

After the Border Is Closed: Fascism, Immigration, and Internationalism in Ricardo A. Bracho's *Puto*

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Those who are against Fascism without being against capitalism, who lament over the barbarism that comes out of barbarism, are like people who wish to eat their veal without slaughtering the calf. . . . They are not against the property relations which engender barbarism; they are only against barbarism itself.

—Bertolt Brecht, "Writing the Truth: Five Difficulties" (1935)

When the US federal government sent paramilitary forces to Portland, Oregon, in 2020 to attack and arrest people protesting the racist police state, and particularly its extrajudicial killing of Black proletarians, some public intellectuals and politicians warned that the manner in which this repression of protest was carried out was a sign that the US could be "heading toward fascism."¹ Such exhortations, common during the presidency of Donald Trump, were symptomatic of a liberal discourse that cast his administration as an exceptional and singular threat to US "democracy" and civility, thereby whitewashing the US ruling class's long history of pursuing fascist and authoritarian modes of political management both within and beyond the borders of its nation-state. The myopia and nationalist provincialism of such discourses are put into stark relief when considering that the paramilitary forces sent to Portland were from a unit of the US Border Patrol that had participated in the US's imperialist warfare in Iraq and Afghanistan, and whose reputation for cruelty was earned from its brutalization and extrajudicial killing of Mexican proletarians.²

Violent and authoritarian modes of governance have been integral and systemic features of US elites' class warfare—particularly as it is exercised on the country's colonized and neocolonized populations; imported, racialized, and surplus workers; and those designated as political enemies. Indeed, Nazis considered the US's racist statecraft to be a precedent and model for their own project. They had particular admiration for the institutionalized anti-Black racism of Jim Crow; for the racist policies on immigration and miscegenation.

tion; and for the US's white supremacist colonial expansion and concomitant wars against Native Americans, which inspired Adolf Hitler's conception of *Lebensraum* (meaning "living space" or the territories, primarily to the East, that he wanted to colonize).³

Viewed internationally, "fascism" names a reactionary, repressive, and anti-democratic form of capitalist political management that has assumed varying forms in different social formations, sometimes opportunistically making use of institutions of bourgeois democracy. Historically, capitalist elites have used fascism to defend and enforce capitalist social relations, expand the rate of profit, undertake forms of primitive accumulation, manage crises of hegemony, and shift the burden of crises of accumulation onto the working and toiling masses.⁴ As an expression of capitalists' political class consciousness, fascism is fundamentally opposed to socialism and has been used as a weapon against it and other antisystemic movements.⁵ It is conceptually distinguished from authoritarianism, understood to primarily rely on an expanding state repressive apparatus, because of fascists' ability to secure active support from significant sectors of civil society, especially members of the petty bourgeoisie or historically privileged strata of the global working class.⁶ This is facilitated by fascists' mobilization of nationalist, racist, and other subhumanizing ideologies, including in the form of anticommunism—a process that is often bolstered by capitalist media and mass communications industries.

Writing from San Quentin prison, shortly before his assassination by the state in 1971, George Jackson described the USA as "the prototype of the international fascist counterrevolution."⁷ Like other Marxists, Jackson understood that fascism is an outgrowth of capitalism in a state of crisis, and an international phenomenon that must be analyzed as such.⁸ He and his contemporaries in the revolutionary Left saw evidence of the fascist or protofascist character of the US ruling class in the US state's racist and political repression, antilabor orientation, enormous prison system and secret police force, and demonstrated support of "every fascist and racist regime in the world."⁹ Jackson believed that international fascism had obtained a hegemonic basis within the US by the end of the 1950s because the wholesale political takeover by monopoly capital had been obscured by an illusion of democratic participation and ruling elites' formidable capacities for managing mass psychology.¹⁰

Pan-Africanists' and Marxists' earlier analyses of the fascist character of colonial governance and its role in bringing fascism to imperial metropolises further illuminates the interdependence of the US ruling class's (neo)colonial and imperialist endeavors and the forms of racial fascism it employs domesti-

cally.¹¹ When Aimé Césaire identified a similar interdependence in the case of European colonialism and interwar fascism, he also indicted the racism and dangerous complicity of those in imperial centers who absolve fascism and “shut their eyes to it” when it is deployed on the other side of imperial and racial divisions of humanity.¹²

These thinkers urge us to see the brutalities of colonialism and imperialism that undergird metropolitan liberalism (and its ideological supplement of bourgeois universalisms), as well as the deployment by nominally liberal-democratic states of fascist forms of governance. While liberal ideology casts fascism as diametrically opposed to liberal democracy, historically, liberalism and fascism have often operated in conjunction as complementary forms of capitalist governance (which are not equivalent to liberal states’ visible government).¹³ Ruling elites apply fascist forms of political management in “zones of internal exclusion within liberal-democratic societies (plantations, reservations, ghettos, and prisons).”¹⁴ Liberal states also govern fascistically in their expansionist, imperialist, and (neo)colonial endeavors, warmaking, and practices of pacification.¹⁵ However, liberal political theater provides cover for elites’ coercive management of certain strata of the global proletariat while helping to secure active support among other strata. This occurs both within and beyond the borders of individual nation-states.

Ultimately, what is at stake is not how we define “fascism” as a stand-alone concept. Césaire’s insight into the uneven acknowledgment of fascism, like his analysis of the racist hypocrisy of bourgeois “humanism,” neatly demonstrates that such concepts are weapons and sites of class struggle in theory. What matters is how methods and concepts used to analyze concrete social formations either obscure or illuminate the scope, causes, and agents of repressive modes of political management, and whether they account for *all* people or imply that it is only the brutalization of *some* people that merits recognition. Such considerations are particularly important for analyzing societies like the US, whose elites’ class warfare has always operated through the creation and management of (neo)colonial and racial divisions of humanity. Those discourses that cast as nascent or exceptional the barbarity of US capitalist rule court a myopic indignation that could be quelled if the jackboots, cages, and engineered suffering would be contained within the prisons, ghettos, black sites, reservations, and (neo)colonies.

A historical materialist and internationalist frame of analysis offers insight into authoritarian practices that are not new but taking on new dimensions in the current conjuncture of capitalist crisis. Immigrants’ struggles are crucial

to such an analysis. US-based capitalism's historical reliance on the exercise of extra-economic coercion against different segments of the global proletariat is not only evinced in the detainment, deportation, and racist terrorization of immigrants within the US but also in the US state's imperialist interventions in Latin America that have forced millions to migrate.¹⁶ As Justin Akers Chacón has argued, the repression of immigrants and refugees is a leading edge of international fascism in our current conjuncture, as it is used to build up police states, abet profiteering from repression, and proliferate racist ideologies and parastate violence.¹⁷ Moreover, the oppression of migrants—in the US and globally—evinces elites' increasing reliance on the militarized control of all workers to increase their exploitation.¹⁸

For these reasons, Ricardo A. Bracho's dystopian science fiction play *Puto* is an especially timely text. It is set in Los Angeles in a near future in which the US state has closed its border with Mexico, barred immigrants from obtaining US citizenship, and revoked the citizenship of felons and left radicals. Internal borders are used to police the mobility of those consigned to "ethnic catchment areas," and white supremacist gangs terrorize communists with impunity. *Puto*'s challenge to discourses about the aberrancy of the "Trump Era" is underscored by the fact that Bracho wrote the play in 2007.

Puto helps elucidate our current conjuncture because it reveals how social relations inherent to US-based capitalism and imperialism systematically produce racialized social hierarchies, racist state and parastate violence, militarism, and authoritarian modalities of social control. Césaire's critique of the uneven recognition of barbarism echoes throughout the play, as the dystopian future it imagines is simultaneously a depiction of US elites' class warfare, past and present. *Puto* thereby demonstrates that what may appear from one perspective as a potential fascist future is the reality faced today by persons rendered hyperexploitable or expendable. Revealing the material basis for such divergent perspectives in (neo)colonial class relations is central to *Puto*'s proletarian internationalist politics—one grounded in the understanding that members of the world's dispossessed majority share with each other fundamental class interests, as well as the potential for collective self-emancipation from exploitation and oppression. As I demonstrate, the play's portrait of our dystopian reality reveals the interrelated uses of citizenship, borders, criminalization, incarceration, and racism to control and divide the global proletariat and thereby intensify its exploitation.

Communist Revolution Every Weekend in Apartheid Los Angeles

Puto follows its eponymous protagonist as he navigates LA's militarized landscape over the course of twenty-four hours. Aboveground Puto is a successful art photographer. Belowground he is a counterfeiter—a trade enabled by his dual US-Mexican citizenship and access to dollars. This makes him a useful fellow traveler to CREW (Communist Revolution Every Weekend). The play's narrative arc follows Puto's transformation from a careerist beholden to his petty bourgeois class interests into a cadre of CREW.

The play opens with Puto waking from a postcoital nap to discover that his laptop and lover Smiles, a leader in CREW, have disappeared. Panicked, he calls his friend Ovíd, who is an “unemployed and unemployable immigrant art historian.” Driving to meet his friend, Ovíd complains, “that elitist sangana [jackass] Puto has it the easiest, dual citizenship before the binationalization of the economy, before they finished building the border wall, so he rides around just hoping Homeland Paramilitary stop him.” While Puto enjoys the mobility of a citizen, Ovíd's citizenship was revoked as punishment for his leftist politics, and he is confined to his local catchment.

When Puto returns home, he finds Knees, a leader in CREW, waiting for him. Puto had promised Smiles that he would set Knees up with a new identity upon her release from prison. She is a “Mexican immigrant con” and a beekeeper “who maintained one of [CREW's] first underground orchards.” Underground beekeeping is part of CREW's efforts to build autonomy and gain control over the production and distribution of food and resources.

Initially, Ovíd suspects that Puto's attachment to CREW is primarily libidinal, as Puto has had most of its members as lovers. Indeed, he makes good on his name, which is hispanophone slang equivalent to both “man whore” and “fag.” This *nom de guerre* is a point of pride, not derision, as Puto's voracious sexuality stands as a negation of bourgeois monogamist mores.

In *Puto*, whorishness is suspect only when it metaphorically represents characters' embrace of their own alienation as an imperative of individualist social ascension. Puto is also a *puto* in that sense, selling art that Ovíd considers “indianist porn” to international galleries. His friend Dalton best embodies the play's portrayal of professional artists as elite servants to elites (to adapt a phrase of Marilyn Minter's),¹⁹ as his art practice (which involves eating pie in his underwear for a webcam) is ironically depicted as titillating service work for a luxury market.

Puto repeatedly demarcates movement work from that of professional intellectuals and artists. At one point in the play, Puto must deliver a message from CREW to Lunar, who is Puto's contact from RUCAS (Revolutionary Underground Chicas Against the State), as well as Knees's ex-girlfriend. He meets her at a lesbian of color potluck that is peopled by artists and academics Lunar derides as "a check-writer bumper-sticker crowd." While Lunar's date Transam the Transman is impressed by Puto's artworld bona fides, Lunar tells Puto, "We don't trust your kind." Yet Puto has proved himself, and the secret message turns out to be a directive to induct him into CREW's inner circle before sending him on the next leg of his mission. CREW's instructions to Puto finally lead him to Smiles. Their passionate reencounter is brief, however, as Puto must leave the city on an undisclosed mission. He drives to the rural home of a movement leader, Rabbit, to deliver (to Puto's surprise) a queen bee. *Puto* ends with armed struggle on the horizon: with the sound of gunfire and bombs going off in a deep distance, Rabbit tells Puto, "Not to worry, mijo. That's our side."

My analysis of *Puto* is based on the final version of the script that was stage-read at the American Studies Association annual conference in 2014. It will be published in a collection of Bracho's plays edited by Richard T. Rodriguez. When I interviewed Bracho in 2015, he said he thinks that "*Puto* remains unproduced mainly because of its politics around sex and violence."²⁰ While representations of both are the commonest of commodities peddled by the culture industries, this does not include vindications of counterviolence against the capitalist state or representations of liberated sexuality.

Materialist Dystopian Realism

When I asked Bracho in an interview about the origins of *Puto*, he referred to popular mobilizations in LA against anti-immigrant legislation and the state repression with which they were met. He specifically named the May Day march he and I attended together in 2007 as the play's "abysmal point of inspiration":

By the end of that day, the second march ending in MacArthur Park ended in state violence. [The LAPD] had just gotten tricked out with all this new drone equipment and they were ready to play, and they airbag shot journalists on camera for a march that was ending. So, I really wanted to talk about that moment and place. The way to uncover that violence is to lift off its veneer and let it fully express itself. If we unmask it and let that grossly flourish, then we have the state as it is at the onset of that play.²¹

Puto is a work of realism in the specific sense Bertolt Brecht gave to this term when theorizing socialist artworks: it entails “discovering the causal complexes of society,” exposing dominant ideologies as impositions of the powerful, and “making possible the concrete and making possible abstraction from it.”²² Thusly defined by its political-ideological ends, this type of materialist realism can take up nonnaturalistic styles. Indeed, *Puto* produces aesthetic estrangement through dystopian speculation, literalized metaphor, and socio-scalar shifts.

Speculative fiction's ability to break from ideologies about historical progress enables historically grounded critiques of the present and representation of the coevalness and mutual imbrication of colonial, neocolonial, and neo-imperial time-space formations.²³ This is seen in *Puto*'s use of aesthetic tactics that shift the time-space coordinates through which “the present” is constructed in bourgeois ideology—typically via nationalist imaginaries and historical progress narratives. Like other contemporary science fictions from the US/Mexico borderlands, *Puto* historicizes the present to offer a vision of a possible (neo) colonial future.²⁴

Kim Stanley Robinson suggests that science fictions evince a stereoscopic aesthetics that combines a metaphorical representation of the present with a “proleptic realism” that portrays a plausible future.²⁵ He argues that many recent dystopian fictions fail to offer plausible visions of the future. Instead, they metaphorically represent, in exaggerated form, how the contemporary “moment *feels*, focusing on fear as a cultural dominant.” This contributes to an “all-encompassing hopelessness.”²⁶ Building on this critique, I argue that there is a crucial difference between speculative fictions that take subjective, affective responses to social phenomena as their basis for extrapolation, and realist fictions, like *Puto*, that identify underlying dynamics of class struggles and extrapolate upon these to produce plausible—and politically useful—visions of the future. Indeed, Bracho distances his work from the former approach. As he puts it, “There's a lot of feeling about feelings and those are suddenly now people's politics. I don't think so. . . . I'm a capital ‘M’ Marxist.”²⁷

While *Puto* offers a counterpoint to the complacency of other dystopian fictions, this is not because it engages in utopianism, which some scholars identify as science fiction's radical political potential.²⁸ The play represents communism and liberation from bourgeois mores as a potential within the present that could be realized through the kind of revolutionary praxis it depicts, not from ideas or desires disconnected from such praxis. This distinction is crucial in Marxist critiques of utopianism, which hold that utopianism is strategically ineffective for building socialism because it is philosophically idealist; it relies

on moral, rather than scientific appeals; it promotes an incorrect understanding of historical development; and it undermines efforts to “[make] a dialectical analysis of the present as a temporal dimension in which the future already appears as a potential.”²⁹ This is one reason why I differentiate the politics of *Puto* from that of José Esteban Muñoz’s idealist theory of queer futurity and utopianism.³⁰ The political claims Muñoz makes about utopian desires manifest in nonnormative affect and the hopes of undefined collectives and “solitary oddball[s]” are at odds with *Puto*’s vindication of the education of desire through organized political struggle, as well as its pointed differentiation of the latter from petty bourgeois individuals’ artistic practices or desires.

While *Puto* offers a critique of our social totality, it does not provide a blueprint for a radically different society. Instead, as its ending makes clear, it situates ongoing class struggle as the future’s horizon. Before returning to a detailed analysis of *Puto*, I provide a brief overview of the history with which the play, and this essay, are centrally concerned.

The War on Immigrants

The creation and superexploitation of migrant labor and the repression of immigrant workers are integral to capitalist accumulation in the current phase of the capitalist world-system. In the wake of the structural crisis of accumulation in the 1970s, the globalization of production and imposition of neoliberal economic policies, as well as immigration policies, were all used to increase the rate of exploitation, break out of class compromises won by labor in earlier cycles of struggle (e.g., the social welfare state), and weaken the power of labor vis-à-vis capital, including through the former’s “flexibilization.”³¹ This socioeconomic restructuring, as well as the violence through which it was secured and which it has generated, has forced millions of people to migrate. Neoliberal globalization has also stoked the demand among firms for low-wage “flexible” labor, that is, workers who can be easily fired and relocated, and to whom states and firms have little or no responsibility.³²

An intensified round of primitive accumulation has also swelled the ranks of migrant workers and of the global reserve army of labor.³³ As a permanent feature of capitalist accumulation, primitive accumulation has historically operated through colonialism, war, debt, enslavement, forced migration, and the transfer into private ownership of means of production that had been held in common, including the productive powers of the natural world.³⁴ These are means through which ruling classes have created and re-created a world market of labor suitable for their purposes.³⁵ As William I. Robinson notes,

this is “simultaneously the history of the racialization of global class relations through the creation by dominant groups of racial and ethnic hierarchies within the labor pools [and surplus populations] that the system has brought into being.” He argues that, since neoliberal globalization, transnational immigrant labor flows have largely “come to replace earlier direct colonial and racial caste controls over labor worldwide.”³⁶ In this context, the illegalization of humans’ mobility and the division of the global proletariat into citizens and noncitizens are particularly salient aspects in the racialization of class relations.

As dispossessed people migrate, “the elemental human freedom of movement” is subjected to state power so that states can “legally and politically produce and mediate the social and spatial differences that capital may then capitalise upon and exploit.”³⁷ Immigration policies direct immigrants to industries when their labor is needed and remove them when “they become superfluous or potentially destabilizing to the system.”³⁸ These policies make migrants into especially vulnerable and controllable workers by, among other things, maintaining their “condition of deportability.”³⁹ Making immigrant workers highly “controlled, disenfranchised, and legally vulnerable—and therefore atomized” renders their labor superexploitable, and the superexploitation of this segment of the global working class is leveraged to extract more profit from *all* workers.⁴⁰

The Mexican and Central American immigrants in *Puto* index the millions of persons who have migrated to the US from these regions because neoliberal economic engineering and state and parastate violence pushed them into the ranks of a swelling transnational reserve army of labor. In Mexico, neoliberal economic policies, including the liberalization of trade with the US, have functioned as part of a planned destruction of the peasantry, pushing peasants off their lands while concentrating land in the hands of transnational corporations.⁴¹ While displaced farmers were forced to migrate to cities in search of work, neoliberal restructuring also caused a decline in manufacturing jobs, as well as a major decline in wages for Mexican workers.⁴² As millions of people were expelled from their means of subsistence or of earning a wage, Mexico became the “number one labor-exporting country in the world proportional to its population.”⁴³ In Central America, brutal US-backed right-wing state terrorism, trade liberalization, and the modernization of agriculture also served as means of primitive accumulation, pushing peasants off their land and forcing massive emigration.⁴⁴ When the counterrevolutionary violence that made millions of people into refugees diminished, neoliberal restructuring continued to immiserate workers, forcing them to emigrate.⁴⁵

During the same decades when US-based members of the transnational capitalist class used the economic and military power of the US state to abet the imposition of neoliberal economic policies across the hemisphere—thereby creating conditions that forced people to migrate—they also intensified the repression of people who migrated to the United States. Since the 1970s, the US federal government has increasingly militarized the country's southern border, and since the 1980s, it has pursued policies that have revived and expanded the deportation and imprisonment of vast numbers of immigrants.⁴⁶ Policies put in place in the 1990s “laid the foundation for the vast criminalization of immigration infractions and for the sharp increase in the annual number of detentions and deportations” while curtailing “judicial review and due process in immigration cases.” Since that decade, immigrants imprisoned for unlawful reentry have been the fastest-growing sector of the US prison population, and since 2004, immigration prosecutions have accounted for the largest share of federal prosecutions nationwide.⁴⁷ The creation of the Department of Homeland Security in 2001 institutionally linked the policing of immigrants with counterterrorism politics, and the spread since 2005 of “zero-tolerance programs” targeting immigrants have spurred a huge increase in detentions and deportations.⁴⁸

The caging and militarized control of migrants is a growth industry expected to constitute a \$53 billion market by 2022.⁴⁹ It is a growing component of the US military-prison-industrial complex, which names not only a set of institutions but “a course of economic development and political decision making for the country.”⁵⁰ Border militarization and mass detention and deportation have opened up new markets for military industries, as well as those involved in building and running prisons and providing services within them, managing deportation logistics, and providing systems of surveillance.⁵¹ These corporations lobby policymakers to push for laws that further criminalize immigrants and expand the use of immigration detention.⁵²

Like the prison-industrial-complex more generally, punitive immigration regimes exemplify ruling groups' use of intensifying social control against a growing relative surplus population—that is, the sector of the global proletariat that has been locked out of formal labor markets. As elites' class warfare has dismantled states' social welfare functions, neoliberal states increasingly govern this part of the working class through forms of “repressive social control,” including incarceration, policing, and deportation, while racialized security ideologies are used to legitimate these forms of state violence and dehumanize their victims.⁵³

Shifting Scale and Internationalist Optics

The system of global apartheid I have described is metaphorically represented in *Puto*, where it is mapped onto the scale of a US city. This scalar shift renders evident the functions of citizenship, illegalization, and borders for controlling workers and enabling their exploitation. Meanwhile, with its proleptic “lens,” the play shows how these forms of social control could take on new forms within the US if immigration to the country were halted.

In *Puto*, Los Angeles's urban landscape is divided into “Homeland Defense Paramilitary Zones,” and movement across their borders is policed. This is first alluded to by Ovíd. Having been stripped of his citizenship because his politics are criminalized, he is confined to his local “ethnic catchment.” He asks to borrow Puto's leaf blower, and when Puto replies, “You don't have a yard,” Ovíd responds, “I just need to pose as a day laborer in order to make it past the Westside Border Patrol on Western. I need to go to the library.”

On the one hand, the internal border checkpoints that appear in *Puto* evoke the roadblocks police officers use to seek a reason to check the immigration status of drivers they have racially profiled (one manifestation of local law enforcement's collaborations with ICE).⁵⁴ Checkpoints appear dystopian in *Puto* because they are fully institutionalized forms of confinement and surveillance to which immigrants in the US are already subject on a more ad hoc basis. On the other hand, these internal borders evoke earlier historical examples of colonial and racist modes of labor control, including those used against Black US Americans and Black South Africans, as well as the internal passport system imposed on Chinese workers in the US in the nineteenth century. As such, the play points to the historical malleability and persistence of racialized confinement as labor control while emphasizing its contemporary deployment against immigrant workers.

LA's spatial apartheid in *Puto* also metaphorically represents international borders. Read as an allegory about transnational migration, Ovíd's plan to cross the Westside Border condenses references to two ways that states make immigrant labor superexploitable by juridically constructing it as a distinct category of labor in relation to capital.⁵⁵ The notion that Ovíd, a noncitizen, can be granted temporary passage into another catchment if it is to perform low-wage work recalls the bonded labor organized by guest worker programs, while the reference to day labor indexes the unregulated market for contingent labor into which undocumented immigrants are pushed because of their illegalization. Historically, guest worker programs, like the Bracero Program,

have created segregated groups of workers who are deprived of fundamental civil and political rights purportedly granted by liberal democratic societies. These “structures are now maintained by ‘illegality’ and the socially powerless workforce it provides.”⁵⁶

As this scene combines a speculative representation of a localized apartheid system with a metaphorical representation of the transnational formation of immigrant labor, it helps us see various ways in which state power has been used historically to enforce a social division of labor and relations of unequal exchange, organize rights-differentiated and racialized hierarchies among workers, and create pools of superexploitable and tightly controlled labor, both within the boundaries of single nation-states and through the use of international borders.

Citizenship, Incarceration, Racism, and Counterinsurgency

Prisons, immigration policy, crime policy, and citizenship all function to produce rights-differentiated social hierarchies that legally consign sectors of the global working class to militarized social control, hyperexploitation, precarity, and premature death.⁵⁷ This is represented in *Puto* as a demystified state apparatus that consigns immigrants, felons, ex-felons, and political dissidents to a servant class. Their mobility and access to dollars are restricted, and they are consigned to various forms of low-wage, contingent, and coerced labor. The fact that their subordinate civic status is codified by their being made, or kept as, noncitizens underscores the exclusionary characteristics of US citizenship and its function in producing inequality.⁵⁸ It also emphasizes the juridical and political manufacture of social stratification while sidelining the sundry ideologies (e.g., racist, nationalist, and those pertaining to criminality and security) that normally serve to naturalize this operation.

By speculating that felons and ex-felons could have their citizenship revoked, *Puto* emphasizes the central role played by the US carceral state in enforcing and legitimizing civic hierarchies in which certain categories of people, including immigrants, are “routinely denied a range of political and civil rights.”⁵⁹ This is accomplished not only by imprisonment but also through the “enormous prison beyond the prison”: surveillance and control of parolees and probationers, employment discrimination, lifetime bans on activities, banishment, and disenfranchisement, as well as de facto or de jure suppression of political participation.⁶⁰

Organizing and enforcing hierarchies of civic status and subjecting some groups of workers to extra-economic coercion (e.g., forced migration, vigilan-

tism, confinement, or the threat of these) are also means by which the bourgeois state plays a key role in organizing labor markets. *Puto* addresses this by marking out the relationship between prison labor and the illegalized labor of immigrants. In the play, felons become the workforce in industrial farming after the US closes its border with Mexico. Historically, convict leasing originated in the US with ruling groups' use of the state's repressive apparatus to maintain a supply of unfree workers after the end of legal slavery.⁶¹ Legal mechanisms, including vagrancy laws and Black codes, were used to incarcerate and proletarianize freed slaves, and by the late 1800s, mass incarceration had created an army of cheap labor—Black in its majority—that was leased to private businesses.⁶² This produced state revenues and put downward pressure on wages for all workers.⁶³ Restrictions that were placed on convict leasing in the early twentieth century were loosened in the 1970s, corresponding with the shift from Fordism and penal welfarism toward neoliberalism and the expansion of the carceral state.⁶⁴ The US agricultural industry, which has long relied on various forms of unfree labor, has responded to recent restrictions on immigration by expanding its practice of leasing convicts.⁶⁵ *Puto*'s speculative reference to "massive agri-prisons" in California's Central Valley is a wholly plausible extrapolation of this tendency. Most important, it highlights a shared logic at work in different ways the state creates pools of subjugated, superexploitable labor for capital. Indeed, the expansion of prison labor, the increased illegalization of immigrant workers, and the institutionalization of workfare all evince the expansion in the US since the 1970s of labor regimes in which workers have no right to organize or negotiate their wage.⁶⁶

While the practices of state violence and militarized social control I have discussed are often mapped onto previously established racial orders, they are also racializing practices themselves.⁶⁷ As ideologies of ascriptive difference that legitimize and naturalize social hierarchies, including the social division of labor, racial ideologies emerge from the practice of racism in concrete historical contexts.⁶⁸ Understanding racism as "the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death" offers a materialist basis for recognizing racist and racializing practices, even when those discourses employed to legitimize them—such as those pertaining to security, legality, or criminality—studiously avoid codified racial signifiers.⁶⁹ Indeed, the "flexibility and fungibility" of racial ascription is related to its pragmatism, particularly as this pertains to the "conscriptio[n], criminalization, and disposability of poor, idle, or surplus labor."⁷⁰ An internationalist and materialist analysis allows us to place racist violence "experienced inside US national boundaries within the larger context of US colonialism in the Americas" and to

see “how different populations have been sequentially racialized in the service of both an expanding rate of profit and the reproduction of US nationalism,” without equating their social positioning or historical experiences.⁷¹

As *Puto* addresses the use of state power to situate groups of people in rights-differentiated social hierarchies and stratified labor markets, it denaturalizes the production of criminalized and racialized social identities (e.g., illegal, terrorist). For instance, when Puto and Knees induct Ovíd into CREW, they explain how it will affect his relationship to the state by citing provisions from the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act that assert the legality of deporting or denying entry to persons the government categorizes as terrorists, as well as those who provide aid to organizations thusly classified. Ovíd asks, “So do I have to start dressing like Knees now that I’m a communist criminal?” Puto replies, “That’s criminalized communist, but no.” Puto’s corrective reformulation of Ovíd’s question exemplifies, in condensed form, how *Puto* denaturalizes identities the state deploys in its security discourses to show how these function as political tools.

This scene highlights the use of counterterrorism discourse and laws to expand legal channels for the state to exercise control over its political targets, criminalize antisystemic agents, and restrict social freedoms.⁷² Though neither CREW nor RUCAS engages in activities that could be considered terroristic from an ecumenical perspective, as revolutionary communists they are terrorists per the state’s use of antiterrorism law. *Puto*’s citation of counterterrorism provisions in the Immigration and Nationality Act specifically addresses the US state’s long-standing use of immigration and deportation policies as a bludgeon against radicals and labor organizing.⁷³ Indeed, the play repeatedly references the historical alignment of anticommunist repression and racist repression in the US.⁷⁴ While showing how the racist repression, control, and superexploitation of sectors of the working class are part and parcel of capitalist social relations, it also insists that the systematic repression of those who fight for the international working class functions to maintain these relations.

Puto’s references to counterterrorism politics show how their contemporary iterations abet authoritarian and fascist tendencies in the US ruling class. It also acknowledges that, domestically, the US’s twenty-first-century counterterrorism policies have been used to target antisystemic agents and racialized immigrants. The play is set in the historical context of the so-called War on Terror, an imperialist war that has provided a “seemingly endless military outlet for surplus capital.” In addition to generating enormous profits, it has also been used to legitimate new transnational systems of social control and the repression of political dissent in the name of security.⁷⁵ This has been demonstrated by the

use of counterterrorism laws to expand police control over public space, restrict civil rights, and establish “a mammoth policing apparatus designed to thrash popular resistance whenever its political directorate determines necessary, while infiltrating, monitoring and harassing political groups as a matter of course.”⁷⁶ Counterterrorism politics have also abetted the repression of immigrants. The idea of a “‘permanent war’ against an invisible and internal enemy” proved useful for the “interests of the well-funded anti-immigrant movement that has been striving to keep immigrant workers disenfranchised,” while both of the US’s corporate parties’ devotion to the War on Terror enabled a rightward shift in immigration policy after 2001.⁷⁷ Moreover, by expanding markets for industries based on repression and militarism, both anti-immigrant and counterterrorism politics materially support the expansion of the police state.⁷⁸

Contemporary US terrorism politics are also a project of racial formation that operates within the political economy of empire.⁷⁹ Having served to construct Arabs, Muslims, and South Asians as “racialized terrorist threats,”⁸⁰ counterterrorism politics have also proliferated “Brown Peril” discourses that criminalize and racialize Latin American immigrants and US Latinxs, as the manufactured phantom of domestic terrorism “has been refracted through the border phobic imagery of ‘invading hordes.’”⁸¹ Xenophobic discourses of the corporate media conflate the figures of “foreigner/ Latino/terrorist/gang-banger,”⁸² evincing the ideological concatenation of “enemy” groups that is key to logics of racialization.⁸³

According to William I. Robinson, anti-immigration racism serves multiple functions for global ruling classes in our current conjuncture of capitalist crisis and unprecedented social inequality. First, like terrorism discourse and other security discourses, it legitimates the expansion of the police state. This serves an increasingly important function of social control at a time when neoliberalism continues to erode the material basis for hegemonic domination. It also provides new opportunities for profiteering from repression. Second, anti-immigrant racism is a form of scapegoating that deflects attention from the fact that the global elite’s class warfare is the cause of the socioeconomic hardships experienced by working-class people in recent decades.⁸⁴ As many White workers in the US have experienced these hardships as a loss of the privilege they “have historically enjoyed within racially and ethnically segmented labour markets,” “political elites and state managers have attempted to reconstruct . . . the white racial hegemonic bloc” through which their domination has historically been secured. This takes the form of racism and xenophobia. One consequence of this—which is a third function of anti-immigrant racism—is the “spread of neo-fascist forces in civil society.”⁸⁵

Neofascist civilian forces appear in *Puto* in the figure of the WASP Ring, a gang whose name (an acronym for White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) associates it with white supremacist-organized private violence. When Knees alerts Puto to the fact that his apartment was creepy-crawled, she explains that “the WASP ring ordered it from the inside” because they do not want Puto to work with CREW. In a fantastical use of literalized metaphor, she and Puto are then attacked by the Ring’s minions: “wasps trained to kill.” They survive, but must abandon Puto’s apartment.

Through its use of literalized metaphor and socio-spatial juxtapositions, this scene addresses historical connections in the US between racist private organized violence, policing, and imperialist militarism. While the WASP Ring is a civilian gang, the figure of killer wasps also signifies state violence through its physical and linguistic evocation of armed drones. This concomitantly alludes to the increasing use of this technology in domestic policing.⁸⁶ As the WASP attack on the immigrant communists of CREW synthesizes these references, it underscores the historical collusion of the US state with white supremacist private (parastate) violence in attacks on immigrants, labor movements, and leftists.⁸⁷

Anti-immigrant vigilantism contemporary to Puto’s writing in 2007 included attacks on Latinx immigrants by the Ku Klux Klan, harassment of immigrant workers by the Save Our State (SOS) organization, and the media-oriented “border patrols” of the Minutemen Project, a nativist vigilante organization that gained the open support of neo-Nazi organizations and US politicians.⁸⁸ Despite vigilantes’ pseudo-populist appeals, the leadership and support of political and economic elites has been a consistent feature of racist vigilantism in the US.⁸⁹ This history stands as an example of ruling elites’ use of both state and parastate violence to discipline workers and enforce racialized class hierarchies. It also demonstrates that, as Nicos Poulantzas argues, in struggles between fascist and antifascist forces, the bourgeois state is not a distinct third force but an ally of the former.⁹⁰ In *Puto*, the WASP Ring and state are clearly aligned in their targeting of communists: immediately after they escape the killer wasps, Knees warns Puto about the possibility of being tortured by Homeland Security for information about CREW.

As armed drones are the paradigmatic technology of the US’s twenty-first-century warfare in the Middle East, the scene of the WASP attack evinces *Puto*’s metaphorical representation of the present in an internationalist key. With killer wasps serving as a multivalent metaphor for racist parastate violence, policing, and imperialist militarism, it represents the terrorization of immigrants and communists within the US as continuous with the US’s imperialist warfare

abroad, thereby pushing us to see the imbrication and alignment of domestic and international forms of class warfare.

Gay Communism against Queer Liberalism

Puto sharply critiques those who would forgo collective struggles for systemic change in favor of seeking individual benefits through complicity or complacency with an unjust system. This critique is aimed, in particular, at professional intellectuals and artists, Latinxs, and queers who seek inclusion within US Empire and its repressive and ideological state apparatuses.

When he is stopped at a catchment checkpoint, Puto encounters Carlos Moreno, a past trick of Puto's who has since become a Homeland Security officer. The fact that the only cop that appears in *Puto* is a gay Latinx exemplifies the play's anti-identarian refusal to equate individuals' politics with their ascribed identities. Puto rebuffs Moreno, calling him "Officer Charlie Brown-Noser" and saying "it's your job that got your nose so brown." Moreno defends himself by saying, "hey, I got a job, insurance and the security that my mom and tías [aunts] won't get deported. I can even marry a paísa [Mexican] and get his chunt [working-class Mexican] ass citizenship."

Moreno is a figure of the assimilation-oriented Latinx who seeks individual liberties and class ascension in exchange for deference to and defense of the US state's laws. Given his role in the social triage based on the distinction of criminalized persons from law-abiding ones, this scene suggests that the social function of this figure is to shore up the system of criminalization and repression that targets racialized minorities and immigrants. Indeed, this is precisely why activists and scholars argue that the use of discourses and tactics that valorize "innocence" in struggles to defend immigrants and prisoners actually buttresses the power of the police state by naturalizing criminalization.⁹¹ By tacitly enshrining the notion that persons worthy of collective defense *should not* challenge the US state and its laws, these discourses and tactics corral political demands toward incorporation into US Empire.⁹²

As Moreno names familial security and reunification via marriage as attractive liberties, this scene also critiques assimilationist gay rights advocacy for its entwinement with US militarism and nationalism. Despite its rhetoric of equality, liberal gay civil rights politics has bolstered neoliberalism and imperialism.⁹³ Firmly entrenched within the nonprofit industrial complex, this movement has promoted a political agenda that "recuperates institutions like marriage, the military, and the criminal punishment system by making them sites for freedom, inclusion, and equality and silencing the long-term

feminist, antiracist and anticolonial analysis of them as apparatuses of violence and control.”⁹⁴ In the context of the “War on Terror,” purported advocacy for gay rights within the US has provided new justifications for US imperialism and has been used to promote racism against Arab and Muslim peoples while pinkwashing the state’s military expenditures.⁹⁵

While Moreno’s defense of his decision to work for Homeland Security acknowledges the significant material benefits that employment by and alignment with the state offer to working-class people in a context where social goods and liberties have been made scarce, Puto reminds him that such pragmatism still involves an exercise of political agency. Puto says, “Hell, I could even live in the Hills with a thousand chunt lovers and paisa beloveds if I agreed to pass them off as my servants. We all got choices . . . and yours was to become Officer Charlie Brown-noser.” With this hypothetical scenario, Puto counters the naturalization of the nuclear family as the sole social structure deserving of state ratification. His statement also underscores the function of immigration policy for recruiting highly exploitable labor. US federal immigration policies that recruit labor through family reunification not only enforce participation in this heteronormative social structure; they also shift more costs of social reproduction onto workers and participate in the further dismantling of the welfare state.⁹⁶ Finally, by snubbing his past lover and reminding him of what he has “forfeited for that uniform and job security,” Puto suggests that Moreno’s assimilationist homonationalism constrains his sexuality, in addition to making him an enemy of the people.

Puto’s reproach of liberal assimilationist politics among Latinxs and queers correlates with its broader critique of the individualist pursuit of recognition and social ascension within a murderously unjust system, as well as with its assertion of the need for organized revolutionary struggle to dismantle that system. This is affirmed with its protagonist’s transformation from careerist fellow-traveler into a cadre of CREW. Going underground requires Puto to leave behind his lucrative art career, and he bemoans losing the lifestyle it had afforded him:

No more grants, no more gigs, no more openings, no art patrons. No champagne or even fucking cava or caviar . . . Now I am just a garden variety faux gangbang revolutionary arms runner. Shit, I should just rechristen myself Santo [Saint].

Puto’s comrades console him with the promise of a huge orgy when he returns from his mission, thereby tacitly asserting that saintliness has little purchase within their revolutionary movement.

The communist movement imagined in *Puto* embraces queer and liberated sexuality. This is expressed in the figures of not only Puto and Smiles but also Knees, Lunar, and the trans bar diva Diosita La Putita Mas Regia. Without romanticizing sexuality (e.g., as a revolutionary force in itself), *Puto* does suggest that sexual practice and desire have a place in revolutionary praxis. Puto's libido foment his involvement with CREW, and his search for his lover melds with his work for the organization and eventual transformation into a cadre.

Puto's liberationist sexual politics stand as a counterpoint to the queer liberalism and homonationalism it critiques. While addressing a plethora of sexual practices, the play does not represent these within identitarian framings, which are regularly marshalled to corral struggles and possibilities for human sexual freedom into the grammar of liberal pluralism.⁹⁷ Rather, it urges us to see the pursuit of sexual freedom and self-determination as integral to the communist struggle for human emancipation. In this way, it echoes insights and aspirations of activists and intellectuals who identified the material interconnections between sexual repression, heterosexism, capitalism, and imperialist militarism.⁹⁸ For example, anarcho-communist revolutionary Daniel Guérin argued that, because the social norms associated with Christianity and heterosexual marriage and reproduction uphold the capitalist social order, (homo)sexual liberation can be achieved only by "libertarian, anti-authoritarian, anti-state" communist revolution, which would succeed "not just in liberalizing attitudes, but . . . in transforming everyday life."⁹⁹ Mario Mieli of the Gay Liberation Front argued that the struggle for communism must include "the negation of the heterosexual norm that is based on the repression of Eros and is essential for maintaining the rule of capital over the species," while Third World Gay Revolution called for a revolutionary socialist society in which people would have the right of self-determination over their bodies and receive protection for "all human sexual self-expression and pleasure between consenting persons."¹⁰⁰

While Puto's sexual desire buttresses his fealty to CREW, the play also suggests that the experience of political struggle shapes his desires and means of pursuing them. The way sexuality figures into Puto's transformation into a revolutionary can be illuminated by understanding affective and sensorial needs as part of the potential for human self-realization that is constrained by capitalist social relations. As Rosemary Hennessy argues, capitalism constructs a plethora of needs that are "outlawed"—that is, proscribed or cast as illegitimate. These not only include things like food, health care, housing, and leisure time but also some humans' needs for sensation and affect.¹⁰¹ She argues for a politics that "links the human potential for sensation and affect

that the discourses of sexual identity organize to the meeting of other vital human needs,” which can be achieved only by “eliminating the social structures of exploitation that capitalism absolutely requires.”¹⁰² Thus we can read the arc of Puto’s radicalization as one in which his individual pursuit of outlawed needs is joined to a collective movement seeking total human emancipation.

The representation of Puto’s transformation from petty bourgeois fellow traveler to revolutionary cadre stages what Amílcar Cabral argues is the decision facing the revolutionary petty bourgeoisie: to either give free rein to its natural tendencies to become more bourgeois or “[commit] *suicide* as a class, to be restored to life in the condition of a revolutionary worker completely identified with the deepest aspirations of the people.”¹⁰³ After Puto chooses to do the latter and departs, his comrades toast him at a lesbian dive bar. When they telephone him as he is driving to the desert, it seems that love for the struggle is the synthesis of Puto’s creative, libidinal, and political drives. He tells his friend Diosita La Putita, “I think I found a new love or artform, or well, I don’t know what it is, but it is big!”

I have shown how a Marxist and internationalist perspective on contemporary class struggles, like that offered by *Puto*, brings into view the historical reliance of US-based capitalism on the exercise of racist, authoritarian, and fascist modes of governance against different segments of the global proletariat. Most important, an analysis of the systemic nature of ruling elites’ repression and violence, and attention to their material basis in the political economy of global capitalism, illuminates the very real connections among popular struggles that are so often siloed from each other via ideology. I have addressed myriad methods used to divide and stratify the global proletariat: from borders, prisons, and racism to offers of exclusionary inclusion in US Empire for freedoms and benefits purposefully made scarce. When considering this panoply of tactics, we would do well to remember that their breadth and power is proportional to—indeed, is a reaction against—the threat posed by our potential unity.

Notes

I thank Gabriel Rockhill for the many conversations that informed this essay, as well as for his keen editing. John Harfouch, Andrews Little, and Randy Williams offered key insights on earlier drafts. I am also grateful to the two anonymous reviewers and the Board of Managing Editors of *American Quarterly* for their helpful comments. Ania Loomba, Suvir Kaul, and Chi-ming Yang gave me feedback on this research at a crucial stage, and Ivanna Berrios, Devin Daniels, Steven Powers, and Claryn Spies provided invaluable research assistance. Ricardo A. Bracho gave me permission to teach and quote his

unpublished work, allowed me to interview him multiple times, and gave me important comments on this essay. He has generously discussed his work and ideas with me over the past twenty years, profoundly shaping my own thinking. My gratitude to and admiration for him cannot be overstated.

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