



fuck the POOLICE

by Tyler Walicek

THOUGH MAGIC MAY HAVE CEASED TO exist as a force in our culture, the world still reserves room for instances of its cousin: the absurd. Weirdness and absurdity are often a source of art, laughter, and wonder. Yet the weirdness of capitalism is, perversely, a homogenizing weirdness. Truly crass phenomena manifest when everything is inscribed with the profit motive: proposals to equip homeless people as roaming Wi-Fi hotspots, click farms that auto-generate monstrous YouTube videos for kids, a landfill where Amazon dumps millions of brand-new, unsold products a year. Life becomes the same *kind* of weird: selfish and extravagant and hostile, often barbarically so. When everyone has an angle, the world is full of sharp edges.

The following story is a particularly vivid example of the bizarreness generated by the convulsions of late capital. It sits at the crossroads of some of neoliberalism's most pernicious elements: biotech data collection, surveillance capitalism, overbearing landlords, privatization, and elf-themed vacation resorts. But this tale begins, incredibly, with dog shit.

My partner was dog-sitting for an adorable and skittish mutt named Angel. She had been previously warned by Angel's owners that their San Francisco apartment building—one of those overpriced steel-and-glass Faraday cages stuffed with tech workers—had an unusual stipulation. Management required all dog owners to submit a sample of their pet's DNA in order to identify the culprit behind any unattended turds. She'd have to be extremely careful not to miss any of Angel's handiwork, or the owners could get slapped with a fine.

When my partner told me about this intersection of Home Owners Association-style shit snitchery and genetic sequencing, I was horrified and intrigued. What an inefficient, roundabout, and ludicrously intrusive method of ratting out a few inconsiderate or distracted tenants. I immediately posted a tweet expressing my amazement. The company, despite not being named in my post, tracked down my complaint and ham-fistedly tried to reply. "*Actually*, it costs properties less to do our program in the long run!" they chirped. This filled me with the immediate urge to destroy them. I began to dig deeper.

The company in question is called, cloyingly, "PooPrints," and as a result I will be forced to type that out over and over again. (Personally, I would have opted for "SpotCheck.") PooPrints has established an elaborate system to monetize worthless waste. First, the landlord requires—as a contractual rental condition—that tenants pay a fee to have their dog's cheek swabbed and its DNA sent to PooPrints headquarters. A cursory Internet search reveals that plenty of tenants are both indignant about the fee and resistant to such invasive measures. If an unauthorized excretion is located, it's sampled and sent to the lab at a cost to the landlord of about \$70. PooPrints then informs the property owner of any positive matches, and the owner charges a fee (in the case of one tenant I spoke to, as much as \$500) to recoup their costs and make a profit. This system is in place at over 3,000 locations. Notably, if the landlord is able to pinpoint offending dogs and levy fees as intended, profit comes at the dog owner's significant expense. Everyone benefits, except—as usual under capitalism—the lowly tenant. (The dog is also an exploited worker whose surplus defecatory

labor value is being appropriated). It's long been theorized that capital would run into hard limits on its ability to scoop up profits, but Marx clearly failed to account for the innovation of poop cops.

Now of course, it's also true that the PooPrints business model seems fatally flawed: if fecal surveillance is successful in discouraging poop abandonment, then those \$70 testing fees will dry up like a turd in the sun. But for the moment, the company is ostensibly profitable. We'll see in five years—it seems likely that this weird boondoggle outfit will fold, at which point the DNA and associated demographic info will be sold off to all manner of interested parties (assuming the company hasn't started doing this already).

POOPRINTS AND ITS UNGLAMOROUS work represent a cross-section, a tiny biopsied sample, of a feedback cycle that we have witnessed gathering momentum ever since the advent of neoliberalism around 50 years ago. Since then, capital, reasserting its power after the cultural gains made by radical undercurrents in the 1930s-1960s, has sought to reverse earlier social-democratic compromises and privatize every conceivable resource. A wayward dog poop, the smallest biohazardous accident, becomes a vector for profit-making. Disorder anywhere in the world always means a chance to swoop in and charge for services, just as the notorious Blackwater security was deployed to New Orleans after Katrina on the public dime. On the grander scale, we can see how corporate and governmental surveillance, increasingly common environmental catastrophes, and good old-fashioned capitalist profiteering intersect and reinforce each other. Technology and surveillance are deployed in the service of rent-seeking institutions (such as property managers, in the case of PooPrints). The state and the justice system aid in this venture, enforcing contracts and keeping these practices legally viable. The accumulation of wealth by the rent-seekers and investors and assorted capitalist interests grants them further control over the culture, the state, and the means of production.

The scale of the injustices committed might vary wildly, but the mechanism is the same. Surveillance facilitates control, which in turn facilitates profit. Militarized police forces deploy advanced technologies, like camera-equipped drones, Stingray cell phone data harvesters, and social media surveillance algorithms, all to snatch up those whom the state defines as criminals. Arresting citizens on a vast scale under drug laws and false and racialized pretenses has resulted in our very own gulag archipelago, imprisoning 2.3 million souls. Private prisons profit from keeping people incarcerated, and other private corporations take advantage of virtually free prison labor. The joint assault of high technology and oppressive systems of con-

trol is emblematic of the general alliance of privatization and exploitation that is being inflicted upon our social, political, and natural worlds.

Now, to be clear—and to avoid slapping *Current Affairs* with a libel lawsuit—PooPrints itself, as far as I can determine, perfectly complies with the letter of the law. The company was founded as a division of BioPet Laboratories in 2008 by Tom Boyd, an extremely wealthy 80-year-old Tennessee capitalist. (“I think you become an entrepreneur simply because you want to make money,” Boyd has been quoted as saying. That seems to be about how deep his motivations go, borne out by the fact that he has started 17 profitable companies. Apparently, his appetite for wealth has yet to be sated.) Boyd claims that BioPet was the first to come up with the idea of monetizing dog poop, though the exact concept behind PooPrints was proposed in a 2005 *New York Times Magazine* article by the authors of the popular (and discredited) *Freakonomics*, predating PooPrints by years, so perhaps we shouldn't give BioPet too much credit.

Boyd touts the precision and reach of the underlying biometric processes and identification databases: “Once that dog goes in [the registry], he can be recognized anywhere in the world [...] He can never get away.” Why not use security cameras to catch a dog in the act, you might ask? “Prove it,” says Boyd. “You go to court...they'll bring out ten dogs that look the same way.” It seems odd to note that a dog “can never get away” by fleeing to another country, since presumably dogs are not on the run from INTERPOL. Nor will they be hauled into dog court and put in a lineup, adorable though that might be. It rather feels like “dogs” *might* be operating as a bit of a stand-in for other coded subjects here. Whatever Boyd's intentions for the future of this particular company, the fact remains that DNA surveillance is a powerful tool that can be and has been easily extended to humans.

You might think the idea of a company using technology to track *human* feces is mere dystopian paranoia, but it's already being done. And, of course, it's being weaponized against our society's most vulnerable members. In my former home of San Francisco, a buildup of human waste in the streets has sparked a crisis that has enraged both homeless advocates and resident techies, albeit for very different reasons. The techies, infuriated by the injustice of being forced to look at the physical evidence of homeless people's desperation and stolen dignity, have programmed a tattletale app, SnapCrap, to keep track of instances of public defecation. (In his self-aggrandizing manifesto, the creator of SnapCrap laments the death of his fantasy of California as “the greatest state in the country” and claims that it was “time to give the city the app it deserved.”)

Of course, the waste crisis is really a housing crisis, and a symptom of the growing privatization of public space. The existing public bathrooms in San Francisco are woefully in-

adequate. Rather than improve public restroom facilities, or tackle the housing shortage in any serious way, the city prefers to deploy Public Works and the police in efforts to euphemistically “sweep” away the problem—thus implying, of course, that the homeless are trash. These “sweep” operations are both counterproductive and flagrantly inhumane: they are a very efficient means of tormenting the homeless, confiscating or destroying their possessions, and shifting them from their present location to a different spot around the corner, where they continue to be homeless. Given the thousands of dollars that cities will expend just to trash some disabled homeless people’s wheelchairs, it’s not unimaginable that a government entity, contracting with private interests, could begin sampling public human waste and connecting the DNA to criminal databases: a kind of unholy synergy between PooPrints and SnapCrap. You may think it’s unlikely, but I wouldn’t underestimate the state’s enthusiasm for imposing new burdensome penalties on the poor, particularly when profit is in the equation.

In fact, biometric data collection is rapidly scaling up, and there are already clear indications that the government is eager to gain access to the genetic information being amassed by private companies under various auspices. Some forms of invasive DNA collection have encountered legal hurdles: the 2008 Genetic Information Nondiscrimination Act bans employer testing of DNA to screen employees, although that didn’t stop Atlas Logistics Group from forcing employees to submit to a cheek swab to pin down a phantom office defecator in 2015. There was a lawsuit, which the employees won, so it appears we are momentarily safe from DNA testing at work. But DNA voluntarily given to a private company for one particular purpose can potentially be accessed by other entities, including the government, for totally different purposes. PooPrints, for example, contracts with government municipalities and Homeowner and Condo Owner Associations, in addition to property managers. As was widely remarked upon, the Golden State Killer was caught because law enforcement was able to access his relatives’ genetic information, thanks to the largely unregulated DNA testing industry (23andMe, Ancestry.com, and the like). FamilyTreeDNA turned out to have no qualms about regularly sharing their database with the FBI. Ancestry.com gave data to the Google-founded Calico, which is attempting to put a stop to aging. 23andMe made a deal with noted evil pharma corporation GlaxoSmithKline to use its data to help develop new drugs. Helix collects customer DNA data to offer them health insights, then gives the data to app developers. And naturally, the NYPD (that old civil-rights-violation standby) maintains a DNA database of—at the time of writing—82,000 citizens, plenty of whom were never convicted of anything, merely questioned in connection to a crime. The database includes samples from children as young as 10.

IN RESEARCHING THE ORIGIN STORY OF THIS dogshit company, I found myself drawn into another capitalist parable: the story of the Boyd family, the excremental entrepreneurs behind PooPrints. As mentioned earlier, Tom Boyd is a wealthy Tennessean. His son, Randy Boyd, owns a company called Radio Systems Corporation, which does \$400 million a year in sales. Randy himself reported \$42 million in taxable income across 2015 and 2016. (Randy paints himself in interviews as a rags-to-riches success story, relating how his father made him buy his own clothes and



A PooPrints DNA test kit

work in the family factory—never pampered, never spoiled by his family’s wealth, a central casting archetype of the hard-working white American male. Of course, most workers don’t leap from the factory floor to head of international sales in one go, but let’s not discount the impact of a properly success-directed mindset.)

After his apprenticeship with his father’s company, Randy struck out on his own selling pet supplies, and soon hit it big with some classic entrepreneurial ingenuity: he waited for the patent on his competitor’s flagship “Invisible Fence” product to expire, then copied it. (As we will see, the Boyds have a knack for riding the line of copyright infringement.) Radio Systems Corporation rapidly expanded and became a pet supply behemoth, selling microchipped pet doors, shock collars, containment fences, GPS tracking systems, and other unsettling technologies that are currently only for pets. (We’ll see if Radio Systems branches out as the planet continues to heat up—the *Guardian* recently reported on a meeting of apocalypse-conscious billionaires who discussed “making guards wear disciplinary collars of some kind in return for their survival.”)

Last year, an investigation by the *Tennessean* uncovered Radio Systems’ rather brazen tax evasion scheme. The company’s Ireland division serves as a routing center for a legal tax dodge known as the “double Irish,” in which income is channeled through an Irish subsidiary before being cached in a traditional tax haven (in the case of Radio Systems, the

SURVEILLANCE FACILITATES CONTROL, WHICH IN TURN FACILITATES PROFIT.

Cayman Islands). The report noted that after “analyzing the company’s tax records, University of California-Irvine School of Law professor Omri Marian estimated...the company paid an effective tax rate of a little more than one percent.”

Randy has in recent years made the traditional move from the world of business into politics, strolling through the revolving door with breezy confidence. Despite having zero educational experience beyond funding scholarships, he was made chair of the Tennessee Higher Education Commission and special adviser to Tennessee Governor Haslam. He proceeded to help engineer the University of Tennessee’s “Drive to 55,” marketed as a plan to improve graduation rates. As reported by the *Associated Press*, leaked documents subsequently made clear that the officials responsible for Drive to 55 were mainly interested in maximizing profits by selling off public university real estate, increasing the use of telecommuting and temporary offices, and decommissioning historic buildings.

After that, Randy’s career reached new heights. Slashing budgets and diverting money from public coffers into private hands results in handsome rewards, after all. It may seem uncouth for a man who is still serving as CEO of a massive business to score an appointment as Tennessee’s Commissioner for Economic and Community Development, or for someone who has never worked as a teacher or administrator to

become the Interim President of the University of Tennessee, but Randy’s wealth, connections, and eye for profiteering have landed him some lucrative sinecures. (He remains UT Interim President to this day). Perhaps all this success went to his head, because he launched a campaign for the Republican gubernatorial nomination in 2018, only to fall flat on his face during the primaries. (He also received at least \$90,000 in campaign donations from companies that had received money from state incentives during his officeholding).

So some guy got rich by copying someone else’s idea, tormented a lot of factory workers in China to make products that in turn tormented a lot of dogs with electric shocks, and, as a result, will now decide how an entire state’s schools should be run.

BUT THE ABSURDITY DOESN’T STOP THERE.

The elder Boyd, Randy’s father, apparently feeling unfulfilled by his dogshit empire, has embarked on a new venture. It’s an experiment in utopianism called “Ancient Lore Village,” a 40-acre “resort inn” with over 150 dwellings, a conference center, and a restaurant. “The village will reflect only good and togetherness,” Boyd says. “Everything is designed so that those who stay with us feel connected to each other.” (Incidentally, it costs upwards of \$200 a night to experience this gift of togetherness.) Upon viewing the design of the housing, the names of the characters, and even the font on the marketing materials, you might be forgiven for thinking that Ancient Lore Village is just an ersatz Middle-Earth resort, and probably some form of legally actionable copyright infringement.

Nonsense, says Tom Boyd. Ancient Lore Village isn’t based on *Lord of the Rings*, but on Tom Boyd’s own book. This wholly original work of fiction is called *The Bobbins: Outcast to the Inner Earth*. The main character’s name is, stupendously, “Bokee Bobbins.” Any resemblance to fictional persons is purely coincidental. I refused to pay \$40 to obtain a copy, but evidently, the 77-page tome follows the cherubic Bokee as he travels to the exotic “Third Dimension,” where presumably he discovers that objects have depth. He also encounters magical villages of dwarves, elves, leprechauns, fairies, orcs, gremlins, and yetis, and comes to accept that, while the creatures all have differing cultures and, uhh, skin tones, they are all united in their desire to worship their creator, “OOoomah.” (This is not a typo.) The book also apparently includes “winged dogs, enchanted hula hoops, and an interdimensional portal to death.” Thinly-veiled self-inserts of Boyd family members all make appearances, with Bokee standing in for a young Tom.

Despite this display of immersive world-building, I find it hard to believe that Boyd cares much for the art of fantasy fiction. The only appeal it seems to have for him—apart from allowing him to lay an entirely unconvincing claim to original intellectual property and market a tourist trap around it—is

the chance to make himself, his family, and his dogs the protagonists of a fantasy epic, just as they see themselves as the protagonists of a quintessential American fable: that of the rags-to-riches bootstrap millionaires.

As it happens, Boyd's visionary project is facing some local resistance. Knoxville residents have organized against the resort's construction and the associated rezoning and traffic increases. But fortunately for everyone, the charms of Ancient Lore will not be confined to the original Walmart-adjacent property in Knoxville. There are plans to build fourteen more of them across the South.

IN A WAY, TOM AND RANDY BOYD DO INDEED live in a parallel fantasy world. They're insulated both by wealth and by a system artificially rigged to abet the amassment of that wealth. They are able to avoid taxes by paying experts to rig up arcane legal and financial structures. The marginal utility of their wealth exists in a different universe than the rest of us.

With technology and capital greasing the slide, enterprises like PooPrints, Radio Systems Corporation, Ancient Lore Village, and countless others continue to bring the fantasies of the rich to life. Because of their stranglehold on politics, the rest of us are subjected to their whims, no matter how facile,

obtrusive, or harmful they might be to our bodies and our communities. Ancient Lore Village is, in perspective, pretty innocuous, though it's an unbearably corny and cynical enterprise. But when a billionaire's fantasy is more about coal-fired power plants, complicit regulatory agencies, invasive data collection, wage theft, and union-busting—as is very often the case—they are, by virtue of our system, able to conjure and wield powerful forces with relative ease. They have built for themselves a world of luxury and wonder, bounded and privatized, available to the select desirables that can pay.

If sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic, sufficiently advanced capitalism might be said to resemble a malevolent form of alchemy. Literal shit can now be transmuted into ill-gotten gold. Seemingly disparate nodes of capital and government—biotech, surveillance, the justice system, real estate—feed into and buttress each other. To the last, capitalists will seek rent through exclusion, exploitation, control, and outright theft. Any fantasyland peace peddled by the marriage of surveillance and private profit is a negative peace: “the absence of tension, not the presence of justice.” Under capitalism, we can never forget that it's the Boyds of the world who will profit from fear, chaos, and ordinary human (and canine) mistakes. The rest of us will have to pick up the pieces. ✚

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