

On Liberation

*Crack, Christianity, and Captivity in
Postwar Guatemala City*

Kevin Lewis O'Neill

The enemy held my will and of it he made a chain and bound me.
—Augustine, *Confessions*

He was completely tied up. Wrapped in a thin mattress, then trussed with twine, a young man lay on the floor of a Pentecostal rehabilitation center. Straight from the streets of Guatemala City, on a mix of crack and *química*, he struggled to free himself as the echoes of an uncanny interview returned to me.¹ Earlier in the week, from the same windowless rehab, a different young man confessed, “I feel tied up. Crack ties me up. I see my life slipping away, but I can’t do anything about it. I know that the blood of Jesus has the power to break any chains. But crack has got me around the neck. These chains, they’ve got me. But that’s why I’m here. For liberation.” Breaking the memory, pulling me back into the moment, the man in the mattress moaned, seemingly to himself, *Me quiero ir a la mierda*. “Get me the fuck out of here.”²

The politics of Christian liberation grow particularly acute from the perspective of captivity. In Guatemala City, amid rising levels of urban violence, informal, unregulated, and oftentimes for-profit Pentecostal rehabilitation centers keep pace with this country’s growing consumption of crack cocaine. They warehouse users (against their will) in the name of liberation, for the sake of security. “If these guys were on the streets,” reasoned one police chief, “they’d drug themselves. They’d rob. They would kill.” It is a clean, contagious logic with at least one clear consequence: today more Guatemalans find themselves tied up in Pentecostal rehabili-

tation centers than locked up in maximum security prisons.³ Given that Guatemala, a once overwhelmingly Roman Catholic country, is now as much as 60 percent Pentecostal and Charismatic Christian, the Protestantism here proves critically important.⁴ It not only rearticulates Christian liberation's political coordinates but also reorganizes the spatial contours of Guatemala City.

This article assesses Christian liberation, both its historical conditions and its political effects, by way of the Pentecostal rehabilitation center. Key here is a shift in the formation of the Christian will. Roman Catholic theologians, only a few decades ago, made Latin American Christian liberation a matter of God's will. They prophesied (with great Hegelian flare) about social progress, economic development, and the long arc of history. "In the Bible poverty is a scandalous position," writes theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez, "inimical to human dignity and therefore contrary to the will of God."⁵ God's will enacts human progress. "The struggle for justice," Gutiérrez continues, "is in itself conformed to the will of God."⁶ Yet today, as a Pentecostal practice, Christian liberation and its formation of the will are not about time (or progress or even the future). It is about space. It is about getting the fuck out of here.

From temporality to spatiality, from progress to egress, a "will to escape," as I call it, now organizes the practice of Christian liberation.⁷ Locked up, tied up, and told to shape up, users come to confess, at times plead, that they want out and they want it now. Pentecostal rehabilitation centers, in response, assure them that captivity is itself liberation—that slavery is salvation.⁸ The effects of this deeply personalized and observably atrophied will are twofold. The first is political. The practice of Christian liberation disembeds (effectively disappears) thousands of users from the city. A feeble will justifies a new genre of captivity. The second effect is analytical. The Pentecostal rehabilitation center flips the study of political theology. For this subfield tends to either evaluate the theological origins of political concepts or provide theological reflections on political questions.⁹ The Pentecostal rehabilitation center inspires neither. Instead, these dark, dank structures, with their ropes and razor wire, provide a window onto Christian liberation as a technique of rule.¹⁰ Christian liberation may liberate Christians, in some kind of soteriological sense, but it also contains them, it governs them, in ways that now organize Guatemala City's carceral landscape.

Crack and Christianity

To appreciate this confluence of crack, Christianity, and captivity—this will to escape—one must begin neither in the streets of Guatemala City nor in its Pentecostal rehabilitation centers, but rather in the nostrils of

North Americans. A gourmet soft drug in the 1960s, cocaine found its clientele courtesy of President Richard Nixon. His 1969 Operation Intercept, with its aerial sprays of Mexican hemp fields and its crackdown on Mexican marijuana smugglers, prompted the American middle class to seek out alternative thrills. As demand soared, cocaine corridors connected Medellín to Miami and Cali to Northern Mexico—all by way of the Caribbean. The United States responded with hugely militarized antidrug policies, yet its navy and coast guard patrols ultimately accomplished very little. By the early 1990s, the Andean region produced an estimated thousand metric tons of cocaine every year. Twenty years and one trillion US tax dollars later, the region still does, making the War on Drugs, by all accounts, a complete and unwavering failure.¹¹

Yet this failure has not been without effect. Increasingly expensive, progressively effective maritime blockades have prompted traffickers to shift their transport operations from sea to land, making Central America their principal transit route. Today planes, boats, and submarines ferry cocaine along the Pacific coast to northern Guatemala. There, in the jungles of Petén, beyond the reach of US interdiction efforts, traffickers prep their product for its eventual trip north. The only challenge of late has been keeping up with traffic. In 2004, an estimated 10 percent of the cocaine produced for the United States passed through Guatemala.¹² This number jumped to 23 percent in 2006 and then 44 percent in 2008.¹³ In 2011, in the shadows of Plan Mexico, a US-led \$1.6 billion security initiative, 84 percent of the cocaine produced for the United States moved through Guatemala.¹⁴ This means that more than \$100 billion worth of narcotics now touches Guatemalan soil every year.¹⁵ This is three times Guatemala's legitimate gross domestic product.

The mass movement of all this cocaine comes with considerable logistics. Equipment, labor, infrastructure—traffickers need all of these but pay for none of them in cash. Instead, they pay with cocaine, which actually holds very little value in Guatemala. There are simply not enough Guatemalans who can afford the drug. To monetize this material, to turn cocaine into cash, laboratories mix the drug with baking soda to make crack cocaine. Now sold throughout Guatemala City, crack cocaine is a far more affordable, far more addictive version of powder cocaine; it is the very substance that hit Los Angeles, New York, and Miami in the mid-1980s.¹⁶ Smoked through a pipe one rock at a time, it is as intense as it is cheap as it is fleeting. Crack leaves the user hungry for more. In the United States, this observable desperation met growing urban violence and decidedly racist antidrug policies in ways that tripled the country's prison population.¹⁷ Yet in Guatemala City, with a homicide rate twenty times the US average, crack cocaine has not just been criminalized.¹⁸ It has been Pentecostalized.

The Pentecostalizing of crack begins and ends with captivity, with the felt reality of being locked up and tied down. Much of this has to do with the built form. An entrepreneurial network of semifortified, quasi-clandestine houses holds men for months, sometimes for years. Neither unlawful nor illegitimate, although inhumane and illiberal, these Pentecostal rehabilitation centers provide a practical solution to a concrete problem. Drug use is up. State resources are down. And Pentecostalism is *the* discourse of change in Guatemala. Jesus saves. But captivity here is not just about architecture. It is also about affect. It is about feeling tied up, narrating this captivity, and then struggling to free oneself from oneself.

Augustine of Hippo puts it best. Writing in the fourth century, uttering his *Confessions*, Augustine describes the human condition as literally bounded by sin. “Because my will was perverse,” he writes, “it changed to lust, and lust yielded to become habit, and habit not resisted became necessity. These were like links hanging one on another—which is why I have called it a chain—and their hard bondage held me bound hand and foot.”¹⁹ Hand and foot, bound tightly, with a chain—this is the Pentecostal predicament. This is crack cocaine. The experience is brute, Augustine insists. His own chains are made of iron. He drags them. They chafe him. Their clanging drowns out the voice of God.²⁰ Rolling and writhing in the fetters he forged for himself, Augustine’s temptations begin with a pear tree but might as well have started with the crack house. Each nails the sinner to the floor (see fig. 1). Images of such incarceration literally litter the Pentecostal rehabilitation center. Pinned to walls, tucked under pillows, and folded into Bibles—Pentecostal print media mashes together abolitionist iconography with cheeky references to *Gulliver’s Travels*.²¹ These fliers depict, with real Christian clarity, grown men wrapped up and tied down by a thicket of sin. How to be free?

Escape, Augustine answers. Turn inward toward the soul and upward toward God.²² Prepare yourself for the saving grace of Jesus Christ. Monastic, ascetic, and contemplative—his answer is absolute. And so too are the stakes, at least for Pentecostals. For the end is not near. It is now. So escape. Escape for your life. The ultimate effect of this effort, this will to escape, is a double bind, of sorts.²³ Crack ties the user up, metaphorically, which is why pastors tie the user up, literally, with every effort at literal escape confirming the necessity of literal captivity. It is actually only when the user becomes a sinner, when he takes on the logic of liberation, that he begins to plod toward eschatological escape, toward Judgment Day.²⁴ Yet, even this monkish effort tends to take place inside a Pentecostal rehabilitation center. The streets prove too seductive, too sinful. So for many, for far too many, liberation becomes a life sentence.



Figure 1. Pamphlet, Guatemala City, 2013. Courtesy of the photographer: Benjamin Fogarty-Valenzuela

Where Do You Want to Go?

Take Javier. Twenty-two years old, he sat quietly on the second floor of an abandoned factory building. Repurposed for rehabilitation, beyond the reach of natural light, the space smelled of urine and feces, of mildew and rotting vegetables. His chair, made for a child, pushed his knees up to his ears. Resting his hands around his ankles, his shoulders atop his thighs, he mumbled just loud enough for me to hear him, “I have no idea why I’m here. No fucking idea.” As I turned toward him for a follow-up, the pastor kicked at the front door. With a steel lock rattling against a steel chain, banging against a steel gate, the pastor entered his house of liberation. Fifty or so users made their way toward him for the daily sermon. With no television, radio, or newspaper at hand, the pastor’s daily instructions proved popular, even if they were compulsory. Javier, fresh from the streets, still a little high, listened from afar. It was only his first day.

“Every man has three enemies,” the pastor preached. “Three enemies,” he repeated. “There’s Satan. That’s the first enemy. The devil is strong. Then there’s the world. That’s the second. The world of pleasures. The world of drugs.” The pastor tapped a Bible against his thigh. “And then there’s you. . . . That’s the third. You are your own enemy.” He paused. Javier stirred. Lifting his chin from his knees, his eyes from the floor, Javier muttered, “I mean, I have no idea why I’m here.” Someone shushed him, but Javier honestly did not know. He would learn, of course, that his mother had called the pastor. Earlier that month, on the outskirts of town, she had bumped into the pastor’s hunting party (*grupo de cacería*). This is what the industry calls the four or five men tapped to collect users from the streets. More often than not these men are themselves in rehab, also under lock and key, but they are bigger, stronger, and sometimes smarter than the average user. Hunting (*cazar*) is a privilege, and the rewards are immediate: status, adventure, and a bit of sunlight. The work pays for itself.

The pastor’s hunting party was in the area—to pick up a neighbor’s kid but also to drum up some business. Abducting those too high or too drunk to resist keeps the rehabilitation center at capacity, with the abducted paying their way through a mix of unpaid labor and family offerings. Amid all of this, during some lull in the hunt, one of the men handed Javier’s mother a business card. Liberation, it promised, from drugs, alcohol, and that ever-capacious category: *delincuencia*. So she called when things got bad.

“The Apostle Paul,” the pastor continued, “describes a great battle raging inside each of us. Did you know that? But this isn’t a battle that beats your body or that marks your flesh. It is a battle over what your body wants. What does your body want? Does your body want drugs? Does it want crack?” Not a single man answered. Javier stared blankly. “Because,” the pastor added, “we can see that Satan is in our hearts. And so we know

where bad thoughts come from, where all fights, wars, murders, drugs, adultery come from. It all comes from the heart. The problem is *here*.” He pointed to his chest, fingering his sternum with some force. “It’s here in the heart. It is inside of me.” A young man, on the floor, quietly touched his own chest. “It’s inside each of us,” the pastor announced.

Things did get bad, for Javier and his mother. A year earlier, Javier started smoking crack. He had smoked weed for years, but crack was different. He didn’t like it at first. “It tasted like shit,” he told me. “*Piedra* made me feel weak; it made me feel really shitty.” But then Javier started smoking *primos*. A combination of marijuana and crack, *primos* cut the rush by mixing the effects. Javier liked *primos*. But eventually, at least for Javier, the weed made for a muddled composition, a literal buzz kill. So he started picking out the bits of crack from the weed to smoke it straight from the pipe. “That’s when it began to destroy me,” Javier explained. “That’s when I started stealing, when I started selling stuff to smoke. I started robbing. With a gun. We’d wait, with a gun, for cars to pass and then pull them over for money. But mostly, I’d find stuff to sell. I’d sell anything I could.” The last thing Javier sold, before his mother called the pastor, was the door off her hinges. Open, exposed, and absolutely humiliated, Javier’s mother had no other choice. “He just started to get really abusive,” she told me, “hitting me and saying that he was going to kill me. I tried to lock him up myself, in the back room, but he got out.” So she called the pastor. “I’d do it again,” she said.

“The thing is,” the pastor preached, “the thing is, you just don’t have the confidence to tell yourself that you can leave, to tell yourself that ‘I want to get out of here,’ that ‘I can escape my desires.’” He shuffled his feet. “Liberation can be yours,” he promised. “It can. But you keep telling yourself, ‘I can’t leave. I can’t leave. I just can’t leave.’” Shaking his head, tucking his shirt into his pants, he added, “Well, that kind of thinking is going to kill you. Because if you keep saying ‘I can’t leave,’ then you’ll never get out of here. Never.” The pastor then caught the eye of a young man. He took a step toward him, proclaiming, “Because we know that there is a heaven and that there is a hell. God said to choose between blessings and a life of sin. Which do you choose? There is eternal life, and there is eternal death. Where do you want to go?” Holding the young man’s attention, locking eyes, the pastor persisted, “I asked you, where do *you* want to go?” Javier, arrested by the question, piqued by the performance, answered for himself, to himself: *Me quiero salir*. “I want out.”

The Will to Escape

The pastor, to be fair, also wants Javier to get out. So, too, does Javier’s mother; the police as well. The hiccup here is a signifier that will not stop

floating. Empty as it is undetermined, with its impasses and imbrications, the word in constant question here is *out*—*out* of the rehab, *out* of drug use, even *out* of this world (and into the next). Operating not despite of but rather because of contradictions inherent to its signification, this *out* proves absolutely productive. This is because “getting out,” at least within the context of the Pentecostal rehabilitation center, can mean so many different things. The pastor’s question, his vision of liberation, shot to the eschaton. It posed a fundamental (if familiar) question to those locked up: Where do you want to go?

Many users, at least at first, take the question literally. Javier did. Soon after his abduction, Javier kicked against a third-floor window. He pulled at its bars. Twenty feet above traffic, he tried to push himself out of the building. The pastor had him tied up. Javier fought back until he threw up—on himself as well as on the rope and the mattress that held him down. But this is just one story. There are so many more—of men rushing the door or peeling back the roof in the dead of night. *Animalitos*, little animals, this is what the workers at a conjoined factory call the users who make it out of the rehab only to end up scampering around their building looking for a way out. ¡*Corre, animalito, corre!* “Run, you little animal, run,” the workers whistle. These hoots, these hollers, echo all too well Giorgio Agamben’s observations about the progressive animalization of man, what Michel Foucault takes to be the bestialization of biopolitics.²⁵ But to linger on this kind of escape, to make *these* efforts *the* evidence, distracts from a deep, dark existential struggle over self-governance, as well as the disciplinary techniques that link apocalypticism and asceticism to the privatization of security. The escape of interest here is not literal but, rather, ethical. It is ethical in something of a Foucauldian sense—as the aestheticization of the subject, as the self working on the self.²⁶

“You, me, everyone, we all need to think,” the pastor explained. “We all need to examine our lives.” We sat around a secondhand card table. Users milled about. Some slept. Some read. Some eavesdropped on our conversation. “We need to ask ourselves what we are doing with ourselves. And then we need to get up. And this is an important point. Who tells us to get up? God doesn’t tell us. You need to tell yourself to get up, to rise up. You need to figure out for yourself what you are going to do with your life.” A man suddenly screamed. Somewhere, behind some wall, under some shadow, he screamed. “They’re ripping out my eyes,” he shrieked, “Oh, God, they’re ripping out my eyes!” The pastor did not pause. “And you can’t do this exam when you are drunk or on drugs. You need to be sober. You need to be healthy. You need to be able to see around you, to understand your circumstances. And this is why these men are here. To examine themselves. To say that they want out.” The man yelled again. The pastor checked his cell phone. “Because, look,” he reasoned, “these

guys are enslaved in a kind of prison for the soul. And we brought them here, to this house, for liberation. We brought them here to meet God. [We brought them here] to liberate themselves from slavery.” Picking up his phone, plugging his free ear with his free hand, the pastor fielded a call. “Oh, my eyes,” the man cried. “They’re burning my eyes!”

Slouching toward Bethlehem, descending into bedlam, the Pentecostal rehabilitation center offers few tools for self-discovery, for self-mastery.²⁷ There are no twelve steps or group sessions. There is no occupational therapy. None of the users have case workers or even files. Progress is not measured. It is rarely mentioned. One is neither better nor worse, only liberated or not. “A lot people say it’s a process,” mentioned the pastor, “but it’s not a process. Liberation is a miracle.”²⁸ Like a switch that flips on and off, with nothing in between, the practice of Christian liberation delivers to users a sense of being either in or out, here or there, enslaved or free. Moral manuals written by Pentecostals dot the rehabilitation center. Strewn about like life preservers, each ready for the Flood, they instruct the inflicted to empower themselves, to constitute their soul as a site of intervention.²⁹

Alone before God, these manuals encourage men, in the words of one user, to become “their own therapist.” The titles tell all. One reads, *The Unlimited Power Inside of Me*.³⁰ Another speaks of *Autoliberación Interior*, or “interior, self-liberation.”³¹ A third promises to *Turn Your Heart in 40 Days*.³² Each invokes what Augustine once called and Lauren Berlant now reads as “cruel optimism,” none more so than the manual titled *I Can and Should Have Success*.³³ With an upwardly mobile businessman on the cover, a suit literally climbing the ladder of success, this image of corporate Christianity contrasts ever so cruelly with the lice-infested mattresses upon which it rests. One of these manuals asks its subject to complete an x-ray (*una radiografía*) of the heart.³⁴ It quotes scripture. Luke 4:18–19: “The Spirit of the Lord has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free.”³⁵ The instructions ask the Christian to pray quietly and then to ask God the following questions. The first reads, “Oh Lord, what parts of my heart need to be restored?” The second asks, “In what part of my heart do you, oh Lord, want to begin this process of restoration?”³⁶ The assignment contains a quiz: “Yes or No, I feel that pain holds me captive. Yes or No, I feel that the past has a hold on me. Yes or No, I am mourning a loss. Yes or No, I am languishing without hope.”³⁷ These questions, their answers, frame Christian liberation, this will to escape, as an “inner dialogue” between self and self.³⁸

The Slavery of Salvation

This inner dialogue is site specific. Christian liberation happens *inside*, rather than *outside*, the Pentecostal rehabilitation center. This crystallized for me in the middle of a sermon. “Your attitude is crucial,” the pastor preached, “for Jesus came here to set you free. He came here to free prisoners.” Muffled by the brick and the mortar, by the boarded-up windows and the locked-down doors, gunshots punctuated the sermon. Some of the men looked up. One shook his head. The pastor impassively continued, “It all depends on your attitude. It’s not about aptitude. It’s about attitude. This is why you have to stay positive, why you have to read books that motivate you.” He held up his Bible. “You have to read the word of God every day.” “Amen,” the men replied.

The gunfire sparked some reflection. “Out there I’d get killed,” confessed one user. Spooked by the noises, having not seen the light of day for three months, he continued, “I was behaving well out there. I had a job, I smoked. But I smoked after work. I didn’t smoke on the job. I never smoked on the job. It was just the people I was hanging out with. That was the problem.” Building on the sermon, taking apart his own attitude, he said, “We smoked a lot. And when my cousins smoked, they’d start shooting. Pop. Pop. Pop. Then some guys would shoot back. Pop. Pop. Pop. I was hanging out with the wrong people.” He shook his head, “For real, I’d get killed out there.” *Out there* as opposed to *right here*, *inside* as opposed to *outside*—these distinctions organize this will to escape. *Here*, inside the rehab, is where you get *out*. “Because basically,” he explained, “when you come to this place, the first thing [you realize] is that you’re not free. You’re not free. You can’t leave. But your spirit is free. Your soul is free. Your spirit is free from doing bad things.” Leaning back, trying to gain some perspective, he continued, “This house lets me escape this world. I am free here. Spiritually free. I can strengthen my spirit here. I can dominate [*dominar*] my flesh here.”

So much of liberation is about domination. Himself tied down, thrown inside of a room, left to scream for help, this user went on to narrate his own inside as if it were his outside.³⁹ “Crack is like,” he searched for the words, “it’s like your spirit is telling you not to smoke. But what do you do? You smoke. And this ties you up. You tie up your spirit. And you don’t listen to your spirit. You just tie it up. And you put it in a room and shut the door. It’s still there. And you can still hear it. It’s screaming for you. You can still hear your spirit screaming for you.” He then pointed his finger at himself. “Last night,” he whispered, “while I was lying in bed, I realized that maybe I’m the one who put this chain on me. I mean, this could be a chain I put on myself. And maybe I need to be the one to take it off.” He paused and then came to some kind of conclusion. “Maybe I tied myself up.”

The haunting image of this man abducting himself, of locking himself up, is only compounded by the fact that those cracks of air, the very ones that kicked up so much conversation, were actually not gunshots. They were fireworks. Leaving the rehab later that day, standing just outside the front door, I waited for my eyes to adjust to the midday sun. As I stood there, it slowly occurred to me that a procession had passed in front of the rehab. Signs of a celebration were everywhere, and someone must have lit some fireworks. Burnt casings littered the street. Duped. We had all been duped, as Diane Nelson might say.⁴⁰ But how?

The quick answer races to the difficulty of distinguishing the sound of a firecracker from that of a firearm when inside a Pentecostal rehabilitation center. The materiality of it all makes it near impossible. Makeshift spaces, cobbled together with secondhand materials, produce cavernous enclosures that are completely walled off from the outside. These are not just total institutions, in the words of Erving Goffman, but also inescapable sensoriums.⁴¹ They are echo chambers that completely distort the senses. From the inside, set apart from the outside, any noise could be anything. And given how these spaces systematically disaggregate the signifier from the signified, it comes as no surprise that pastors can bend users (so effectively, so efficiently) toward a cataclysmic reading of the world. These are places of great eschatological tension.

“There is fear in the streets,” the pastor mentioned, almost in passing. “These are the end of days. We are living in the time of the apocalypse. These are very, very dangerous times.” He squared himself to me. “I’m not totally sure if you’ve seen the movies. With the zombies. They’re out there, you know? Zombies are in the streets. They don’t want to be free. But that’s why we bring them here. *Here*, brother. We bring them here to be free.” Possibly putting too fine a point on it all, the pastor then gestured to a cache of pirated DVDs. He plays them for the occasional movie night. Titles include *Doomsday* (2008), *The Lazarus Project* (2008), *The Devil’s Mercy* (2008), *Escape from Hell* (2000), and *The Haunting in Connecticut* (2009). This last one, “based on a true story,” features a family forced to relocate for their son’s health. They end up moving into a former mortuary. The rest is fairly predictable, but one scene stands out. It depicts the teenage son with hundreds of satanic words carved into his flesh. His body is pink with sin. The demons did it to him, but his mother, shaking with panic, shrieks, “What have you done to yourself?” This scene is uncanny for most. Naked and ashamed, marked by possession, the question, with its concern, forever folds back onto the user: what have you done to yourself?

Disembedding the Sinner

The answer to this question is not always obvious, but its effects are observable. Christian liberation, with its will to escape, ensnares the user. It holds him captive. But it does so at more than one scale. Christian liberation stewards the individual person, to be sure, but it also governs entire populations. Before returning to the individual, to Javier's abduction in particular, it is important to consider, if only briefly, a perspective that holds the entirety of Guatemala City in a single frame. For it is only at this scale that one can ask that familiar and daunting question, the one that pokes at the righteous at every turn: liberation for whom?

There is, to answer, no single Pentecostal rehabilitation center. There are Pentecostal rehabilitation centers, in the plural. There are, in fact, as many as two hundred Pentecostal rehabilitation centers in the metropolitan area. A quick mapping of some of these structures calls to mind Michel Foucault's notion of the carceral archipelago.⁴² Yet Foucault's metaphor is static. This is no archipelago. These centers are not islands. They close. They relocate. They reopen. Users also graduate, so to speak, and start their own outfits. Others escape but then return (and return and return). Recidivism is common. This assemblage, put simply, is in constant motion.

This movement is productive. This is because Guatemala City is not a particularly large metropolis. With approximately three million residents, the city cannot support what a growing literature describes as "fortified enclaves." These are internally complete spaces of privilege where the wealthy live in peaceful solidarity. Mexico City, Bogotá, and São Paulo—each of these megacities typifies what some understand to be a "city of walls."⁴³ Guatemala City does not.⁴⁴ There are simply not enough wealthy Guatemalans to wall themselves off from the world. The quick fix, however, has been to invert private security's infrastructure—its steel bars, razor wire, and reinforced concrete—to keep users *in* rather than *out*, to wall them off from the rest of the world. "At least this place is safe," I mentioned to one user, in an offhand kind of way. Facing a security wall, one topped with shards of broken glass, he corrected me. "That doesn't keep people out," he said. "It keeps us in."

This *in*, as opposed to this *out*, is how the practice of Christian liberation reorganizes the spatial contours of Guatemala City, enacting not just a new genre of captivity but also a distinct kind of segregation. Rather than an archipelago of isolated enclaves, rather than fortresses of privilege, rising levels of drug use and street crime prompt the faithful to "disembed" an entire population from the city.⁴⁵ They rip users from city life, disconnecting them from the general fabric of society. Javier, for one, was ripped out of his own home. "I was just watching a movie with my girlfriend," he told me. "I was smoking some weed and watching a movie, when these

guys rushed in. They rushed in and grabbed me. They were screaming at me. They were loud. And they just totally freaked me out (*me friquearon*). They told me not to fight. Not to resist. So I was like, ‘All right! Calm down!’ I stood up. They tied me up and drove me here.” In the end, it is this ripping apart that makes possible the practice of Christian liberation. This ripping motion pulls people *inside* as opposed to *outside*. “This place is a refuge,” explained one user. “I am free here. I can strengthen my spirit here. This [rehab] is where I can heal.” When asked if he thought he was ready to leave, the answer was decisive: “No.” But then when, I pushed? “Maybe never,” he answered.

Disembedded from the city, users rarely return. Instead, they move from one Pentecostal rehabilitation center to another. Some enter dozens of centers, which can create a bit of an uncanny return, even if only for me. Years will have passed between interviews, I will not recognize the face, when a user will hand me a wrinkled business card, from an institution I have long left. Where has he been all this time, I wonder?

As an assemblage, as a shifting network of Pentecostal rehabilitation centers, the practice of Christian liberation lifts thousands of users from city life. It rips them off the streets and then warehouses them. The net effect is what David Harvey would call “worlds of inequality, alienation, and injustice.”⁴⁶ But this is Marxist language. In a Christian key, in light of Latin American Christian liberation’s own genealogy, the more theologically accurate, more ethnographically appropriate word for this predicament would be *forsaken*.

Forsaken

Latin American liberation theologians often wrote about “the forsaken.” Always a collective, tethered to a teleology, the people, the poor, the masses had been forsaken, they argued—but not for long. Liberation would come. Their optimism, theologically speaking, was hard fought. Liberation theologians, from Leonardo Boff to Ignacio Ellacuría, from Jürgen Moltmann to Jon Sobrino, upended the idea that human history was simply a trial through which the faithful must pass. Together, in community, these theologians forged real continuity between temporal progress and ultimate transcendence. A preferential option for the poor made this possible. So, too, did practical interventions. These included co-ops, teach-ins, and literacy programs. Each trafficked in Western ideas of modernization and economic development. Social progress, they argued, enacted the biblical story of Exodus. Mixing the metanarratives of Marxism and modernity with a strong dose of “temporal distancing,” the faithful read papal ruminations over “integral development” as a reason to see God working in human history.⁴⁷ Key to this was not just an ascending

order of human development but also a temporal framework that maintained a stable relationship between history and hierarchy. Given enough time, enough effort, third worlds would become first worlds. The poor would inherit the earth.

Fifty years later, however, the practice of Christian liberation is no longer about development.⁴⁸ It is about deliverance. So, too, is the idea of the forsaken. Take Javier, once again. One month into captivity, he confided, “I want to kill myself.” He avoided eye contact but kept on talking. “No one listens to me. No one wants to help me. No one understands me. They say that I’m a disgrace and that I’m self-destructive. But I want my freedom. I want liberation. I want to get out of here. To look for my family. To look for a job. I have all these dreams, but here I’m treated like trash.” He shook his head, adding, “I’ve been discarded [*deshechado*] like a piece of trash.”

Javier’s intentions are not without precedence. Earlier in the month, another man from the same rehab stole a DVD from the pastor’s collection of apocalyptic films. He cracked it in two and then tried to cut himself free. He tried to dig his way out of captivity through his wrists. The pastor had him stopped, of course. The man healed, eventually. But this desperate effort presented the practice of Christian liberation in the starkest of terms possible. Out—he wanted out, and he wanted it now. So does Javier. With suicide still on his mind, he wrote a letter to his mother. It read, in part:

Dear Mom, This is Javier. I’m sending you this letter to ask a favor. I want you to get me out of here. They don’t treat me right, and they hit me. I don’t want to suffer anymore. Help me. Only you can help me. . . . Come soon. I promise I will change everything. I’ll change my way of life. Don’t leave me here. I can’t stand it here. If you leave me here I’m going to kill myself. Please come and get me out. I want to keep on living. Help me to get out of here. I beg you. Mom, come once you get this letter. I love you. I am waiting here for you. Javier.

Javier’s mother received the letter. It terrified her, but the pastor insisted that this note only proved just how much Javier needed to be *inside* as opposed to *outside, there* as opposed to *here*. So Javier stayed, waiting for Godot as much as God. And in his staying, in his failed effort at escape, the practice of Christian liberation shifted. The idea of the forsaken changed. For decades, liberation theologians linked Christ’s passion to the people’s passion. Each progressively plodded past every Station of the Cross, with Good Friday giving way to Easter Sunday. “With a great cry,” writes theologian Jon Sobrino, “there is also resurrection, a word continues to resound and the crucified endure through history.”⁴⁹ For a time, for a rather long time, Christian liberation was about a progressive notion of time—but this no longer holds. Christian liberation’s invocation

of Christ's passion still fits, and maybe more so now than ever before. Yet I believe it is more ethnographically convincing to shift focus away from the Stations of the Cross—the progressive plod from one moment in time to another—and toward Jesus's last words, which seem to have everything to do with space and not time, with egress and not progress, with immediacies and not eventualities. Decidedly nonprogressive, absolutely desperate, these last words seem the most biblically proximate to the user who just wants to get the fuck out. Matthew 27:45–46, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?”

Notes

This article draws on extended fieldwork in Guatemala City between 2006 and 2013. This fieldwork took place in Pentecostal rehabilitation centers, which are predominantly male institutions. Thus, the masculine pronoun is used to refer to users. Those whom I interviewed remain anonymous or are cited by pseudonym. In some cases certain details (insignificant to the analysis) have been changed to further protect the identities of my informants. Special thanks to Benjamin Fogarty-Valenzuela for research assistance and Basit Kareem Iqbal for research and editorial assistance. The fieldwork was supported by the Open Society Foundations, the Social Science Research Council, the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation, the Wenner-Gren Foundation, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Writing was made possible by an American Council of Learned Societies faculty fellowship.

1. *Quimica* is Guatemalan slang for rubbing alcohol.

2. The literal translation of *me quiero ir a la mierda* is “I want to go to shit.” Better translations include “I want to die,” “I want to go to hell,” “get me the hell out of here,” and “get me the fuck out of here.” The last is closest to the context and, upon follow-up interviews, closest to the intent of the original utterance. It should also be noted that users employ a range of other expressions, too many to list here, to express their desire to get out. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

3. Guatemala's prison population is fewer than 6,000 inmates. This number does not include pretrial detainees or remand prisoners. My own fieldwork suggests that there are as many as 200 Pentecostal rehabilitation centers in Guatemala City. Some hold as many as 150 people; some, as few as 10. A conservative average is 30 people per center. This puts the number of people inside Pentecostal rehabilitation centers at well over 6,000. For the prison population, see Guatemala Prison Brief, International Centre for Prison Studies, www.prisonstudies.org/country/guatemala (accessed 22 April 2014).

4. Pew Forum, *Spirit and Power: A 10-Nation Survey of Pentecostals by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life* (Washington, DC: Pew Forum, 2006). For more detailed work on Christianity in Guatemala, see Virginia Garrard-Burnett, *Protestantism in Guatemala: Living in the New Jerusalem* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998); Kevin Lewis O'Neill, *City of God: Christian Citizenship in Postwar Guatemala* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

5. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, 15th anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 165.

6. Gutiérrez cites a French Episcopal commission. *Ibid.*, 158.

7. I take the will to be a kind of ethics, which Michel Foucault views as a

relation of the self to itself in terms of moral agency. See Michel Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow, vol. 1 of *The Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984* (New York: New Press, 1997).

8. Dale B. Martin, *Slavery as Salvation: The Metaphor of Slavery in Pauline Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990). For mention of these centers in a far more historical light than what is possible here, see Deborah T. Levenson, *Adiós Niño: The Gangs of Guatemala City and the Politics of Death* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

9. For the theological origins of political concepts, see, e.g., Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); for theological reflection on political questions, see, e.g., Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*.

10. By technique, I follow the work of Foucault to mean a “practical rationality governed by a conscious goal.” The conscious aim here is to escape. See Michel Foucault, “Space, Knowledge, and Power,” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 255.

11. Thanks to a generation of scholars, the broad contours of this narrative are now widely known. See, e.g., Paul Gootenberg, *Andean Cocaine: The Making of a Global Drug* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

12. Mary Jordan, “Pit Stop on the Cocaine Highway: Guatemala Becomes Favored Link for US-Bound Drugs,” *Washington Post*, 6 October 2004.

13. Randal C. Archibold and Damien Cave, “Drug Wars Push Deeper into Central America,” *New York Times*, 23 March 2011.

14. *Ibid.*

15. Frank Viviano, “A Vacation Goes South,” *California* (Summer 2012), alumni.berkeley.edu/news/california-magazine/summer-2012-north-south/vacation-goes-south. For a more detailed analysis, see two Beckley Foundation reports: “Paths for Reform: Proposed Options for Alternative Drugs Policies in Guatemala,” 11 January 2013, www.beckleyfoundation.org/Paths-for-Reform.pdf; and “Illicit Drugs Markets and Dimensions of Violence in Guatemala” (draft, 30 May 2013), www.beckleyfoundation.org/Illicit-Drug-Markets.pdf.

16. See, e.g., Philippe Bourgois, *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in el Barrio* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

17. Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2010).

18. See 2009 statistics of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime in “Intentional Homicide, Count and Rate per 100,000 Population (1995–2001),” www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/statistics/crime/Homicide_statistics2012.xls (accessed 1 November 2103). As explained by Jorge A. Restrepo and Alonso Tobón García, “¿Como se distribuye la violencia armada en Guatemala?” (in *Guatemala en la encrucijada. Panorama de una violencia transformada*, ed. Jorge A. Restrepo and Alonso Tobón García [Bogotá: Geneva Declaration, 2011], 51–56), Guatemala City’s rate of homicides per population far outpaces the rest of the country’s rate. Guatemala City was 116 homicides per 100,000 people in 2010, when the United States generally holds at 5 per 100,000.

19. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. F. J. Sheed (New York: Hackett, 2006), 148.

20. *Ibid.*, 23 (deaf from chains clanking), 101 (dragged the chains and chains chafe), and 135 (chain of iron).

21. Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver’s Travels into Several Remote Regions of the World* (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1880).

22. Phillip Cary, *Augustine's Invention of the Inner Self: The Legacy of a Christian Platonist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

23. A double bind is commonly defined as a contradiction that leads to no possible resolution. The concept begins with Gregory Bateson's theory of schizophrenia in his *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York: Ballantine, 1972). A more recent invocation can be seen in Jessica R. Cattelino, "The Double Bind of American Indian Need-Based Sovereignty," *Cultural Anthropology* 25, no. 2 (2010): 235–62.

24. Joel Robbins, *Becoming Sinners: Christianity and Moral Torment in a Papua New Guinea Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

25. Giorgio Agamben borrows this formulation from Michel Foucault, who states that biopolitics produces "une animalization progressive de l'homme." This phrase, found in the third volume of Foucault's *Dits et Écrits*, appears in the introduction to *Homo Sacer*, where it is translated as "the progressive bestialization of man." See Foucault, *Dits et Écrits*, vols. 3 and 4 (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 719; Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 3; Agamben, "Non au tatouage biopolitique," *Le Monde*, 10 January 2004, www.egs.edu/faculty/giorgio-agamben/articles/non-au-tatouage-biopolitique/; Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), twelfth session; and Anne Boever, "Biopolitics in Deconstruction" (paper presented at the summer workshop of the Derrida Seminars Translation Project, Institut Mémoires de l'Édition Contemporaine, Caen, France, 7–12 July 2008), derridaseminars.org/pdfs/2008/Boever_2008_presentation.pdf (accessed 22 April 2014).

26. Michel Foucault, *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988).

27. W. B. Yeats, "The Second Coming (Slouching towards Bethlehem)," in *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (Churchtown, Ireland: Cuala Press, 1921), 346; and Joan Didion, *Slouching towards Bethlehem: Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1968).

28. For the ambiguously emancipatory event of miracles in another Pentecostal context, see Ruth Marshall, "The Sovereignty of Miracles: Pentecostal Political Theology in Nigeria," *Constellations* 17, no. 2 (2010): 197–223.

29. Nikolas S. Rose, *Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Self* (London: Free Association Books, 1999).

30. Richard Roberts, *¡El poder ilimitado dentro de ti!*, trans. Edgar González (Tulsa, OK: Oral Roberts Ministries, 1999).

31. Anthony de Mello, *Autoliberación interior* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Lumen, 1988).

32. Randy Madrid, *La Vuelta al Corazón en 40 Días* (Guatemala City: Avances Litográfico, 2011).

33. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011). She defines cruel optimism as "a kind of relation in which one depends on objects that block the very thriving that motivates our attachment in the first place." Berlant, "Lauren Berlant on Her Book 'Cruel Optimism,'" *Rorotoko*, 5 June 2012, rorotoko.com/interview/20120605_berlant_lauren_on_cruel_optimism/.

34. Madrid, *La Vuelta al Corazón*, 59.

35. Edited for style. Full passage reads: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set

the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (New International Version).

36. Madrid, *La Vuelta al Corazón*, 18.

37. *Ibid.*, 17.

38. Barbara Cruikshank, *The Will to Empower: Democratic Citizens and Other Subjects* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 95.

39. Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, trans. Sean Hand (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 96: "The outside is not a fixed limit but a moving matter animated by peristaltic movements, folds and foldings that together make up an inside: they are not something other than the outside, but precisely the inside of the outside."

40. Diane M. Nelson, *Reckoning: The Ends of War in Guatemala* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009). Nelson writes, "To be duped is different from claiming ignorance, although that is also a way of remembering the war in Guatemala, as in many postwars. It is also different from being forced to do something. Duping suggests you went willingly but under false pretenses" (12).

41. Erving Goffman, *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (New York: Doubleday, 1961).

42. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1995), 297.

43. See Teresa P. R. Caldeira, *City of Walls: Crime, Segregation, and Citizenship in São Paulo* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

44. Kevin Lewis O'Neill and Kedron Thomas, eds., *Securing the City: Neoliberalism, Space, and Insecurity in Postwar Guatemala* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

45. Dennis Rodgers, "'Disembedding' the City: Crime, Insecurity and Spatial Organization in Managua, Nicaragua," *Environment and Urbanization* 16, no. 2 (2004): 123.

46. David Harvey, "The Right to the City," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 27 (December 2003): 939–41.

47. For integral development, see Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio* [Encyclical Letter on the Development of Peoples], 26 March 1967, www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_26031967_populorum_en.html. For temporal distancing, see Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002 [1983]), 30.

48. James Ferguson, "Decomposing Modernity: History and Hierarchy after Development," in *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 176–93.

49. Jon Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 173.