Roar and Let These Crimes be Known Across the Earth

The Sixth Tricontinental Art Bulletin (August 2024)

Listen to 'Chee Lai' ('Arise') or 'March of the Volunteers' recorded in 1941. - Paul Robeson

Enjoy listening to this song by Paul Robeson, '**Chee Lai**' ('Arise') or 'March of the Volunteers' recorded in 1941.

> Smash the iron gates of the Concessions!
> Smash the pious doors of the missionary houses!
> Smash the revolving doors of the Jim Crow Y.M.C.As.
> Crush the enemies of land and bread and freedom!
> Stand up and roar, China!
> You know what you want!
> The only way to get it is
> To take it!

> Roar, China!
> -Excerpt from 'Roar, China!' (1937) by Langston Hughes

While in Madrid in September 1937, African-American poet Langston Hughes published a poem entitled, 'Roar, China!' It was the height of the Spanish Civil War and just two months after Japan's imperialist occupation of China, which took the lives of 20 million Chinese people until its end in 1945. One might wonder what connection Hughes saw between struggles against racial segregation in the United States, Francisco Franco's nationalist forces in Spain, and the full-scale invasion of China.

His poem appeared in *Volunteer for Liberty*, an English-language weekly newspaper for the International Brigades, comprised of fighters from around the world who were defending the Spanish Republic against Franco's fascism. Hughes had been sent to Spain as a correspondent to cover the stories of African-American volunteers who had joined the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. Hughes wrote in his autobiography *I Wonder as I Wander*, 'Why would a Negro come way over to Spain to help solve Spain's problems – perhaps with his very life'. He sought to find out.

PROVISIONAL

Ministerio de Estado

VALENCIA

El Jefe de la Oficina de Prensa

CERTIFICA que Langston Hughes figura inscrito en el Registro de Periodistas Extranjeros de esta Oficina, como corresponsal de "Globe Magazine", "Afro American" de Baltimore, y "Call-Post" de Cleveland.

Valencia, 30 de Julio de 1937.

Langston Hughes' registration as a journalist in Spain, July 1937.

Italy's 1935 invasion of Ethiopia (one of the few African countries that had not suffered the ravages of European colonialism) compelled African-Americans to join the brigades in Spain. They understood that by fighting Franco, they were also weakening Italy's fascist rule under Benito Mussolini. 'Yesterday, Ethiopia, Czechoslovakia – today, Spain – tomorrow, maybe America. Fascism won't stop anywhere – until we stop it,' one volunteer told him. Taking a cue from this, Hughes extended the subject of anti-fascist struggle to Asia.

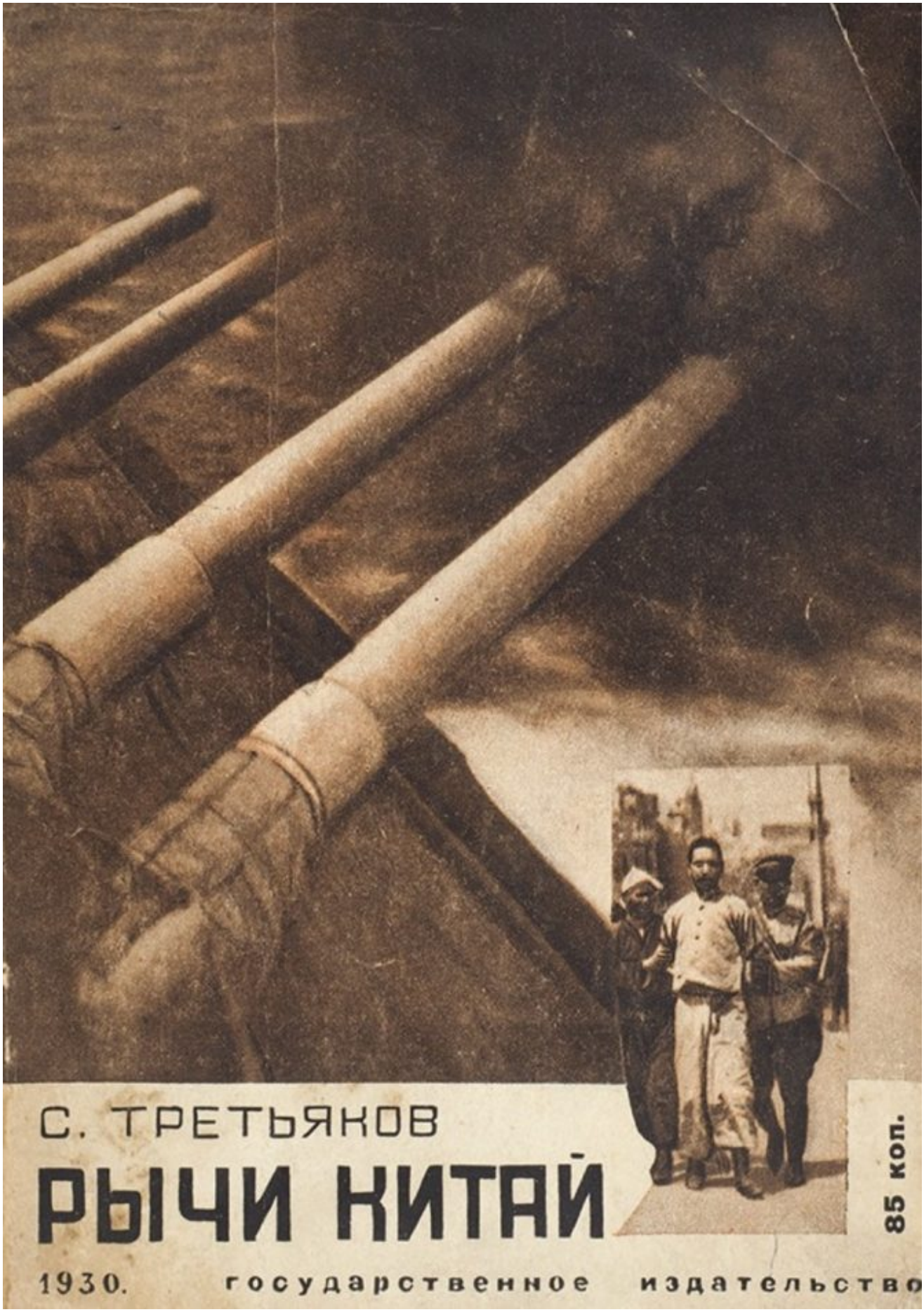
In his poem, Hughes calls on the Chinese people to 'roar' and simultaneously smash the US' Jim Crow laws, and China's concessions – the European-controlled areas of semi-colonial Shanghai. Visiting the city in 1933, Hughes witnessed how colonialism drew 'a colour line against the Chinese in China itself', delimiting areas from buildings to parks for Europeans only – paralleling the racial segregation in his own country. It was clear that racism against the 'darker peoples of the world' was inextricably connected to colonialism and fascism.

Living among the international brigadiers, Spanish avant-garde writers and artists, communists and anarchists, Hughes deepened his anti-fascist solidarity, both in his poetry and politics, which crossed racial, national, and linguistic boundaries. Like Hughes, countless writers and artists joined the battle of ideas and the battle in the trenches.

¡No pasarán! ('They shall not pass!') poster during the Spanish Civil War, 1930s. Credit: Wikimedia Commons.

The Popular Front strategy coming out of the Communist International's seventh congress in 1935 was to unify the world's anti-fascist forces, from progressive liberals to communists. This included material support, such as Soviet assistance and organisation of international brigades in Spain, and the promotion of anti-fascist culture and intellectual networks, with Hughes as one of the prominent figures.

That same year, the International Writers Association for the Defence of Culture was established in Paris to bring together intellectuals committed to using culture in the international anti-fascist fight. Speaking at the association's 1938 meeting, Hughes affirmed that the best poems ought to 'combine music, meaning, and clarity in a pattern of social force.' His poem, 'Roar, China!' embodies culture's unique capacity to transform the hearts and minds of the people, and mobilise them into a social force. He was not, however, the first to invoke China's roar in an artistic production.


С. ТРЕТЬЯКОВ
РЫЧИ КИТАЙ
1930. государственное издательство
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Poster of Sergei Tretyakov's *Roar, China!*, 1930. Credit: State Publishing House of the RSFSR.

In the mid-1920s, Sergei Tretyakov, Russian avant-garde journalist and playwright spent two years in China, teaching Russian literature at Beijing University and filing reports for *Pravda*, the newspaper of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. When he heard about two Chinese boatmen who were executed by the British after a US businessman was found dead in China, Tretyakov wrote the play, *Roar, China!*, applying his 'factography' method of factually representing reality in a work of art. Tretyakov, according to cultural critic Walter Benjamin, exemplified an 'operating writer' whose 'mission is not to report but to struggle; not to play the spectator but to intervene actively.' As a socialist, Tretyakov wrote not just to recount a story, but to expose the brutality of British 'gunboat diplomacy' and China's semi-colonial reality to the world. He wrote to intervene in history.

Tretyakov's play was staged in Moscow in 1926, and four years later became a Broadway production by Herbert Biberman, a communist screenwriter from the US who was later blacklisted and jailed under McCarthyism. Biberman's production *Roar, China!* featured a primarily Asian-American cast of immigrant workers, a similar casting approach that he later used in his celebrated 1954 film about Mexican-American miners, *Salt of the Earth*. En route to Mexico, Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein attended the opening show. Two years later, Langston Hughes, who also saw the Broadway production, met Tretyakov in person on his visit to the Soviet Union, who gifted him with 'an enormous poster, showing a gigantic Chinese coolie breaking his chains', the poet recalled in his autobiography. The poster was a print by the famous Chinese woodblock artist Li Hua, with its title inscribed in English: 'Roar, China!'

Roar, China! Broadway production, New York, 1930. Credit: NY Public Library.

Tretyakov's play found its way to many places such as the Indian People's Theatre Association. In 1942, the play was adapted to the struggle against Japanese fascism in Asia, and the US and English figures were replaced by Japanese characters. As noted in the publication's introduction, this 'anti-fascist' play was intended to be performed for worker and peasant audiences and to show links between Chinese and Indian

realities. After translation into nearly a dozen Indian languages, the play toured around the country. Beyond India, the play was even performed in Yiddish in a Nazi concentration camp in Poland in 1944.

In *Roar China*'s final scene, due to the growing revolt in the backdrop of the story, the Japanese executioner withdraws just before he pulls the trigger on the innocent Chinese boatmen. In their defence, the onlooking crowd of workers proclaims: 'Roar China! Roar in the ears of all the world. Let these crimes be known across the earth. Roar!' Indeed, through its multiple iterations – from woodblock prints to theatrical plays, from Broadway shows to poems – the roar of China resonated with the oppressed, the colonised, and those fighting against fascism around the world.

Li Hua (China), *Roar, China!*, 1935.

A century later, as right-wing and neofascist forces rear their ugly heads again, where is our collective roar across the earth, and how are artists mobilising to resist this growing tide? Our latest dossier, ***To Confront Rising Neofascism, the Latin American Left Must Rediscover Itself***, tries to address just that. For the publication, we included artwork from Latin American and Caribbean artists who have portrayed the realities of neofascism. We spoke with some of the Brazilian artists to learn more about their work.

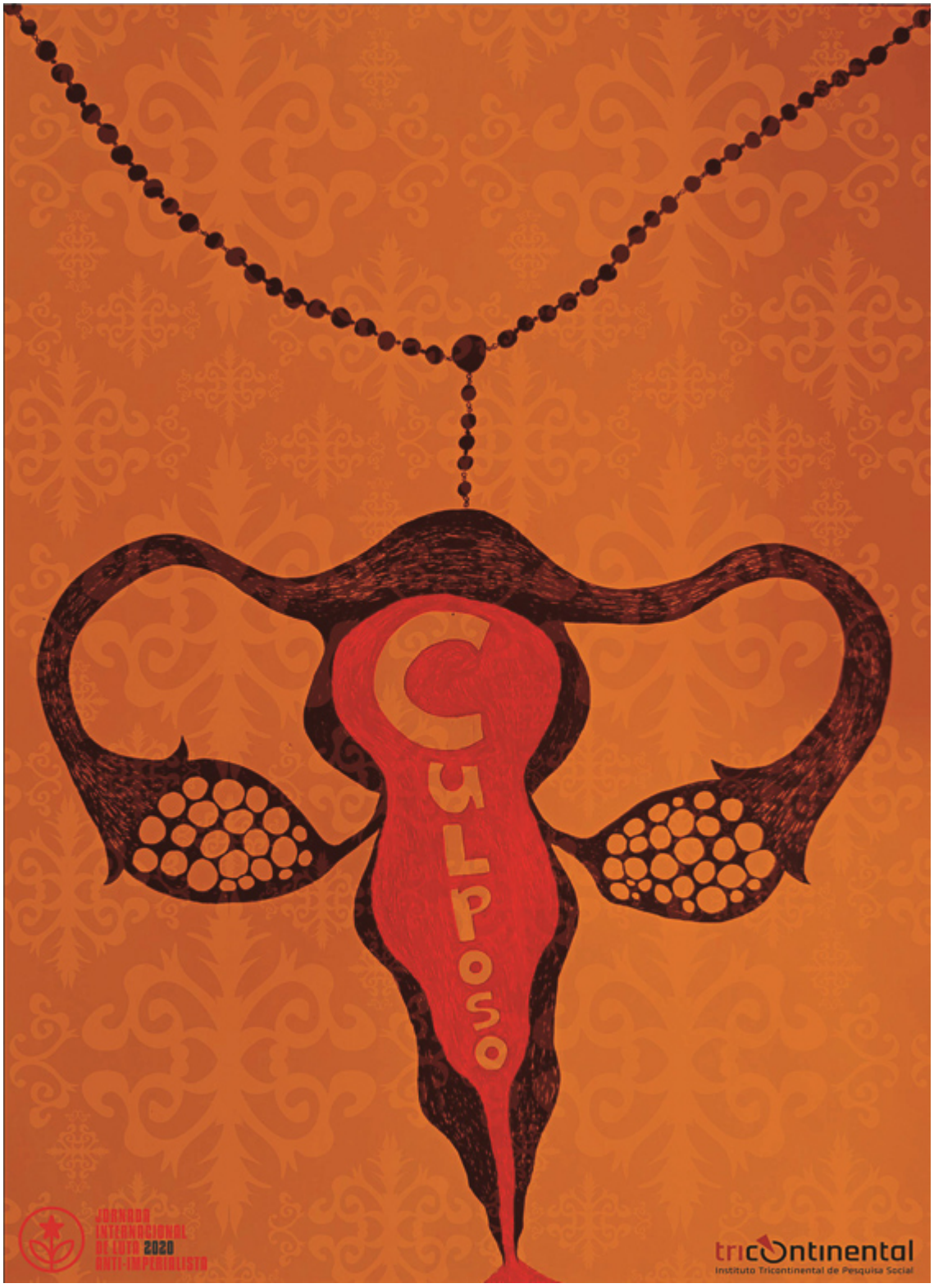
Túlio Carapiá and **Clara Cerqueira** (Brazil), *Hybrid Wars*, 2020.

Remembering their work created in 2020, Túlio Carapiá and Clara Cerqueira recalled,

> we witnessed the consolidation of the far-right's rise in our country with the election of Jair

> Bolsonaro. Also, we observed the process of the Venezuelan elections being boycotted by the right, the coup in Bolivia against Evo Morales, and the harsh repression of protests in Chile against the Constitution implemented during Pinochet's dictatorship – clear demonstrations of the rise of conservatism and the far-right through undemocratic means across Latin America.

Carapiá and Cerqueira's immediate response to the 'insidious manoeuvres of imperialism, through fake news, hate speech, evangelical religions, and all kinds of deceitful propaganda' was to 'speak out' and create art that analyses the reality and puts it in dialogue with other perspectives. 'We believe that collectivity is the only effective and lasting form of learning, resistance, and survival.'

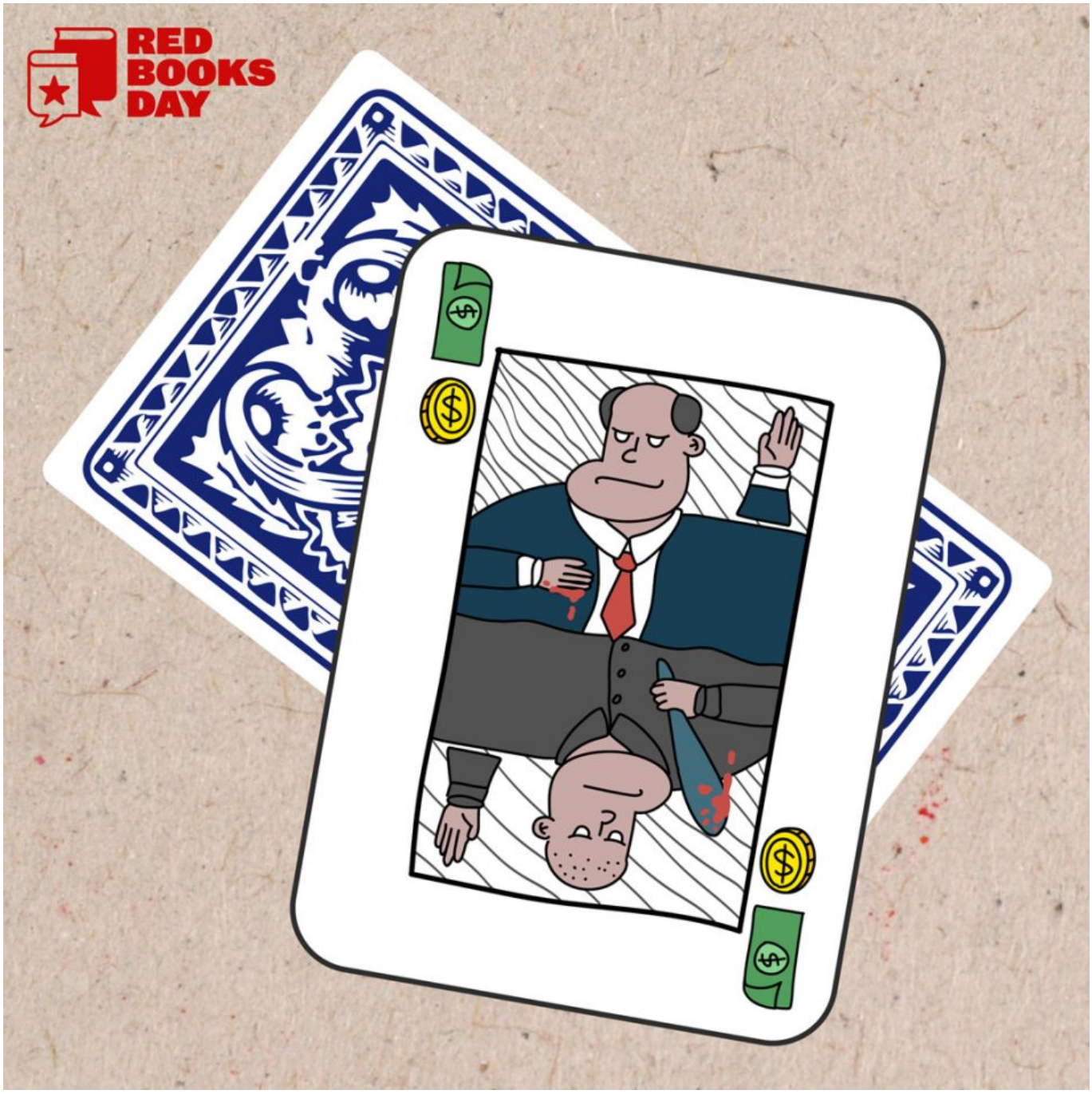


Luciléia da Silva Vieira (Brazil), '*Unintentional' Rape*, 2020.

Made in the same year, Luciléia da Silva Vieira's work was 'created out of profound indignation' after a defendant in Brazil was acquitted of rape charges because it was deemed 'unintentional'. When we asked about far-right tactics attacking reproductive rights, promoting 'traditional' heteronormative family structures,

and spreading fear of so-called 'gender ideology,' she responded, 'This hatred is a project, and fundamentalism is at the core of this oppressive discourse against women'. For her, in the face of this project of hate, visual art, as a language, 'has the power to communicate, provoke reflection, and create profound impacts'.

In Other News…



Red Books Day poster for August by **Salvatore Carleo** (Italy/Potere al Popolo).

The red book of the month is Slovenian sociologist Rastko Močnik's *Spisi o suvremenom kapitalizmu* (*Writings on Modern Capitalism*). In the artwork inspired by the book, Salvatore Carleo represents historical fascism and contemporary neofascism as mirrored kings on playing cards, with their parallels and distinctions.

Dani Ruggeri with the cover of *El Otro Lago*.

On a final and special note, our art department's Dani Ruggeri has just published her second fantasy-adventure children's comic book with Maten al Mensajero. ***El Otro Lago*** (*'The Other Lake'*) takes place in a working-class neighbourhood on the periphery of Buenos Aires, Argentina. For Dani, this comic is about amplifying stories from the margins that are too often portrayed through poverty and hardships, rather than by their poetry and possibilities.

Warmly,

Tings Chak

Art director, Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research