
Refusing the Referendum: Queer Latino Masculinities and Utopian Citizenship in Justin Torres' *We the Animals*

Marion Christina Rohrleitner



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ejas/11856>

DOI: 10.4000/ejas.11856

ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher

European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference

Marion Christina Rohrleitner, "Refusing the Referendum: Queer Latino Masculinities and Utopian Citizenship in Justin Torres' *We the Animals*", *European journal of American studies* [Online], 11-3 | 2017, document 15, Online since 26 January 2017, connection on 08 July 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/11856> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.11856>

This text was automatically generated on 8 July 2021.

Creative Commons License

Refusing the Referendum: Queer Latino Masculinities and Utopian Citizenship in Justin Torres' *We the Animals*

Marion Christina Rohrleitner

- ¹ On June 26, 2013, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down Section 3 of the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) and exactly two years later, on June 26, 2015, ruled all bans on same-sex unions unconstitutional. In doing so it created, for the first time in U.S. history, equal marriage rights for same-sex couples in all states, and changed the legal status and civil rights of members of the LGBTQ community in crucial ways, ranging from visitation rights to the granting of visas to international spouses, and from adoption to inheritance rights. The 2011 publication of Justin Torres's debut novel *We the Animals* performs queer Puerto Rican masculinity at the precise moment when the government first considers challenges to the constitutionality of section 3 of DOMA, as expressed by then Attorney General Eric Holder,¹ intersecting with an ever-growing hostility towards Latinx in the United States. While the most virulent recent anti-immigrant discourse has been targeting Mexican and Central American immigrants and their children, culminating in the passing of Arizona SB 1070 in Spring 2010, Puerto Ricans on the island, too, continue to be second-class citizens ineligible to participate in presidential elections and to apply for governmental relief from crippling debt. In ongoing limbo as a "unincorporated territory" (Soto-Crespo 101) of the United States since the Spanish-American War of 1898, and the "longest existing colony in the world" (Trías Monge 185), the condition of Puerto Rico always already queers the myth of an egalitarian, democratic nation.

A queer coming of age/coming out narrative, *We the Animals* features a first person narrator, the youngest of three brothers, who grows up in a working class home in upstate New York, and emerges as someone who rejects the very values that strive to "normalize" queer life via assimilation into legally defined and state-sanctioned

coupledom. Embracing “queerness as utopian formation” (Muñoz 26), the nameless narrator rejects the predetermined path of a puritanically “virtuous,” materialistically productive, culturally assimilated, and politically predictable American masculinity and citizenship, and ends his narrative with a vision of queer life that does not depend on majoritarian approval, but unapologetically celebrates the possibilities of a “queer planet” (Warner xvi). This way, Torres, via his narrator, creates a model of Latino masculinity that offers an alternative to assimilationist narratives of “Americanization,” and encourages readers to imagine a utopian space in which civil and human rights are not tied to compliance with heteronormative lifestyles.

I argue that the refusal of the novel’s unapologetically queer Nuyorican protagonist to be absorbed into a form of homosexual life that can be contained in the institution of monogamous marriage is closely connected to the refusal of a majority of Puerto Ricans in the 1998, and, to an extent, also in the 2012 referendum, to choose from only three sanctioned options: statehood, independence, or remaining a commonwealth or so-called Free Associated State. Puerto Rico’s colonial relationship to the United States is perhaps best understood in the odd legal terms used to define it: Puerto Rico is “foreign, in the domestic sense,” an “unincorporated territory,” neither a state nor an independent nation. Instead, Puerto Rico is a commonwealth in a nation that rejects an imperialist label and emphasizes, time and again, its exceptionalist stance, allegedly striving to only spread democracy and freedom among those whom Mark Twain ironically called “the person sitting in darkness” in his incisive critique of U.S. American imperialism during the Filipino-American War. The very terminology used to discursively conceal the truth about Puerto Rico’s commonwealth status as a colonial legacy can be read as a perversion of any notion of democratic citizenship. Puerto Ricans, citizens since the ratification of the Jones Act in 1917, can be drafted into the U.S. army, and yet are not allowed to vote in presidential elections. Puerto Ricans have been subjected to the hazardous impact of pharmaceutical corporations, and yet have no agency in determining the distribution of these corporations’ profits. The residents of Vieques have been exposed to sixty years of arms testing on their small island without any recourse to reparations. And because of Puerto Rico’s status as a commonwealth, the current debt crisis leaves the island’s inhabitants without access to government bailouts.

In *Insularismo*, Antonio S. Pedreira suggested as early as 1935 to think of Puerto Rico as a malleable “borderlands” rather than as either a sovereign state or a colony of the United States. Building on Pedreira, Luis Muñoz Marín, the founding father of modern Puerto Rico, thought of the Estado Libre Asociado (ELA) as a “new decolonial state” (Soto-Crespo 9), whose positionality as a borderlands between the United States and the nations of the Caribbean could use the oxymoron of being “foreign in a domestic sense” to its advantage, as a means of rejecting that the only path to independence and self-reliance was an uncritical embrace of nationalistic ideologies. Soto-Crespo explains, “it is in this sense of being included but not incorporated into the American Union that I refer to Puerto Rico as a borderland state” (13). Walter D. Mignolo’s application and extension of Gloria Anzaldúa’s “new mestiza consciousness” to an even more inclusive “border gnosis” as an epistemology that is not confined to a particular geographical and historical location, is especially productive when thinking about the larger impact of contemporary queer Puerto Rican writing. The rejection of non-normative relations safely contained in monogamous, state-sanctioned marriage by queer activists insists on a space that is anarchic and cannot be controlled by the state,

even if this rejection also results in daily grievances and discriminatory exclusions. Overt and covert modes of exclusion put Puerto Ricans on the margins of the US-American body politic, similar to the second-class status many members of the LGBTQ community continue to experience. The referendum—a socially acceptable form of expressing political dissent—appears to be a perfectly rational tool for Puerto Ricans to facilitate change. And yet, the refusal of the very institution of the referendum is also a refusal to accept the rules of the game as outlined by a hegemonic force.

Prior to the publication of *We the Animals* in September 2011, three referenda were held in Puerto Rico with regards to Puerto Ricans' preference over the future of their island as either an independent nation, a full state, or maintaining the status quo as a Free Associated State. According to the Puerto Rico State Electoral Commission, an overwhelming majority (over 60% of the electorate) voted in favor of preserving the status quo in 1967. In 1993, a very slight majority supported the commonwealth over statehood, but in 1998, 50.5% of voters tellingly chose the option "none of the above," closely followed by those in favor of statehood. In 2012, barely one year after the publication of the novel, the last referendum to date resulted in 61.15 % voting for the first time in favor of statehood over a Free Associated State. However, even this most recent result is not as clear as it may seem at first sight, because some 470,000 voters left the second question, with regard to the preferred alternative option, blank.² Thus, in effect only about 45% of the electorate actively supported statehood. Each result reflects a specific historical moment and economic reality for Puerto Ricans, but the result I am most interested in here is the majority vote in favor of the "none of the above" options from 1998. This anarchic vote best mirrors the condition of the narrator of the novel, who not only refuses to embrace the heteronormative world of his father and brothers, but also rejects an equally normative limitation of queer life contained by monogamous marriage.

By choosing "none of the above," the Puerto Rican electorate refused the very idea of referendum and the terms in which it was presented to them. Since all three options leave Puerto Ricans without a vision of belonging that challenges nationalistic, and heteronormative, paradigms, checking "none of the above" allows, in fact, a space for utopian citizenship. Similarly, the narrator of *We the Animals* intentionally places himself outside of the norm, and embraces a world of outcasts and mongrels, where he strives, for the first time, to walk "upright, upright" (125) at the end of the novel. Even though this promise is made with speech impeded by the slurring brought on by heavy doses of medication intended to "cure" his non-conformist attitude, he vows to stand up for himself this time.

Stefano Harney's and Fred Moten's work in *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* and José Esteban Muñoz's notion of queer futurity in *Cruising Utopia* offer useful frameworks for a politics of refusal in a queer Puerto Rican context as strategies not of passive resistance, but as practices of active dissent that open up spaces for utopian forms of citizenship. In his introduction to *The Undercommons*, Jack Halberstam summarizes the queer project as follows: "[we] refuse to ask for recognition and instead we want to take apart, dismantle, tear down the structure that, right now, limits our ability to find each other, to see beyond it and to access the places that we know lie outside its walls" (7). This refusal to operate within the given parameters of allegedly democratic structures applies to both Puerto Rican and queer rejections of participation in existing hegemonic institutions. Harney and Moten go even further in

their astute analysis of the power of refusal, and state, “[w]e surround democracy’s false image in order to unsettle it. Every time it tries to enclose us in a decision, we’re undecided. Every time it tries to represent our will, we’re unwilling” (19). The unwillingness of some members of the Puerto Rican electorate to follow the rules outlined by a colonialist state in the 1998 and 2012 referenda is a powerful illustration of such queering practices.

Inspired by Soto-Crespo’s claim that the Puerto Rican “state form [is] specifically designed to undercut nationalist ideology” (58), I suggest that Justin Torres’s narrator, too, undercuts the nation state’s relentless attempts at containing queer Nuyorican bodies. His coming-of-age queer account offers a counter-narrative to the allegedly universal desire for inclusion into the nation state, and its smallest unit, the nuclear family, and instead calls for an unsettling and uncomfortable, yet proud and defiant identity outside of the normative paths. Rather than seeing Puerto Rico’s political location in limbo as always already detrimental, a queer perspective thus allows us to read its in-betweenness as potentially full of utopian possibilities.

While passive resistance, demonstrations, and negotiations are all considered accepted political modes aiming at effecting social change, outright refusal is usually linked to an anarchic attitude and, by extension, to a lack of rational engagement—in short, madness or “abnormality.” Puerto Rico is indeed an “anomaly” (Soto-Crespo 2), an entity that is neither fully a colony nor fully sovereign, a place in between that defies mutually exclusive binaries, highlighting the very absurdity of such Manichean thinking—in other words, a queer place. Similarly, the Nuyorican first person narrator in *We the Animals* embraces what Lázaro Lima has called a “queer Latino aesthetics.” According to Lima,

Indeed, both the terms ‘Latino’ and ‘queer’ mark a contestatory relationship to the state. The state continues to take an active role in enforcing the discrimination of Latinos and queers through laws and, less directly, but no less influentially, through the stigma that makes both vulnerable to other slights that mark them with the scarlet letter of cultural and political inferiority. (6)

- 10 Puerto Rico is simultaneously of and not of the nation, and while some long to either fully belong to the United States or be on their own, many Puerto Ricans also seem to see the utopian possibilities of lingering in limbo.

The novel’s narrator and main protagonist grows up embedded in a nuclear working class family, the son of an island-born Puerto Rican father and a US-born white American mother, who struggle to preserve their, however abusive, marriage and to provide for the narrator and his two older brothers, Manny and Joel. The narrator refers to his family as his “pack,” fiercely protective of each member and depending on obedience and loyalty to its leader at all cost; while Paps’s machismo determines the traditional gender roles in the family early on, his absences and temporary abandonment of the family force Ma into the role of provider, and her breakdowns and mental frailty cast her sons in the role of nurturing caretakers. An unnamed interlocutor in Warner’s introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet* powerfully summarizes this ambiguous role of the ethnic family for queer individuals: “As a gay man of color I find certain aspects of my identity empowered and fortified within the space of the ethnic family, while other aspects of my identity are negated in that very same space. I fall in between what seems to me a split between the racially marked family and the white queer” (xviii). The ethnic family is simultaneously a space where cultural difference, for example gender roles that are clearly outside of the US-American

mainstream, can be celebrated, as well as a space where heteronormativity is strictly enforced via an equation of heterosexual masculinity with *puertorriqueñidad*.

Importantly, the young narrator's coming out is not the only queer story in this novel. Ma, the narrator's mother, suffers a mental breakdown after her husband, the father of her three sons, leaves the family, and casts her in the role of sole provider. When their mother is incapacitated from grief, the sons witness how Ma's supervisor Lina stops by and becomes the protective and gentle lover Paps has never been able to be:

'Comrade!' she hollered, stepping over us, and Ma came running, throwing herself into Lina's big arms, burying her face in Lina's silky black hair.... Then Lina started kissing Ma all over, soft little kisses, covering Ma's whole face with them, even her nose and eyebrows. Then she put her lips on Ma's lips and held them there, soft and still, and nobody—not me, not Ma, not Joel or Manny, nobody—said a word. There wasn't a word to say. (32)

- 13 The lived experiences of “the pack” thus begin to deconstruct any preconceived notion of normative family life long before the narrator is violently outed; this deconstruction of “mainstream” American life significantly also operates across racial lines as well, when the white American mother of Puerto Rican sons is kissed passionately by her Chinese American co-worker.

After the narrator's family reads his diary, in which he details his sexual fantasies of masochistic submission and humiliation, he confronts them with helpless anger at this transgression of his privacy, knowing that this will be, in effect the end of his childhood embedded in a however troubled nuclear family, a member of his pack of brothers:

This was our last time all five in the rooms together. I could have risen; I believe they would have embraced me. Instead, I behaved like an animal.... I bucked and spat and screamed my throat raw. I cursed them: we were, all of us, sons of whores, mongrels, our mother fucked a beast.... I said and did animal, unforgivable things. What else, but to take me to the zoo? (118)

- 15 The zoo is the mental health facility where the narrator is taken upon his enraged breakdown after his family discovers his diaries and realizes the extent of his “depravity.”

As the novel's last vignette, this final paragraph offers a complex image of the Puerto Rican outcast:

These days, I sleep with peacocks, lions, on a bed of leaves. I've lost my pack. I dream of standing upright, of uncurled knuckles, of a simpler life—no hot muzzles, no fangs, no claws, no obscene plumage-strolling gaily, with an upright air. I sleep with other animals in cages and in dens, down rabbit holes, on tufts of hay. They adorn me, these animals—lay me down, paw me, own me—crown me prince of their rank jungles. 'Upright, upright,' I say, I slur, I vow. (125)

- 17 The narrator's relationship to his new “familia from scratch” is full of ambiguity. He enjoys the admiration of a wide range of his fellow zoo animals, who crown him their princely ruler, much like Max is chosen to rule over the wildlings in Maurice Sendak's gorgeous 1963 children's book *Where the Wild Things Are*, and yet he also maintains his distance from them, knowing that he will not succumb to their social rules either. As Warner suggests, “Following Hannah Arendt, we might even say that queer politics opposes society itself” (xxvii); the narrator of *We the Animals* chooses a world all to himself, and refuses to be lulled by a society that even seems to take to him.

Jack Halberstam, tellingly begins his foreword to *The Undercommons* with a discussion of *Where the Wild Things Are*, and the importance of the “wild things” refusal to comply with normative social relations. Halberstam emphasizes the importance of acknowledging and giving space to the untamable wild in any human existence: “Listening to cacophony and noise tells us that there is a wild beyond to [sic] the structures we inhabit and that inhabit us” (7). He then suggests, “In order to bring colonialism to an end then, one does not speak truth to power, one has to inhabit the crazy, nonsensical, ranting language of the other, the other who has been rendered a nonentity by colonialism” (8). What better space to “inhabit the crazy” than the zoo, and where else to practice the “ranting language of the other” than in the company of the ultimate, non-human others—animals? And yet, it is the animals, the eternal others, the mad, the imprisoned, who teach both the narrator in *We the Animals*, and Max, who they really are.

In Sendak’s story, Max grows up while living with the “wild things,” and they make him their ruler. Only after Max realizes that this pack is yet another confinement, this time with different rules and regulations, does he decide to return to his home. The importance of anarchy, of letting the wild things be wild, without attempting to contain their unpredictable behavior by taming them is at the heart of Sendak’s narrative. The boy leaves the wild things behind and returns to his room changed. He is now free from his fear about the “wild things” that inhabit him and no longer feels the need to control them; instead, he has learned to appreciate them in their very wildness, and is consequently able to allow space for the wild as a creative force within himself.

The narrator of *We the Animals*, too, is crowned a prince by his fellow zoo animals, who, he states, also “lay me down, paw me, own me.” This other kind of compromising cage makes him long for his ability to stand “upright”—to live as he wishes, unapologetically, his head held high—and being fetishized by his newly found community is threatening to become yet another kind of confinement. Standing “upright,” without the need to constantly defend himself against a hostile environment and bound neither by heteronormativity nor by the reproduction of racist, classist, sexist, or ageist bias in the LGBTQ community, the narrator moves from a drug-induced “I slur” to a proudly affirming “I vow”—ending his coming of age narrative with a promise to himself to not bend to anyone else’s rule.

This proud, determined commitment to only stick to his own ethics is anticipated by, and perhaps only made possible after enduring a severe power struggle with Paps. The narrator’s Puerto Rican father comes to represent a violent machismo on the one hand, and a tender potential inherent in a Latino masculinity that is constantly threatened by colonial emasculation on the other hand. Paps, whose domestic abuse has shaped the narrator’s childhood as much as his father’s random acts of kindness towards his mother and brothers, gives his son a bath—a profoundly intimate gesture that is, however, wrought with uneven power dynamics that are intrinsic to a heteronormative society:

‘I’m an adult,’ the boy says. ‘I got rights.’

‘Everybody’s got rights. A man tied to a bed got rights. A man down in a dungeon got rights. A little screaming baby got rights. Yeah you got rights. What you don’t got is power.’ (120)

- 22 In this passage, the narrator makes explicit the vast difference between having civil and human rights in theory, and being able to claim, access, and defend them in

practice. Only if power relations shift, will the narrator's rights on paper be worth anything. Unless he can gain access to power, or refuse the very structures that create hierarchical power structures to begin with, rights are nothing but a fantasy, a specter on the horizon.

And yet, in the face of utter annihilation, it becomes even more important to maintain a vision of a utopian life outside of the narrow limitations of the condoned and possible. Halberstam elaborates, "[f]or Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, we must make common cause with those desires and (non)positions that seem crazy and unimaginable: we must, on behalf of this alignment, refuse that which was first refused to us and in this refusal reshape desire, reorient hope, reimagine possibility and do so separate from the fantasies nestled into rights and respectability" (10-11). Refusal of the suggestions and terms offered by the (hetero)normative mainstream is necessary to allow for "a horizon of possibility" (Muñoz 97) that can facilitate actual change.

A separation from "fantasies nestled into rights and respectability" seems counterintuitive for any activism intended to effect social change. And yet, Nuyorican writers most closely associated with the Nuyorican Poets' Café and the Young Lords movement have a longstanding tradition of refusing US-American myths surrounding national identity, equal opportunity, and masculinity, a tradition that Justin Torres inherits and which he actively engages in his work. Two founding figures of the Nuyorican Poetry movement, Miguel Algarín and Pedro Pietri, have already redefined and rewritten the American Dream and heteronormative American masculinity in their poems. In "Puerto Rican Obituary," for example, the Puerto Rican migrant workers never refuse, never deny, and never stop believing in the American Dream. They pay the ultimate price and yet remain unacknowledged and marginalized:

They worked
 They were always on time
 They were never late
 They never spoke back
 when they were insulted
 They worked
 They never took days off
 that were not on the calendar
 They never went on strike
 without permission
 They worked
 ten days a week
 and were only paid for five. (3)

- 25 Struggling to be accepted, and attempting to assimilate into the US-American mainstream at all cost, "Juan, Miguel, Milagros, Olga, Manuel" are never considered to be part of the American citizenry in spite of their massive contributions to literally building the US-nation: "Proud to belong to a community / of gringos who want them lynched/Proud to be a long distance away / from the sacred phrase: Que Pasa." They can find solace only upon returning to the island as ghosts, where "to be called negrito / means to be called LOVE" (12). The unnamed narrator in *We the Animals* refuses to participate in the rat race of US-American competition for material goods; instead, he chooses the zoo, an anarchic space that allows him to experiment with pleasure and desire without caring about the accumulation of material wealth or the norms set up by a society that rejects him. Puerto Rican queer identity, here, is not akin to death; instead, it is a place where a racist slur is transformed into a space of playful affection.

Mongo Affair, a 1975 collection of poems by Piedro Pietri's fellow Nuyorican poet Miguel Algarín, also explicitly addresses the intimate connection between non-normative Puerto Rican masculinities and Puerto Rico's subordinate status as a Free Associated State of the United States. Most critics have read the impotence that plagues the lyrical I as a sign of Puerto Rico's inability to stand up against US-domination, and a cursory look at a key passage seems to substantiate this claim:

mongo can only tease
but it can't tickle
the juice of earth vagina
Mongo es el borinqueño
Who's being moved
To the inner-city jungles
...
who cleans, sweeps, crawls
gets ripped off (87-88)

- 27 The "mongo" is passive both sexually and in his mobility; he is "being moved" rather than moving himself, and his role is that of one who "teases" rather than penetrates. From a nationalist perspective, which insists on a traditional and forceful definition of masculinity, the "mongo" is a failed and pitiful image of an impotent Puerto Rican male.

Miguel Algarín's mongo, by only "teasing," provides pleasure that does not result in intercourse and procreation, as penetration might; the mongo's ambiguous sexual orientation may also play a role; his fluid sexuality and his lack of desire to "fertilize" the "earthy vagina," enable him to offer a kind of sexual pleasure that is detached from a focus on reproduction and the heteronormative nuclear family. Perhaps mongo's passivity is a conscious choice, and a willful embrace of a masculinity that can be in a sexually passive role, rather than a sign of weakness and defeat. This new image of a Puerto Rican masculinity resurfaces in *We the Animals*. When the main protagonist awakens to his non-normative sexuality in his acts and in his imagination, he frequently casts himself as a passive partner, as a masochist whose very act of submission provides him the pleasure he craves:

In bold and explicit language I had written fantasies about men I met at the bus station, about what I wanted done to me. I had written a catalog of imagined perversions, a violent pornography with myself at the center, with myself obliterated. (116)

- 29 His first sexual experience takes place at an equally non-sanctioned site, a bus terminal in the middle of a nightly blizzard. The anonymous driver's "cold thick fingers wormed past my waistband; I held still. 'You want me to make you,' the driver said. 'I'll make you. I'll make you.' And I was made" (114-115). The passive voice dominates: "done to me," "obliterated," and "was made," and yet the speaker is not a hapless victim of sexual violence; on the contrary, he is placed at the center of the experience, and is in control of what he wanted to be done at all times. The satisfaction the young narrator gets from these sado-masochistic encounters reveal a power dynamics that is much more complex than a one-directional and straightforward perpetrator / victim, or "colonizer / colonized" relationship.

Similarly, a queer reading of *We the Animals* can provide an alternative interpretation of the narrator's isolation, and firmly places JustinTorres in a tradition of queer Puerto Rican writing. The narrator keenly feels his distance from his brothers,

which is a result not only of his budding sexuality, but also his intellectualism, his interest in the larger world beyond the safety of a clearly defined nuclear family: this difference, to the brothers, signifies his lack of commitment to their ethnic Puerto Rican and working class background, and his impending departure from the pack: “They smelled my difference—my sharp, sad, pansy scent. They believed I would know a world larger than their own. They hated me for my good grades, for my white ways. All at once they were disgusted, and jealous, and deeply protective, and deeply proud” (105). And yet, their fears are also the result of a profound recognition of their brother’s ability to negotiate and inhabit both worlds, and more. Similar to ardent Puerto Rican nationalists, who tend to consider those in favor of statehood or the commonwealth traitors to the cause, the brothers recognize at the same time that their brother’s choice to leave opens up new opportunities and vistas for Puerto Rican identity to develop, possibilities that they wish for all Puerto Ricans to be had.

Once the narrator’s sexual orientation and practices are revealed to his family, the tone of the narrative shifts, and becomes allegorical. In the chapter “Dawn,” the previously highly specific father, whose Puerto Rican background had determined all of his interactions with his family, simply becomes “a father” (119), and the carefully constructed first person voice is replaced with a distancing third person: “The boy’s chin begins to chatter” (119). The chapter addresses the readers with an inciting “Look” and invites an intimate gaze that implicates the reader in a voyeuristic act—another non-sanctioned site of non-reproductive sexuality. Temporal chronology is suspended, and we exist in the perpetual present: “Now the father lathers the cloth. Now the son can only wait” (119).

Upon the gentle gesture of bathing his son who just experienced a breakdown, the father reassures the mother, who has assumed the role of silent and passive observer, “We’re going to get him fixed up” (123)—a promise that normative order shall be restored shortly by an expert institution. The narrator’s pack of now alienated brothers are “happy and thankful to have simple work [of cleaning out the driveway] ahead of them” (123), whose formerly very physical homosocial relationship now requires a new formality, lest they, too, run the danger of becoming “animals.”

Aside from the zoo, there is another, more empowering, space available to queer Puerto Ricans such as the narrator of *We the Animals*, a place that may also be replete with masks and cages, but of a different kind. In his moving tribute to the 49 young men and women, many of them of Puerto Rican descent, who were murdered at a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida, on June 12, 1916, Justin Torres celebrates the power of “Latin night at the queer club” as a space of complete freedom, and contrasts the protected world inside, with the racist, classist, and homophobic threats from the outside, tellingly showing their intimate connection to the economic catastrophe experience by Puerto Ricans on the island in 2016:

Outside, there’s a world that politicizes every aspect of your identity. There are preachers, of multiple faiths, mostly self-identified Christians, condemning you to hell. Outside, they call you an abomination. Outside, there is a news media that acts as if there are two sides to a debate over trans people using public bathrooms. Outside, there is a presidential candidate who has built a platform on erecting a wall between the United States and Mexico—and not only do people believe that crap is possible, they believe it is necessary. Outside, Puerto Rico is still a colony, being allowed to drown in debt, to suffer, without the right to file for bankruptcy, to protect itself. (n.pag.)

- 34 This hostile outside world is juxtaposed with the safe, celebratory, and openly transgressive space inside the club, which refuses to succumb to any norms. As Jose Esteban Muñoz put it, “queer culture, in its music and iconography, often references salvation... and there is indeed something about the transformative powers of nightlife that queers and people of color have always clung to” (108). Torres, in his moving tribute, echoes Muñoz’s take on the queer nightclub as the stage for queer performance, and as a space in which hope, defined as “the emotional modality that permits us to access futurity” (Muñoz 98) defies not only an oppressive, one-dimensional status-quo, but death itself:

But inside, it is loud and sexy and on. If you’re lucky, it’s a mixed crowd, muscle Marys and bois and femme fags and butch dykes and genderqueers. If you’re lucky, no one is wearing much clothing, and the dance floor is full. If you’re lucky, they’re playing reggaeton, salsa, and you can move.... Lap the bar, out for a smoke, back inside, the ammonia and sweat and the floor slightly tacky, another drink, the imperative is to get loose, get down, find religion, lose it, find your hips locked into another’s, break, dance on your own for a while—but you didn’t come here to be a nun—find your lips pressed against another’s, break, find your friends, dance. The only imperative is to be transformed, transfigured in the disco light. To lighten, loosen, see yourself reflected in the beauty of others. You didn’t come here to be a martyr, you came to live, papi. To live, mamacita. To live, hijos. To live, mariposas.... But for a moment I want to talk about the sacredness of Latin Night at the Queer Club. Amid all the noise, I want to close my eyes and see you all there, dancing, inviolable, free. (n. pag.)

- 35 Uncompromising, unapologetic queer life that neither strives to cater to nor longs to be accepted into a Puritanical mainstream is celebrated at the queer dance club; it is one of the sacred spaces the novel’s narrator will find where he will be able to walk, and dance, “upright, upright” and choose whose prince he wishes to become for one night, or many more. The queer Puerto Rican narrator’s refusal to be confined to one of a few socially sanctioned and predetermined choices allows him to experience a diverse and contradictory “horizon of possibility” (Muñoz 97), not a zoo, but an island where the “wild things” roam freely.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Algarín, Miguel. *Mongo Affair*. New York: Nuyorican Press, 1978. Print.

Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands—La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Press, 1987. Print.

Arrizón, Alicia. *Queering Mestizaje: Transculturation and Performance*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006. Print.

Halberstam, Jack. “The Wild Beyond: With and for the Undercommons.” *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*. Wivenhoe, New York, and Port Watson: Minor Compositions, 2013. 2-12. Print.

Halley, Janet and Andrew Parker, eds. *After Sex: On Writing Since Queer Theory*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2011. Print.

Harney, Stefano, and Fred Moten. *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*. Wivenhoe, New York, and Port Watson: Minor Compositions, 2013. Print.

Lima, Lázaro. "Introduction: Genealogies of Queer Latino Writing." *Ambientes: New Queer Latino Writing*. Ed. Lázaro Lima and Felice Picano. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2011. 3-13. Print.

Mignolo, Walter D. *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000. Print.

Moreno, Marisel. *Family Matters: Puerto Rican Women Authors on the Island and the Mainland*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012. Print.

Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York: New York University Press, 2009. Print.

Pietri, Pedro. "Puerto Rican Obituary." *Selected Poetry*. Ed. Juan Flores and Pedro López Adorno. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2015. 3-12. Print.

Rodriguez, Juana Maria. *Queer Latinidad: Identity Practices, Discursive Spaces*. New York: New York University Press, 2003. Print.

Sendak, Maurice. *Where the Wild Things Are*. New York: Harper Collins, 1988. Print.

Soto-Crespo, Ramón E. *Mainland Passage: The Cultural Anomaly of Puerto Rico*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009. Print.

Torres, Justin. *We the Animals: A Novel*. Boston and New York: Mariner Books, 2011. Print.

---. "In Praise of Latin Night at the Queer Club." *The Washington Post*. 13 Jun 2016. Web. 15 Jun 2016.

Trías Monge, José. *Puerto Rico: The Trials of the Oldest Colony in the World*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997. Print.

Twain, Mark. "To the Person Sitting in Darkness." *North American Review* 172 (1901). Print.

Warner, Michael, "Introduction." *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*. Ed. Michael Warner. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993. vii-xxviii. Print.

NOTES

1. <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/statement-attorney-general-litigation-involving-defense-marriage-act>
2. These numbers are taken from the Puerto Rican State Electoral Commission, which tracks the official results of the 1967, 1993, and 2012 plebiscites. <http://eleccionespuertorico.org/cgi-bin/eventos.cgi?evento=1967>, <http://eleccionespuertorico.org/cgi-bin/eventos.cgi?evento=1993>, <http://electionspuertorico.org/1998/summary.html> <http://64.185.222.182/main12/homepage.xml>

ABSTRACTS

The U.S. Supreme Court decision of June 26, 2015, which ruled the ban on same-sex unions unconstitutional, created, for the first time, equal marriage rights for same-sex couples in all states, thus changing the civic status of members of the LGBTQ community in important ways, ranging from visitation rights to inheritance law. Justin Torres's 2011 debut novel *We the Animals* performs Puerto Rican queer masculinity at the precise moment when the first formal challenges to the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), as expressed by then Attorney General Eric Holder, intersect with growing and increasingly aggressive hostility towards Latinx in the United States regardless of their legal status, and when Puerto Ricans on the island continue to be second class citizens ineligible, for example, to participate in presidential elections. In ongoing limbo as an unincorporated territory of the United States, the legal condition of Puerto Rico always already queers the myth of an egalitarian, democratic nation. A queer coming of age/coming out narrative, *We the Animals* features a first person narrator, the youngest of three Puerto Rican brothers, who grows up in a working class home in upstate New York and emerges as someone who rejects the very values that strive to "normalize" queer life via assimilation into legally defined and sanctioned coupledness. Embracing what José Esteban Muñoz has called a "queer utopia" the nameless narrator rejects the predetermined path of puritanically "virtuous," materialistically productive, culturally assimilated, and politically predictable American masculinity and citizenship, and ends his narrative at the beginning of an alternative queer vision that does not depend on majoritarian approval, but unapologetically celebrates the possibilities of a "queer planet" (Michael Warner). In doing so, Torres, via his narrator, creates a model of queer Latino masculinity that offers an alternative to assimilationist narratives of "Americanization" and encourages us to imagine a utopian space in which civil and human rights are not tied to a compliance with heteronormative lifestyles.

INDEX

Keywords: bildungsroman, citizenship, Justin Torres, masculinity, Puerto Rican, queer utopia

AUTHOR

MARION CHRISTINA ROHRLEITNER

The University of Texas at El Paso