attention to the ways that the middle and upper classes encourage and benefit from such violence.

Even as these texts acknowledge the ways that all of us, as participants in consumer society, are complicit with the neoliberal system, they fall short of providing their audiences with a vision of an alternative to the *status quo*. Perhaps like Dora in *Central do Brasil* and Morena in *Morena en rojo*, these texts, having been shaped by neoliberal ideology and having to compete in the very market that they condemn, find it difficult, if not impossible, to see beyond what the neoliberal worldview presents as the realm of possibilities. Or perhaps, in line with Bolaño’s comment about the *novela de denuncia*, they are merely positing the necessity of reformulating leftist discourse in literature and film in order to find a new approach to resisting neoliberal capitalism.
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174


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