

**(De)Mythologizing the Disabled: Chilean Freaks in  
Roberto Bolaño's *El Tercer Reich* and *Estrella distante***

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A Latin American hybrid monster roams the nightmares and feverish thoughts of the German narrator of Roberto Bolaño's posthumous novel *El Tercer Reich*, set in a beach town very similar to his adopted hometown, Blanes.<sup>1</sup> The board on which Udo Berger and El Quemado ("the burnt one") play a historical war game is a contact zone between a Western European citizen and a Chilean exile, and as power between metropolitan and peripheral subjects is negotiated through the game, in the mind of the German protagonist their banal contemporary activity takes on the ominous character of the return of the past in the form of an other that demands reparations. Defeat will be more than just a defeat. For the German narrator-protagonist, the victory of the Chilean antagonist will give El Quemado an opportunity to act out the history of horror that is "written" on his body in the form of scars that are the result of torture. For Berger, El Quemado is a monstrous freak who embodies historical trauma and carries with him an impossible demand for justice. Sacred violence will emerge from what Berger understands as a melancholy hybrid body that stands on the beach as a ruin that threateningly and enticingly combines nature and history. According to Nadja Durbach, the hallmark of the freak-show performer in the nineteenth century was its ability to "inhabit two categories at once;" the freak was "monstrous precisely because of the instability of its body" (*The Spectacle of Deformity* 3). In Berger's eyes, El Quemado's monstrosity resides in the riddle his scarred body poses about the extreme violence in his past, thus creating a confusion of biology and history that creates a dark mystery embodied by the Latin American player that Berger tries unsuccessfully to beat.

In *Estrella distante*, written and published in the 1990s, we will find that Bolaño has stopped analyzing disability and enfreakment exclusively in terms of national identity and clashes between Latin American and European subjects. Lorenzo, who has lost both his arms in an accident, is a gay artist who,

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after trying to kill himself, leaves Chile for Europe, purchases two prosthetic arms that make him feel like what he jokingly refers to as a robot, and ends up performing as Petra, the mascot of the Paralympic Games in Barcelona in 1992. Lorenzo is neither a tragic figure who kills himself, a sacrificial character that Bolaño uses to highlight the complex regime of oppression in Chile, nor someone who may be appropriated by transhumanist neoliberal utopian discourses that would make disabled bodies the privileged sites of exceptionalism and fantasies of self-reliance.<sup>2</sup> He escapes sacralization through transcendental victimization or ascendance to a redemptive figure through cyborg subjectification. It is neoliberalism that he finally participates in when he agrees to become a mascot. Disability is deprived of a tragic national allegorical dimension in *Estrella distante*, and enfreakment becomes self-enfreakment, as it is Lorenzo who turns himself into a freak for a global audience. When national identities seem to dissolve under the deterritorialization of identity encouraged by global capitalism, freakery is equally deterritorialized and put to new uses, without losing its central features of mythification and exclusion under and through a hegemonic ableist public eye.

In an essay on Latin American freaks, Susan Antebi warns, “The question of freakishness and freaks in Latin American contexts is fraught from the beginning by its decontextualized and translated quality; it is an imposition, even when embraced. To study freakishness in Latin America, or just to pay attention to it, necessarily involves an awkward back-and-forth movement, between apologizing for radical decontextualization, and reclaiming the notion by distancing oneself from possible misunderstandings” (“Blindness and Freakishness” 27). After several mentions of the Anglo-American nineteenth-century tradition of the freak show, Antebi calls our attention to the fact that “the freak show functions as ethnographic spectacle, and betrays its intimate ties to ongoing colonialist practices” (27). In this article, I will keep in mind the deterritorialization that takes place when theory on freakery is applied to Latin American realities, as I look for productive ways in which it can be translated and reclaimed. In particular, I would like to use Antebi’s warning and insight to frame my analysis of *El Tercer Reich* in terms of transnational cultural processes in which a Eurocentric, hegemonic gaze constructs racial(ized) marginal(ized) figures with nonstandard bodily features as freaks. I would like to embed our understanding of enfreakment processes in a network of ideological practices that ontologize those differences (or, rather, divergences from some statistical construct taken as standard) and come out with “freaks” that do very clear ideological work for the benefit of hegemonic groups. Enfreakment may lead to the sacralization of people with so-called nonstandard bodily features, and these people therefore can be used, in what seems to follow the ambiguity of the sacred, as abject sacrificial figures or as an empowered, threatening, supernatural other whose exteriority serves to

cement the social cohesiveness of the community of the nondisabled.<sup>3</sup> In this article I intend to do three things. I will reverse the chronological sequence and analyze characters with disabilities in *Estrella distante* first, in order to better understand Bolaño's approach to enfreakment. Second, I will consider why the German narrator-protagonist of *El Tercer Reich* mythifies El Quemado and ends up accepting so easily that El Quemado wants to kill him. Third, I will explore how Bolaño's anticlimatic ending in *El Tercer Reich* debunks the enfreaking gaze of the European player, demythifies the Latin American character, and reveals the processes through which scars and trauma are pathologized and the disabled body is turned into threatening freakery.

### **Disability and Enfreakment in *Estrella distante***

In a recent article, Frank Cassuto succinctly defines the nature of the freak and the ideological work that freaks perform:

“Freak” labels disability as spectacle. The freak stands as an archetypal “other,” a disabled figure on theatrical display before an able-bodied audience that uses the display to define its own sense of belonging. . . . The figure of the freak literally embodies the fundamental opposition that disability studies has aimed first to expose and understand, and then to redefine and redirect: namely, the conflict between an able-bodied “us” and a disabled “them.” (85)

As the archetypal “other,” the freak results from the cultural process that transforms the statistically uncommon into the radically extraordinary. As David Hevey explains in “The Enfreakment of Photography,” “[t]he repression of disabled people makes it more likely that the symbolic use of disablement by non-disabled people is a sinister or mythologist one” (444). Difference is ontologized, and enfreakment creates a being whose nature is constitutively different from the identity of those that have not (yet) been objects of this same process. Recreated as a site of absolute difference, the freakish body may be even transferred to the sphere of the sacred by means of a public ritual. The freak show displays the all-too-well-known precariousness of the flesh, the messy and uncontrollable materiality of biological existence, only to abject it in an attempt to shore up the viewers' fears about their own vulnerability. Mayra Rivera has recently explained how a whole trend of Western thought disavows the carnality of our own bodies, and as a result “allusions to flesh tempt us to hide, or reject and project onto others, any traces of weakness, cor-

ruptibility, constraints”; in this prevalent view, the flesh is, above all, vulnerable, and a source of exposure to “humiliations” (54). The freak show serves as a reminder and an exorcism of the dangers that imperil the biological life of humankind. But this exorcism only works to repress the fear of violence and, as a result, it actually produces a latent threat. By creating an ontological gap between the viewers and the viewed, the freak show turns a case of nonconformity to bodily standards into a threat to the sense of security of those who stare. Starers can also transfer the symbolic and physical violence that they inflict to those on display. Thus, freaks may become potentially malicious monsters, as they not only come to embody the abject disgust and fear of those who stare. They may mirror the starers’ aggression as well, violence just dormant and waiting for the right moment to fully explode in an act of revenge that is ultimately incomprehensible because it comes from the other. In the end, the enfreakment of certain bodily configurations may create sacralized figures that, cut off from everyday life, will strike out in acts of transcendental aggression and/or retribution.

Before turning to the processes of sacralization at work in *El Tercer Reich* and *Estrella distante*, it may be useful to have a look at 2666. In “The Part of the Critics” we have a disabled character, Morini, one of the four critics around which the first part revolves. After years of suffering from multiple sclerosis, he has a “mysterious accident” and needs to use a wheelchair for the rest of his life. This is not an article about Morini, however. In excluding him from the core of my argument, I am following Nadja Durbach when she warns us against using “the categories of ‘the freak,’ ‘the disabled,’ and ‘the Other’ as interchangeable” (Review). The freak would exist, according to Durbach in the same book review, in a sphere ruled by public exhibition, performance, and consumer culture. And only in specific cases, I would add, the process of enfreakment leads to sacralization and the construction of the freak as an other. When considering “The Part of the Critics” of 2666, there is nothing in Morini’s quiet life that may relate him to a public performance of a particular physical state, to consumer culture, or to the construction of a community of starers around him.<sup>4</sup> Invoking him in an article about enfreakment to immediately discard him as a valid object of study is useful, however, for fully understanding the two freakish characters that Bolaño includes in *Estrella distante*.

The first freak that we encounter in *Estrella distante* comes out of an obscure novel that blends fantasy and pornography and which a character translates into French. What we have is

un relato sobrecogedor en el que a una mujer le van creciendo o más propiamente se le van abriendo sexos y anos por todas las partes de su anatomía, ante el natural espanto de sus familiares (el relato transcurre en

los años veinte, pero supongo que al menos la sorpresa hubiera sido igual en los setenta o en los noventa), y que termina recluida en un burdel del norte, un burdel para mineros, encerrada en el burdel y dentro del burdel encerrada en su habitación sin ventanas, hasta que al final se convierte en una gran *entrada-salida* disforme y salvaje y acaba con el viejo macró que regenta el burdel y con las demás putas y con los horrorizados clientes y luego sale al patio y se interna en el desierto (caminando o volando, Pereda no lo aclara) hasta que el aire se la traga. (Bolaño, *Estrella distante* 76)<sup>5</sup>

Bolaño's freak here is also an impossible, supernatural creature who becomes an absolute other beyond human comprehension. Her body ends up losing any contours and dissolving into flesh, into mere materiality. Although kept in a kind of secrecy that is the opposite of the public display of the freak show, she is still offered for public consumption as a result of her bodily dimorphism. Her participation in consumer culture is extremely sordid as she is abused by her family, the owner of a brothel, and the brothel's clients. In the end, she looks like an apocalyptic figure that extracts holy retribution from all members of humankind within her reach, and she gets lost in the transcendental space of the Atacama Desert, which constitutes one more sly attack (usually unacknowledged by critics) against the Messianic poetry of Raúl Zurita, the most critically acclaimed Chilean poet of Bolaño's generation.<sup>6</sup> In the final analysis, enfreakment in this passage appears as the result of a feverish imagination that feeds on anxieties about sexual intercourse, gender, and class. Above all, this freak is constructed out of fears regarding the uncontrollable materiality of the flesh, which at any time seems about to break through the cultural work that constrains it into the contours of the body, rendering it an object of knowledge and control. Coitus becomes anthropophagy, the distinctiveness of bodies dissolves in the commonality of the flesh, and gender hierarchies are reversed. The freaks that the Western imagination creates for its novels and other narratives can be monstrous avatars of the other that at any moment may destroy the very society that imagines them.

The case of Lorenzo in *Estrella distante* reveals a more complex engagement with the question of disability and enfreakment. After being born to a working-class family, losing both of his arms in an accident, and realizing that he is gay, Lorenzo finds himself in a complicated situation. As Bolaño puts it, "Lorenzo creció en Chile y sin brazos, lo que de por sí hacía su situación bastante desventajosa, pero encima creció en el Chile de Pinochet, lo que convertía cualquier situación desventajosa en desesperada, pero esto no era todo, pues pronto descubrió que era homosexual, lo que convertía la situación

desesperada en inconcebible e inenarrable” (*Estrella distante* 82).<sup>7</sup> On the one hand, Bolaño seems to be placing Lorenzo beyond discourse, as a tragic other. On the other hand, we can see how he carefully embeds Lorenzo’s disability in a network of exclusions that, in the end, point to an ableist but also authoritarian, genocidal, classist, and homophobic regime. In this sense, Bolaño seems to agree with Susan Antebi and Beth E. Jörgensen when they remind us that “disability also intersects with factors of class, race, and gender to prompt critical reflection on the complexities of the social and cultural construction of disability as well as the human being’s inescapably embodied experience of the world” (11). Bolaño carefully sketches an overlapping set of hegemonic discourses that deprive Lorenzo of any feeling of inclusion in normative Chilean society. Disability is one among other disempowering cultural constructions and political structures intersecting in Lorenzo’s body. This apparent desire to deprive disability of an absolute character can also be seen in the way Bolaño handles two extremely common elements in ableist narratives—namely, the disabled person’s attempt to commit suicide and the redemption story that follows it. Fully accepting the hegemonic view that disability is a tragic condition, Lorenzo tries to kill himself by drowning in the sea. Kahlil Chaar Pérez helpfully reads this suicide attempt in national-allegorical terms: “it seems that Lorenzo is one more avatar of a Chilean nation that has been traumatized and reduced to the fragments of a national body that is literally *manqué*” (662; my translation). If this were actually the case, we could conclude that Bolaño is like those photographers that Hevey denounces for turning disabled people into symbols of collapse and chaos (434–35). Bolaño’s tone is ambivalent throughout the whole passage, however, oscillating between the serious and the ironic (we are told that every self-respecting stretch of Chilean coastline has an ideal spot for jumping into the Pacific Ocean to commit suicide; as he drowns, his whole life flashes before Lorenzo’s eyes, “*tal cuenta la leyenda*” [*Estrella distante* 82] [“as the legend goes,” my translation]); there is a melodramatic insistence on remembered images of Lorenzo’s mother) so that readers can keep some distance from the passage. Producing a Brechtian gap, not empathy, is the point here; we have a parody of the tragic, not tragedy itself. And Lorenzo’s life project after his suicide attempt has nothing to do with his disability or the nation, for now he will try to become “*un poeta secreto*” [“an undercover poet”] (83).

After his attempt to kill himself, Lorenzo’s accomplishments are presented in nonheroic terms.<sup>8</sup> Lorenzo becomes an artist who paints and performs in public to save money and leave Chile, but he never seems to make his missing arms the center of his artistic endeavors. What the narrative really focuses on is the fact that his friends cannot understand how he can wipe himself after using the bathroom, to which he replies that, if Blaise Cendrars could box with one arm, and very effectively too, “*cómo no iba a ser él capaz de limpiarse—y*

muy bien—su culo después de cagar” (Bolaño, *Estrella distante* 84).<sup>9</sup> In a few sentences, Bolaño paints a picture of disability that goes against hegemonic views; as Tom Shakespeare points out, “disability, in everyday thought and language, is associated with failure, with dependency, with not being able to do things” (95). A community of disabled people is briefly sketched out, a community of people who manage without thinking too much about it.<sup>10</sup> In Bolaño’s telling of Lorenzo’s story, he seems to have an overall satisfactory life, defined by mundane pleasures and achievements, which goes in line with “[p]sychological research that has supported disabled people’s self-reports of good quality of life” (Shakespeare 97). Even the prostheses that he buys at one point are simply an opportunity for jokes about transhumanist transformations: “Parecían brazos de verdad y le gustaron más que nada por la sensación de ciencia-ficción, de robótica, de sentirse ciborg que tenía cuando caminaba con las prótesis puestas” (Bolaño, *Estrella distante* 84).<sup>11</sup> Besides these playful allusions to cyborg reconfigurations of identity, however, Lorenzo does not use the prostheses to significantly transform his body or mystify it, for when he spends time with a lover, she removes them, plainly showing his unenhanced body. Therefore, we could say that Lorenzo eschews more empowering reinventions of the disabled body. As Tobin Siebers explains, “[t]he power of disability generates new forms of embodied and imaginary difference, supporting complex embodiment as a critical methodology” (245). Lorenzo does not participate in this methodology, nor does he choose to be identified, as Siebers would have it, by “the possession and use of the knowledge acquired . . . as [someone] living in adapting to an unjust society” (245). Lorenzo will not participate in any collective emancipatory struggle either. According to Rosi Braidotti, “[t]he fast-changing field of disability studies is almost emblematic of the posthuman predicament. Ever mindful that we do not yet know what a body can do, disability studies combine the critique of normative bodily models with the advocacy of new, creative models of embodiment” (146). Lorenzo is interested in neither of these projects. For most of Bolaño’s story Lorenzo does not become an instrument to advance sacralizing discourses of national despair, he refuses to be a defender of narratives of neoliberal transhumanist transcendence, and he is not fetishized into an exteriority from which a critique of hegemonic discourses may be articulated. And yet he will still be coopted by the prevailing globalist neoliberal regime and discourses of normalization of disability when he becomes Petra, the mascot of the Paralympics celebrated immediately after the Olympic Games of Barcelona.

By calling them “la magna Olimpiada de Barcelona” (translator Christ Andrews’s “historic” does not quite capture the sarcasm), Bolaño makes clear his ironic, critical stance towards an event whose main goals were political and economic (*Estrella distante* 84).<sup>12</sup> Now Lorenzo-as-Petra is a willing par-

ticipant in a vast propaganda campaign that Joan Ramon Resina describes as “a large-scale marketing operation based on the production of glamorous images” (216). Although we never find out what his actual performance is like, we can get an idea from his “audition”: “Dicen que cuando Mariscal lo vio embutido en el traje de Petra, haciendo virguerías con las piernas como un bailarín esquizofrénico del Bolshoi, dijo: es la Petra de mis sueños” (82).<sup>13</sup> And this is when Lorenzo finally enters the realm of the freak, with a performance that fits into contemporary practices ruled by spectacle and capital. He becomes a media darling, giving interviews that make the narrator alternatively laugh and weep as he lies, disabled himself, in a hospital bed. With his interviews, Lorenzo-as-Petra adds a verbal dimension to this scripted public display of disability. This combination of the visual and the oral in a political ceremony of support of the status quo is a key element of the freak show. As Durbach explains,

The showman’s narrative and the promotional materials that surrounded these shows reinforced these themes of primitiveness, savagery, and thus the necessity of imperial rule. Freak shows were highly structured experiences that were invariably framed by a story about the anomalous body on display. The presenter’s patter, important at most freak show performances, was particularly essential to the success of these shows, as it transformed otherwise unremarkable individuals into bloodthirsty savages. (*The Spectacle of Deformity* 153)

By engaging with the media and providing a verbal commentary on his disability, Lorenzo-as-Petra completes a process of self-enfreakment that would seem to go against the very purpose of the Paralympic Games, which nominally intends the “normalization” of disabled people. In fact, the Paralympics reenact what David T. Mitchell and Sharon Snyder describe as “a liberal overcoming story, one where a disabled person transcends the limitations of his tragic embodiment to attain a basic level of social participation” (57). In this sense, Petra’s exceptionalism as the mascot of a festival that glorifies a neoliberal ethos of heroic self-reliance is nevertheless an ironic normalization of sorts, as Lorenzo-as-Petra is shown to be someone who willingly submits to the same capitalist premises that seemingly rule the world. And thus the transformation of Lorenzo into Petra can be seen as a story about commercial exploitation of the nonstandard body. Bolaño illustrates how neoliberalism successfully encourages self-enfreakment in front of a global audience. To conclude this section with the critic with whom it started, Bolaño’s story of



Lorenzo-Petra shows that, in Cassuto's words,

freak shows have not so much disappeared as dispersed. Just as freak show spectators could once wander from booth to booth in a sideshow tent, viewers may now flip from channel to channel. . . . The freak show remains alive and well, then, a still-viable prism for collective anxiety—but with a change. Mass culture would have us believe that freaks now write their own script from their own lives. (87–88)

As Lorenzo performs Petra, he enters the same complex zone in which marketing and a theatrical disability meet, a zone that is all too well known to non-normative artists engaging with the mainstream. Chilean writer Pedro Lemebel denounces the dramatic veil that literature lays on biography, noting that, in the end, the biography of a non-heterosexual artist is “a matter of marketing and homotheatricality” (Better 33). Lorenzo-as-the-Petra is born precisely out of this overlap, in which “the basic participation” that the Paralympics promote really means exclusion and disempowerment. As viewers watch the supposedly “normalizing” Paralympics, they see how the divide between able and disabled is reinforced by one of those “special” activities that, according to Michel Desjardins, are “both like and radically different” (75). Lorenzo may not be one of those freaks upon whose extraordinary character the sacred is imposed, and in Bolaño's narrative he does come to stand for a traumatized nation. In the neoliberal 1990s, as a “secret poet,” all you need to enfreak yourself is to be given the chance to participate in global capitalism. In the late 1980s, however, Bolaño is still concerned with exploring how a hegemonic Eurocentric gaze creates freaks and takes it one further step to sacralize them. Analyzing the freaks of *Estrella distante* helps us understand how disabled people, freakery, and the other are not necessarily the same. Nevertheless, *El Tercer Reich* shows how easily they can be conflated.

### **The German Champion and the Latin American Freak**

Udo Berger is the German champion of Rise and Decline of the Third Reich, a grand strategy game in which players reproduce and manipulate the military campaigns in the European theater in World War II. He travels with his girlfriend, Ingeborg, to the kind of Mediterranean beach town in which Bolaño spent almost a third of his life. Berger seems increasingly haunted by a sense of constant though undefined threat that is only heightened after In-

geborg returns to Germany and he surprisingly decides to stay. Berger begins playing a game of Third Reich with a local, El Quemado. His opponent is a Latin American immigrant who rents pedal boats and spends the night at the beach inside a ramshackle structure made of the boats and a tarp. His body is covered in the scars of deep burns. On the shaky basis of vague rumors and innuendoes from locals who may be pranking Berger or taking revenge on him, he lets himself be convinced that the strong-muscled and horribly scarred Latin American exile is going to execute him if Berger loses. It is important to emphasize that Berger believes that he will be executed, not murdered. His banal vacation now becomes an exciting adventure in which he is risking his own life on the board, playing a game with ritualistic, sacred overtones, as if he were Antonius Block playing chess against Death in Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*. At the novel's anticlimactic end, however, nothing happens to Berger when El Quemado wins.

At the heart of *El Tercer Reich* is a double enigma. Why is Berger so easily convinced that El Quemado wants to kill him? And, more important, why does he follow him to the beach to be executed without really trying to defend himself, instead of just staying in the safety of his hotel room or actively trying to thwart El Quemado's supposed plans? The reader may want to attribute this to the fact that this text is an unrevised draft that needs to flesh out the sense of menace that Berger experiences from the beginning. We can also identify the clash of two narrative practices: the well-made novel that leads to a clear-cut revelation at the end, and Bolaño's general practice of fashioning disorienting narrative arcs and anticlimactic non-endings. And yet we may also want to identify Bolaño's desire to highlight Berger's need to turn his rival into an absolute enemy, so that the game becomes a duel and violence is no longer repressed through play. Berger, who plays Nazi Germany, expresses his deep unease with his current German identity a number of times. He believes that he lives in an amnesiac Europe that has no sense of the heroic (Bolaño, *El Tercer Reich* 118), and he does not know what it means to be German, although he is sure that it is something difficult that German people have gradually forgotten (227). By turning El Quemado into a murderous freak who will ultimately execute him, Berger will be able to embrace some kind of recovered identity. Dying the way that Germans died as war criminals will allow him to reenter the transhistorical realm of the German nation. His execution will be an exercise of anamnesis, a memory practice of sorts, in which Berger will be reminded of what it meant to be German and to live in a Europe still not deprived of a sense of the heroic. But to reconstruct his German identity, he will need to cast the Latin American exile as a sacred figure willing to exact retribution for crimes that Berger never committed himself. As Antebi reminds us, corporeal difference poses a riddle that pushes the spectator to look for a truth (*Carnal Inscriptions* 109). The truth that Berger constructs

will lead to self-serving enfreakment of a victim of political violence who is still suffering as a result of his traumatic past.

The constant attention he receives from the beachgoers objectifies him. Although nobody buys a ticket to a freak show, there is a public display of his corporeal difference in front of starers that evaluate him. Overall, he is viewed with a conventional mix of pity and disgust. Berger, however, will take things further. No one in the novel is more obsessed with El Quemado's bodily difference, and no one pushes him further away from the boundaries of the human community, than Berger. From the start, he sees El Quemado as an extraordinary being who asks the kind of disturbing riddle Antebi mentions:

Nadie nace así, con la piel tan martirizada. Ahora bien, no cabía duda de que las quemaduras no eran recientes. Probablemente databan de unos cinco años atrás, incluso más a juzgar por la actitud del pobre tipo (yo no lo miraba) acostumbrado a despertar la curiosidad y el interés propio de los monstruos y los mutilados, las miradas de involuntaria repulsión, la piedad por la gran desgracia. Perder un brazo o una pierna es perder una parte de sí mismo, pero sufrir tales quemaduras es transformarse, convertirse en otro. (Bolaño, *El Tercer Reich* 35)<sup>14</sup>

According to Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, “When we do see the usually concealed sight of disability writ boldly on others, we stare in fascinated disbelief and uneasy identification. Why, we ask with our eyes, does that person with dwarfism, that amputee, that drooler, look so much like and yet so different from me?” (20). For Berger, the questions that El Quemado's scars seem to pose are “How did this happen? What is the history behind these scars?” and, more important, “What does it mean to be transformed into someone else? And what is the nature of this someone else that he is now?” Berger will end up answering in a typical European way, by turning the Latin American immigrant into a menacing freak, a monstrous other. In Berger's eyes, El Quemado is a figure that is not far away from the cannibal as European modernity constructed it, according to Carlos Jáuregui: a key signifier of colonial alterity (12). Berger's truth about El Quemado is that he has been transformed into something that stands apart from the human community to which, in Berger's eyes, the German young man belongs and the Latin American immigrant does not. It is unclear whether this “someone else” is fully human in the eyes of Berger, who thinks El Quemado is using the game to finally communicate (as if he had not been able to do so before), and that only while he is playing is El Quemado not “un monstruo sino una cabeza que piensa.” (Bolaño, *El*

*Tercer Reich*, 266).<sup>15</sup> Berger sees him as precisely the monstrous double that is the object of sacrifice, according to Girard: “As we have seen, the surrogate victim meets his death in the guise of the monstrous double. All sacred creatures partake of monstrosity, whether overtly or covertly” (251). And if we accept Girard’s understanding of sacrifice, the fact that in Berger’s mind the monstrous victim becomes monstrous victimizer is no surprise. In Kathryn McClymond’s words, “throughout [*Violence and the Sacred*] Girard develops the argument that sacrifice is centered on notions of substitution and deferred violence: a sacrificial victim receives the deflected violence originally intended for the sacrifice” (45). Berger projects his own desire for violence and aggression on his antagonist, the obvious monster who, as an abject outcast in Berger’s eyes, should qualify for victim more than anybody else. And precisely because El Quemado should be a victim, it is easy for Berger to turn him into a victimizer.

And what is this particular idea for which Berger is willing to die and be sacrificed? Forcing El Quemado to remain a figure that inhabits an unsettling place between human and nonhuman, a monster created by the indelible inscription of a sovereign power that understands politics only as a contest between friend and enemy. By turning the game into much more than a game, Berger expresses nostalgia for a life-transforming war in which victory comes at the expense of a defeated and murdered opponent. In Berger’s eyes, the game he plays with El Quemado backs a political philosophy for which a sacrifice-centered theology would determine the life of state.<sup>16</sup> Instead of considering a game of Third Reich to be a collaborative enterprise that is centered on the joint creation of a counterfactual historical “truth” that, as a side effect, decides the status of each player as winner or loser at the end, Berger ends up perceiving it as a necessary step toward the cancellation of play and destruction of the enemy. He ignores the notion that, as Doris Sommer explains by glossing Schiller, “play exercises our human faculties in ways that embrace antagonism and contain it” (88). Berger needs an absolute antagonism with El Quemado so that any blurring of differences and any overlap between them is carefully avoided by creating a distinctly specular relationship that maintains his own sense of self. Berger desires a hierarchical relationship between them, but this hierarchical relationship is always in danger of collapsing. Berger’s biggest fear is being forced to accept their shared identity as human beings. Constructing El Quemado as a murderous freak is Berger’s way of asserting his ultimate total difference from him. The closer the German player thinks he is to identifying with El Quemado, the more he needs his opponent to be a deranged Latin American cannibal who is bent on killing Berger in a way that moves transforms murder into execution and even sacred sacrifice at the altar of transhistorical atonement. Therefore, at the core of Bolaño’s analysis of disability, trauma, and the mythification of corporeal difference through

enfreakment lies Berger's need to construct his game rival as the ultimate foe, a violent other. Berger's inability to forget about absolute enmity is also Bolaño's. Gareth Williams has said in relation to *Estrella distante* that "Bolaño might point to the absurdity or injustice of the geometry of hostility to which he is drawn over and over again. But he still remains ensconced within it" (139). In *El Tercer Reich*, Bolaño's demythification of disability and his rejection of enfreakment cannot help but conjure up the otherizing discourse and gaze that he wants to critique and expose. In this novel, the relationship between ableist starrer and disabled staree is ruled by aggression (real and projected) and hostility on the part of the former, no matter how little the latter may be interested in reciprocating.

Let us remember once again that the Latin American player never kills Berger. He takes him to the beach the night he wins, that much is true, but his actions look more like a prank than anything else. He may imply that he is going to execute Berger, but in fact he is only relishing his victory and gently making fun of the defeated German champion. The narrative arc of the previous 340 pages ends up in nothing, an anticlimax that still forces Berger to change his life. He has been trying to explain his actions to himself, and he thinks he has ended up living a tale in which he will get closer and closer to the heart of darkness until his final sacrificial execution gives meaning to an unfulfilling life. His own wish to die is clear in the scene in which he believes he is going to be executed as a stand-in for all Nazis, including those South American officers who tortured El Quemado and left him horribly scarred for life. Berger barely whispers that he is not a Nazi, and he does not resist when El Quemado's overwhelmingly strong arms put him in the same place as those Nazi officials sentenced to death at the Nuremberg trials.

El Quemado, however, is not interested in making the game anything but a game. He shows how grand strategy games, in which events are "rewritten" on the boards and history follows different paths, can be a liberating practice. Historical events are malleable—in the past, in the present, and, most important, in the future. For those who have suffered trauma and loss, playing these games can be an alternative to mourning. They are one example of nontotalizing narratives and critical thinking that we can accept as an equally valid modality of working through trauma (Lacabra 67). El Quemado experiences freedom as he recognizes the contingency that these board games highlight, a freedom from history, in which he has been defeated by Pinochet's authoritarian regime and traumatized by its political violence. "Pobre muchacho. Vive en una cárcel permanente" (Bolaño, *El Tercer Reich* 240), says one of the characters, precisely on September 11, the date of the military coup in Chile.<sup>17</sup> That day, El Quemado, who, according to the locals, was "a soldier of sorts" back in his country, is almost beside himself as he walks all over the beach lost in thought, visibly reliving a historical and personal drama that non-Chilean

characters know nothing about. He is a scarred victim of torture, someone whose past can never be forgotten because of the materiality of his scars and the objectifying stares of others. El Quemado's historical and personal trauma is constantly reactualized, a trauma that he clearly has not left behind, and which he even feeds by reading poetry. As he explains, reading Vallejo, Neruda, and Lorca gives him a feeling of "[l]a desesperación, la altura, el mar, cosas no cerradas, abiertas de par en par, como si el pecho te explotara" (291).<sup>18</sup> We can see that wounds never have a chance to close, showing an openness that is the most severe constraint. He lives like someone who is in prison. Even so, "la partida consigue relajarlo, lo percibo en los músculos de sus brazos y su pecho, como si por fin pudiera mirarse y no ver *nada*" (190).<sup>19</sup> The same game that in Berger's eyes only makes him more of a monstrous figure bent on revenge helps El Quemado work through his trauma and, at the very least, gain some respite from his past.

## Conclusion

In *El Tercer Reich*, Bolaño presents a disabled body as a way to discuss historical trauma and political oppression. In this he is not alone: Julie Avril Minich has recently shown that the decolonization of disability is a crucial concern in Junot Díaz's work, in which characters' bodies "show the effects of poor nutrition, addiction, overwork, inadequate housing, and cancer" (Hanna, Vargas, and Saldívar 28). This pairing of disability and trauma must not immediately be rejected as one more version of ableist discourses of disability as tragic, especially when considering the history of violence and exclusion of the oppressed. Clare Barker and Stuart Murray argue,

Given that the history of colonialism (and its post/neocolonial aftermath) is indeed a history of mass disablement, and that the *acquisition* of disability may be tied into wider patterns of dispossession—the loss of family, home, land, community, employment—there is a pressing need, as we see it, to resist the too-easy censure of narratives that construct disability as loss. . . . What individuals in such circumstances experience as loss should not be rendered an invalid response by arguments that fail to recognize the wider contexts and material environments in which disablement occurs. (230)

A particularly relevant idea comes when they discuss the scars that are left on the bodies of oppressed people: "Disability metaphors may be meaningful not

just as ‘crutch[es]’ (Mitchell and Snyder, 49) in the telling of some ‘other’ tale of postcolonial experience, but as part of foundational cultural and historical disability narratives; the depiction of scars in narrative accounts of slavery is just one conspicuous example of this” (233–34). In this essay I have tried to show how Bolaño is aware of traditional narratives of disability as a tragic condition and of processes of enfreakment and sacralization of non-normative bodies. Unveiling and resisting such hegemonic and disempowering constructions of disability does not mean that Bolaño is willing to erase social and political contexts that oppress people, inscribe this oppression on their bodies, and turn them into agents that must negotiate the constant presence of the ableist stare. It is one thing to refuse to make of Lorenzo an allegorical stand-in for the mutilated Chilean national community under Pinochet; it is another to refuse to explore the complex network of exclusionary structures that will make Lorenzo go into exile and, later on, turn himself into Petra. Lorenzo does not become the freakish other in a sacralizing pornographic tale shaped by fear and anxiety, but instead is willing to turn himself into a freak in order to participate in a neoliberal narrative of normalization, heroic self-reliance, and benevolent globalization. When we turn to *El Tercer Reich*, we can see what kind of contribution can be made if we follow Antebi’s warning to engage in a careful, though still decontextualizing, translation of the concept of the freak to the field of Latin American studies. Berger’s willingness to turn El Quemado into a vengeful monster shows how the nineteenth-century conflation of the freak and non-white, non-European cultures is not gone. Recognizing enfreakment as one more form of colonial violence imposed on Latin American subjects may put a decontextualized concept to good use. In the hands of Latin American artists who construct a European gaze to unveil its workings, appropriating the concept of the freak may be one more way to resist that Eurocentric stare that turns Latin Americans into monsters while refusing to acknowledge or address their histories and personhood.

## Notes

1. Roberto Bolaño kept the manuscript of *El Tercer Reich* in a drawer from 1989 until his death in 2003 because he felt deeply unsatisfied with it. Although he did not mention it by its title, one may recognize *El Tercer Reich* in what he describes in an interview as his only unpublished novel, a four-hundred-page book that turned out to be “an unredeemable piece of crap” (Braithwaite 98; my translation).
2. As Mitchell and Snyder argue, “[c]ompensation narratives—or, rather, schemes of stigma-destroying superpower overcompensation—rule formulas of neoliberal explanatory systems. Such systems enshrine the body that is different yet enabled

enough to ask nothing of their crumbling, obstruction-ridden infrastructures, continually naturalized as environments made for most, but not by any means all, bodies. These enhanced supercrips are celebrated by post-Fordist capitalist cultures and socialist governments alike as symbols of the success of systems that further marginalize their ‘less able’ disabled kin in the shadow of committed researchers and policy-makers conjoined to technologized creaming practices for the *able-disabled*’ (59). Obviously enough, the prosthetic arms do not make Lorenzo one of these “enhanced supercrips,” but she still refuses to embrace the cyborg promise that prosthetics could embody by mocking it herself.

3. Here I am invoking Roger Caillois’s second chapter of *Man and the Sacred*.
4. As for another character in “The Part of the Critics,” Edwin Johns, the painter who cuts off his own hand to have it embalmed and placed in the middle of one his paintings, I would mention that Victoria Dickmann-Burnett understands his art project in terms of transability—that is, the desire to acquire a disabled body (125). I would refrain from considering him a freak, or, as I explain below in regard to Lorenzo, as someone who engages in a process of self-enfreakment. It is unclear to what extent his mutilation is actually related to consumer culture, and the display of his severed hand does not necessarily qualify as performance. At most, it is an abject trace of an originating act committed ob-scenely, behind the scenes. Johns’s act of self-mutilation is too complex to be reductively explained as (self-)enfreakment, and I will not attempt an analysis of it here.
5. “[A] startling story in which a woman finds vaginas and anuses growing, or rather opening, all over her anatomy, to the understandable horror of her friends and family (the story is set in the ’20s, but I don’t suppose it would have been any less shocking in the ’70s or the ’90s), and who ends up confined to a brothel for miners in northern Chile, where she remains, shut up in a room without windows, until in the end she becomes a great amorphous, uncontrollable *in-and-out*, finishes off the old pimp who runs the brothel along with the rest of the whores and the terrified clients, goes out onto the patio, and sets off into the desert (walking or flying, Pereda doesn’t say), finally disappearing into thin air” (66–67).
6. Thanks to *Purgatorio*, for instance, Zurita is strongly associated with the Atacama Desert, which stands at the center of a messianic discourse whose poetic appeal Bolaño recognized while at the same time completely rejecting it (Braithwaite 113). The uncertainty about whether this woman walks or flies into the desert reproduces Zurita’s mixing of land and sky in certain passages of the poem: “Helo allí Helo allí / suspendido en el aire / El Desierto de Atacama” (in Anna Deeny’s words in her excellent translation of the poem, “There it is There / suspended in the air / The Desert of Atacama” (40–41). For a more comprehensive reading of the relationship between *Estrella distante* and Zurita’s poetic work, see Williams.
7. “Lorenzo grew up in Chile without arms, an unfortunate situation for any child, but he also grew up in Pinochet’s Chile, which turned unfortunate situations into desperate ones, on top of which he soon discovered that he was homosexual, which made his already desperate situation inconceivable and indescribable” (72).



8. In this sense, whatever his accomplishments may be, Lorenzo's story is not a supercrip story. Sami Schalk recently identified "superlative language, scientific examination of the body and mind, continual comparison to a nondisabled person, suppression of negative emotions, suppression of privilege, emphasis on personal effort and attitude, depoliticization of disability, and appeal to a sentimental universal humanity as mechanisms of supercrip narratives" (84). Everything Schalk mentions here is absent in Bolaño's telling of Lorenzo's story. He does desire to leave Chile and works hard to achieve that goal, but Bolaño uses a straightforward, nonheroic, unsentimental tone that has nothing to do with the cloying glorification of the goals and endeavors of certain disabled individuals in supercrip narratives.
9. "[Lorenzo] could clean her [sic] ass after shitting, and very nicely too" (74–75).
10. Franklin Rodríguez summarizes Lorenzo's biography in these terms: "Petra (Lorenzo) is also a heroic character, homosexual and armless, a man who overcomes a lot of obstacles only to become annoying and banal" (211). My reading here goes in a different direction.
11. "[the arms] looked real and what he liked best was the way they made him feel like a robot or a cyborg in a science fiction film when he put them on and walked around" (75)
12. As Edgar Illas explains, "[t]ogether with the Mediterranean label, the embrace of Europe was another key component of the official marketing of Barcelona during the Olympics. On this point, Pasqual Maragall's local government, and Jordi Pujol's Generalitat, complemented each other, and both shared a Europeanist vocation that linked their respective agendas for Barcelona and Catalonia" (106).
13. "when Mariscal saw Lorenzo leaping about in his skin-tight Petra costume like an schizophrenic principal from the Bolshoi Ballet, he said: the Petra of my dreams" (75).
14. "No one is born like that, with such ravaged skin. At the same time, it was clear that the burns weren't recent. They probably dated back five years, or even more to judge by the attitude of the poor guy (I wasn't looking at him), who had clearly grown used to attracting the same interest and stares as monsters and the mutilated, glances of involuntary revulsion, of pity at a great misfortune. To lose an arm or a leg is to lose a part of oneself, but to be burned like that is to be transformed, to become someone else" (20).
15. "a monster but rather a thinking being."
16. In my analysis of the deranged fantasies of this German man who struggles so hard to make Nazi Germany win, I am obviously invoking Carl Schmitt. For the role that the opposition friend vs. enemy *may* play in politics, see *The Concept of the Political*. For the role of the sacred in modern secular political life, see his *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*.
17. "Poor boy. He lives in a perpetual prison" (182).
18. "Despair, heights, the sea, things that aren't closed, things that are partway open, like something bursting in the chest" (222–23).
19. "the game relaxes him, I see it in the muscles of his arms and chest, as if at last he's able to look at himself and not see *anything*" (140).

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