

## **Hacking the Border: Undocumented Migration and Technologies of Resistance in Alex Rivera's *Sleep Dealer* and Digital Media**

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Peruvian-American filmmaker Alex Rivera uses film and web-based media to document immigrant life in the U.S. and the network of transnational connections that result from displacement. Rivera's web-based documentaries, themselves subversive uses of technology, critique neoliberalism and the hyper-vigilance and violence under which we live while also pointing to the creativity, ingenuity, and technological savvy of the 21st century clandestine migrant to invent ever new forms of resistance. This study situates Rivera's 2008 feature-length film, *Sleep Dealer*, in the context of U.S.-Mexico border films and the current trend in anti-globalization, digitally mediated activism. Radical action happens in *Sleep Dealer* as a result of technological advances that create solidarity between people of vastly different, but interconnected, social, political and geographical positions. Rivera's work disrupts the image of the undocumented immigrant, bringing it more in line with the 21<sup>st</sup> century realities that inspire us all to get connected and fight, take part in the global coalitions working for justice. [Article copies available for a fee from The Transformative Studies Institute. E-mail address: [journal@transformativestudies.org](mailto:journal@transformativestudies.org) Website: <http://www.transformativestudies.org> ©2020 by The Transformative Studies Institute. All rights reserved.]

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"...a veces controlas la máquina y a veces te controla a ti"  
*Sleep Dealer* (2008)

"At times you control the machine and at times it controls you,"<sup>2</sup> cautions Luz Martinez, a "*coyotek*" in Alex Rivera's vision of a not so distant

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future as she installs clandestine "nodes" in his protagonist, Memo, which connect his body to the "Net" and allow him to work in the virtual border factories or "*infomaquilas*," otherwise known as "sleep dealers." She expresses the dual-edged sword that technology, the Internet in particular, has become in our increasingly globalized world. On the one hand, the egalitarian, democratic promises of the information age have been eclipsed by the devastation of local economies and environments of the global South, the increasing gap between the rich and the poor, and the ever more militarized surveillance of daily life. On the other hand, from Mexico's Zapatista guerrilla "webfare" to the WTO swarming protests in Seattle, we are witnessing the rise of global justice movements around the world, mediated by digital media and activist networking resisting these destructive forces (Arquilla et al.). Latino digital media artist and filmmaker Alex Rivera participates in and represents these radical actions using film and web-based media to document immigrant life in the U.S. and the network of transnational connections that result from displacement. Rivera's web-based documentaries, themselves subversive uses of technology, critique neoliberalism and the hyper-vigilance and violence under which we live while also pointing to the creativity, ingenuity, and technological savvy of the 21st century clandestine migrant to invent ever new forms of resistance.

Rivera's 2008 award-winning feature film, *Sleep Dealer*, depicts a militarized world of walled borders where a globalized workforce sends its labor North via cyberspace from remote maquiladoras. Workers toil until they go blind or collapse, earning factories the name "sleep dealers."<sup>3</sup> While ostensibly science fiction, the film depicts technologies already in use and alludes to recent occurrences such as the Bechtel corporation's water privatization efforts in Bolivia, Fox's televising drone patrols in Iraq and U.S. border towns, and the structural violence experienced by *maquila* workers, to mention a few. *Sleep Dealer* follows the intersecting stories of three characters: Memo Cruz (played by Mexican actor, Luis Fernando Peña), a Oaxacan *campesino*; Luz Martinez (played by Chilean actress Leonor Varela), a writer/journalist/blogger and *coyotek* who helps people without documents cross over into the world of the sleep dealers as node workers; and Rudy Ramirez (played by U.S. actor Jacob Vargas), a

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<sup>2</sup> This and subsequent translations are my own.

<sup>3</sup> The term refers to early 20th century migrant workers who rented beds from "sleep dealers" along their journey from southern to northern Europe in search of work. Rivera read this in a book by art historian and theorist John Berger (Prasch 46).

Mexican-American corporate contracted drone pilot trained to kill "terrorists" remotely for a television audience. This study places Rivera's work in the context of the current trend of global justice activism, digitally mediated, by exploring his use of the radical figure of the "campesino hacktivist."<sup>4</sup> Campesino hacker Memo is forced to become an undocumented migrant and eventually develops into a sort of activist.

As a migrant worker and son of a Oaxacan tenant farmer, Memo is an unusual sci-fi hero, compared to the more common, astronauts, scientists, and police detectives.<sup>5</sup> Rivera patterns Memo on *Star Wars'* epic hero Luke Skywalker who was also a peasant farmer from a desert planet whose home was destroyed by an imperialist army, forcing him to cross the border with the help of a Jedi knight (here the drone pilot).<sup>6</sup> Like Skywalker, Memo starts out alienated from his Oaxacan home and farming community and moves to a deeper identification with them and a new appreciation of the ecological knowledge and technology passed on to him by his father. His development is reflected in the environmental spaces he inhabits and the film's cinematography further establishes an analogous relationship between Memo and the land. The change in Memo's attitude coincides with the new understanding of injustice he gains from being forced to leave his home and plug into the system. These experiences, coupled with his contact with the other characters, lead him to reflect on his social location and resist the forces that oppress him effectively becoming a hacktivist. The protagonist's trajectory depicts how technology fortifies the global capitalist machine and how the marginalized have used it to mobilize emerging political consciousness and resistance.

The recurring theme throughout much of Rivera's work, connectivity, refers to the network of interrelated human, technological and ecological

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<sup>4</sup> Anthropologist Diane Nelson came up with the term *Maya hacker* while working with Mayan cultural rights in Guatemala in 1993 where information and networking were essential political strategies of indigenous rights movements (291). Mayan activists provide alternatives to colonializing education in "literacy, desktop publishing, linguistic theories, radio, and computers to promote cultural survival . . . they say that the 'decolonization of the Maya begins with knowing how to use technology and not being used by it'" (292). The image of the campesino hacker or hacktivist became more current with the EZLN and those who work in solidarity with them globally.

<sup>5</sup> For more on the radical image of the farm worker in *Sleep Dealer*, see Curtis Marez's phenomenal study, *Farm Worker Futurism: Speculative Technologies of Resistance*, which explores the historical role that technology has played in the depiction of migrant laborers in the U.S.

<sup>6</sup> Viewers will note many similarities between *Star Wars* and *Sleep Dealer*, including the latter's bar scenes and climactic drone chase through the Oaxacan canyons that recalls Skywalker's chase to the Death Star (DVD interview with filmmaker).

relationships. Focusing on the point of view of undocumented and documented immigrants in the U.S. principally from south of the border, Rivera demonstrates the way local and global human connections among individuals and communities are disturbed and reorganized as they cross literal and figurative physical or virtual borders. Unusual for a first world lens, we see the causes of migration shifting family and community relations and thrusting migrant workers into new realms where they connect with "*el otro lado*" (the other side) almost always using technology in new ways. The term "connectivity" is used in electronics and computer science to refer to the network of links through which electricity and information flow. The Internet is the vehicle for the exchange of labor, goods, information, and capital. Access to it is a way of connecting with the world, but more importantly, *Sleep Dealer* demonstrates that it is also a principal source of power within the first world economy and is in no-way a free-flowing exchange of energy and power. We observe the unequal power relations play out as different individuals enter into the global system from unique positions of access or are barred from it entirely. Ecological connectivity figures prominently as Rivera explores the changing relationships between humans and our natural habitats as characters are cut off from life-giving resources due to corporate greed and forced migration. Ecology is a science of connections between the earth and all the forms of life that inhabit it in an interrelated network of systems. In fact, as early as the 1950s, ecosystems ecology was explained using cybernetics, and connectivity.<sup>7</sup>

The figure of the campesino hacktivist draws from the very real movement in Chiapas, Mexico, the EZLN, *Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional* (The Zapatista Army of National Liberation). There are numerous examples of digitally mediated activism around the globe, but I focus on the EZLN because Rivera's film alludes to it and, as the first example of an "informational guerilla movement," (Castells) or "netwar" (Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 1993, 2001), it has spurred countless

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<sup>7</sup> Devon Peña tells us that the model's author, Eugene Odum, had ties to military research agencies and the Atomic Energy Commission that gave him a technocratic approach (Peña 13). Relevant to our themes here dealing with social and environmental injustice, some ecologists opposed the model's "mechanistic depiction of nature, top-down engineering ethos, and reflection of managerial capitalist values" while others objected to the way the theory viewed nature as something to be managed, manipulated, monitored and controlled (Peña 13). This is yet another instance of the way our intellectual models regarding natural resources and human labor have been co-opted by corporate and military interests leading to the kind of structural oppression that is part of business as usual.

rebellions since its January 1st revolt in 1994 and continues to inspire global justice activist movements, artists and intellectuals of all kinds. Before its appearance on the global scene, the EZLN was largely unknown outside of Mexico despite its directing peasant revolts that date back to the 1940s (Castells 77). Most critics agree that the success of the EZLN was due to its strategic use of telecommunications, videos and computer-mediated communication to gain support and solidarity around the world (Castells 83). One of the key demands of the group is the right to government support of indigenous controlled media. Significant to this study of Rivera's work is the EZLN's use of representational practices that hacktivists have adopted to resist structural violence. While dozens died on both sides of the initial conflict, the movement has desperately avoided conventional warfare, employing arms more as a symbol or statement of their sacrifice and willingness to die for the cause (Castells 82). Their iconic ski masks play a similar signifying role, as does the image of pipe smoking Subcomandante Marcos and his poetic writings and interviews (Castells 82-3). The EZLN not only protests against conformity to a capitalist geopolitical order, but members also see themselves as patriots who want to be a part of the nation and who demand democracy, liberty and justice for all Mexicans (Castells 81). According to a December 1994 poll, 78% of Mexico City residents, who also suffered from these economic policies and corruption, thought their demands were justified (Castells 82). Stefan Wray explains how the influence of the Zapatista cyberwar has inspired other groups interested in protest through "electronic civil disobedience":

With each passing year, since 1994, the level of computer sophistication has increased. What began as mere transmission of EZLN communiqués and other information via email became also a network of hypertext linked web sites. In borrowing another term from Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* - in addition to nomadic - the movement of information through these various cyber-nets of resistance has been said to have occurred rhizomatically, moving horizontally, non-linearly, and underground.

Naturally, the Zapatista Electronic movement is a top priority for analysis and surveillance for Military and Intelligence research (Digital Zapatismo). The U.S. Military think tank, the Rand Corporation, whose publications I cite liberally here, has studied the movement extensively.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> For more information on the Rand Corporation, see: [www.rand.org](http://www.rand.org).

Rivera's *Sleep Dealer* alludes to the ELZN in the "aqua-terrorist" group called the EMLA, *Ejército Maya de la Liberación de Agua* (the Mayan Army of Water Liberation), whose members wear black ski masks like the EZLN. Memo's father is killed by a drone that mistakenly identified him as a member of this group because of Memo's hacking apparatus. This is one of the most significant moments in the plot because it compels Memo to go north to work in the sleep dealers, depicting a part of the immigration narrative often left out by anti-immigrant representations. These narratives, as Rivera points out in an interview, present migration as a new phenomenon that responds principally to current economic motivators, thereby erasing hundreds of years of "disruption" of local realities.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, it was a key gesture in Rivera's representation that the unjustified drone attack creates the crisis that leads to undocumented migration (Calit2ube). Extending the narrative of the undocumented border crosser, Rivera challenges the powerful and pervasive depiction of the "illegal alien" in the U.S. as an undesirable, helpless, victim and a burden, or a criminal, menace to society, even a terrorist and ultimately unhuman.

Mainstream U.S. news media reproduces anxiety-producing reports of the influx of undesirable migrants at border zones that represent a threat because, as victims of "inferior," "underdeveloped," or "oppressive" nations - like the 2014 "wave" of children from Central America is depicted - they will be a burden the U.S. society cannot manage.<sup>10</sup> More recently, the ominous images of the "caravan" used to justify policies that undermine asylum are invoked long after the influx has dwindled (Alvarez). Charles Ramírez Berg describes how these overflowing border images don't seem to have progressed beyond the patronizing and "self-congratulatory" poetic invitation on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty where immigrants are depicted as "tired," "poor," "huddled masses," "homeless, tempest tost," "wretched refuse" oppressed by "teeming" societies that prohibit them from breathing free (160). The scholar describes the way television documentaries and news stories

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<sup>9</sup> CALit2 interview. Under the pretext of liberating nations from Spanish colonization, the U.S. claims control of the Americas in 1823 with the Monroe Doctrine. The policy did assist various nations in freeing themselves from colonial powers, but it also justified the consistent pattern of political intervention and economic encroachment by the U.S., a continuity of "disruptions."

<sup>10</sup> See for instance: "Why are children flooding the U.S. Border?"

<http://www.newsweek.com/why-are-children-flocking-us-mexico-254371>; "As Children Flood to Border, The U.S. Presses Latin American to Act,"

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/21/world/americas/biden-in-guatemala-to-discuss-child-migrants.html>.

depict the U.S. border as a leaky dike threatening to overflow into the United States, flooding the country with "illegal aliens" and destroying the American way of life in the process. These films are part of what José David Saldívar aptly calls "fundamentally colonialist discourses whereby U.S. Latinos are cast as an illegal outside force, an alien nation 'polluting' U.S. culture." Or, as Ali Behdad puts it: The U.S. -Mexico border has been portrayed in the popular discourse as in a state of siege. As suggested by the titles of such journalistic reports as 'Losing Control of the Borders' or 'Invasion from Mexico: It Just Keeps Growing,' the border is represented as a battle grounds where the Border Patrol strives to defend the nation by upholding its 'border integrity' against the 'swelling tide of illegal Mexican aliens' (200). Ramírez Berg interrogates the general use of the term "alien" and convincingly argues that a plethora of science fiction films involving extraterrestrials and space invaders represent "a culturally unconscious means of working out the whole question of immigration that has emerged in the last decades" and because the most formidable group is Latino, he connects these images with Latino stereotypes he identifies (154). *Sleep Dealer* transforms this victim or threatening image into one of agency and technological and political sophistication.

The artist's image of the campesino hacker explodes traditional stereotypes of the immigrant from south of the border as uneducated or somehow regressive and underdeveloped. According to the OED, a hacker is "(s)omeone who gains unauthorized access to a computer system," a fitting metaphor for undocumented border crossing. Certainly, technological sophistication has not been traditionally associated with undocumented immigrants or campesinos, even with the striking historical examples to the contrary, namely, the Zapatista Electronic Movement. Steven Levy, in his 1983 study, *Hackers: Heroes of the Computer Revolution*, describes a subculture of hackers that began in the 1950s at MIT and extends to contemporary hobbyists and gamers who innovate and customize their own equipment and software. Central to hacker culture is the "hacker ethic" that maintains that access to computers should be unlimited, information should be free, and that computers can contribute to improving the quality of life among other things. Hackers believe they ought to be able to tinker with any system and improve upon it. Therefore, there is an inherent tendency towards decentralization and mistrust of authorities. The "free source movement" came out of this ethic. Rivera's numerous mockumentaries, the *Lowdrone* installation, and *InvisibleAmerica.com* that satirizes news stories, to

mention a few, express this active resistance against status quo injustice and a playfulness and cleverness that is a signature of hacker culture.

Rivera pays homage to the groundbreaking work of a kindred hacktivist in *Sleep Dealer*. In the workshop where Memo tinkers with his hacking device lies a copy of *Hackear para principiantes (Hacking for Beginners)* by R. Domiguez. Ricardo Dominguez, artist, activist, UCSD professor of visual arts, and a significant influence on Rivera's work, has been a major force transforming images of borders and border crossers using technology. Dominguez has been called the "godfather of hacktivism," though he prefers the term "Electronic Civil Disobedience" for its ties to historical activism (Frank and Bond). *The Critical Art Ensemble* (CAE) coined the term in 1996, referring to Thoreau's 1849 manifesto, to describe this sort of digital activism. Dominguez was a member of the CAE in the 80s and is co-founder, with Carmin Karasic, Brett Stalbaum and Stefan Wray, of the *Electronic Disturbance Theater* that works in solidarity with the Zapatistas. He has organized countless acts and technological tools of electronic civil disobedience: from virtual sit-ins of the FloodNet, a performative and interactive program that spams targeted servers overloading them with requests. Professor Dominguez and his team created the TBT, the Transborder Immigrant Tool, an electronic phone app that helps undocumented border crossers find water left by NGOs such as Water Stations Inc. and Border Angels, among other helpful functions.

In *The Power of Identity*, sociologist Manuel Castells discusses the process of identity construction in the context of transnational activism and social movements in what he refers to as our "network society" that can also be useful to understand the characters' conscientization. The first, "legitimizing identity," is "introduced by the dominant institutions of society to extend and rationalize their domination vis à vis social actors" (Castells 8). The second, "resistance identity," is "generated by those actors that are in positions/conditions devalued and/or stigmatized by the logic of domination, thus building trenches of resistance and survival on the basis of principles different from, or opposed to, those permeating the institutions of society" (Castells 8). The final and most radical formation is "project identity," which emerges when "social actors, on the basis of whichever cultural materials are available to them, build a new identity that redefines their position in society and by doing so, seek the transformation of overall social structure" (Castells 8). Here Castells explains that resistance identity creates communities that may lead to project identity, that is, the formation of transformative subjects. One example he uses is feminism, which moves from pockets of



resistance around women's rights to challenging patriarchy in all its manifestations, the family, sexuality, reproduction, and identity, thereby transforming the entire society. We might just as well use the example of the Zapatistas who began as a localized struggle resisting their oppressed and marginalized position in Mexican society and eventually expanded their protest to include the transformation of the global political order. *Sleep Dealer* represents this process of the construction of transformative, oppositional subjects in the characters of Memo, Luz and Rudy who realize transnational digitally mediated activism innovating border films, particularly those situated on the U.S.-Mexico border.<sup>11</sup>

We first meet Memo working in the sleep dealer and remembering life in his pueblo, Santa Ana del Río, Oaxaca. The town's name, "del Río," is full of irony as the river is only a memory since a U.S. corporation privatized it, damming it and piping it North. Recalling how he and his father had to pay for water for their *milpa* (traditional corn field) in the dry region, he says, "Para mí, Santa Ana del Río era una trampa, seca, sola, desconectada..." ("To me, Santa Ana del Río was a trap, dry, alone, disconnected...") On the other hand, despite the struggle required to work it, Memo's father believed in the land's value and felt it was integral to their heritage and identity. Before the dam, his farm did well. He even hired others to work the land with them. The farmer represents a tradition of rich ecological knowledge and a way of life based on this understanding in Oaxaca and other rural areas in Mexico that have been devastated by the global economy since NAFTA. In Castells's formation, Memo's father is an example of a resistance identity, surviving and resisting through tradition; however, he is unable to take action that would transform his society. He is unable to grasp enough of how the unjust system works to be able to fight it. At this point, for Memo the *milpa* is just an obligation. He spends his free time escaping this life by hacking into the Net, tuning in to the world of *el otro lado* - the U.S. Memo's alienation from his roots irritates his father, who says to him angrily, "No sabes ni quién eres!" ("You don't even know who you are!") While Memo doesn't leave his home because of the struggle on the farm, his family's poverty or what he learns on the Net, we see the various kinds of forces that push people to migrate north that contribute to his decision to leave when the ultimate motivator occurs.

Economic pressure, lack of income, and hunger represent the most common push factors presented in Mexican and Hollywood border films

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<sup>11</sup> We can also infer these processes in some of Rivera's documentaries which give glimpses into the lives of transnational subjects.

though the majority don't treat these factors in depth, according to David Maciel (11). The critic explains that Mexican border films are practically a genre all to itself given that since 1938, over one hundred such films have been produced (1). Mexican migration to the U.S. must be understood in the complex historical, economic and political contexts that go back to the beginnings of both nations. U.S. imperialism, a legacy assumed after European colonial powers, is certainly not explored as a cause of increased poverty and migration in films from either nation.<sup>12</sup> Many films include the pull of being reunited with family members, such as *La misma luna* (2007 Patricia Riggen) and *El viaje de Teo* (2008 Walter Doehner). In addition to economic triggers, natural disasters and civil wars are common features in films featuring migration from Central America (Deveny 251). In Gregory Nava's classic *El Norte* (1983), two children flee after their parents are killed by soldiers acting under the government sponsored genocide enacted on Mayan people during the period. The U.S. media's pervasive images of improved work situations and quality of life often act as pull factors.

Memo's obsession with hacking demonstrates the powerful influence of North American media around the world. He intercepts conversations of node workers gainfully employed remotely in locations through the U.S., fueling his curiosity and alienation from his home. Memo is not the only one disconnected from his local reality at this stage of the film. His brother escapes through television, cheering with relish as drone pilots bomb "aqua-terrorists" in lands strikingly similar to his own. Rivera explains that Memo's desire to connect with the North and his brother's fascination with television represent the way people in many nations are absorbed in all the U.S. is transmitting to the world through the media (director's comments in DVD). Rivera explores this phenomenon in his 1995 mockumentary *Papapapá (couch potato father)*, which satirizes both his father's obsession with American television while living in Peru and the racism he experiences as a new immigrant in the U.S. This story unfolds alongside a comical exploration of the way potatoes – extremely varied in color and size in Peru – are selected first by European colonizers, then by U.S. companies to make potato chips based on a conformity of size, shape and white color. The potato's trajectory mirrors Rivera's father's journey north. He hopes to escape the prejudice he experiences due to his Incan blood, only to find Jim Crow legalized

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<sup>12</sup> For more on U.S. neocolonialism see Juan González's *Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America*, Howard Zinn's *The Forging of the American Empire* and many works of Eduardo Galeano including the influential 1971 *Venas abiertas de Latino América*, to name but a few.

segregation and discrimination in the U.S. The colonizing transmissions devalue local realities and create desire for U.S. products and the promise of access to power and material wealth. Here we see that one does not acquire an oppositional identity by virtue of being born into a marginal location - the margins are not out of reach of the global capitalist desire-making machine. More insidiously, Rivera's reference to the Fox network's 2009 TV series *Homeland Security USA* points out how such transmissions also subtly validate the structural violence that maintains an unjust system of unequal relations.

Despite Memo's initial alienation, the cinematography depicts him as connected to the land in Oaxaca. While Memo spends his free time listening to conversations on his makeshift receiver, he does not neglect his farming duties. Memo tells in voiceover that the summer he is forced to leave his home seemed like any summer. We see him watering the *milpa*, the sun passing overhead and the corn sprouting from the soil in time-lapse video. The effect is that Memo does not seem separate from the fluid movement of these natural elements in this scene; the rhythm of his days appears synchronized with the sun and the earth. This harmonious rhythm is brutally interrupted when Memo and his brother see their own house targeted by a drone pilot on a neighbor's television. As they approach their house, running, they see it blown to bits and their father shot and killed after crawling out of the rubble. The pilot, Rudy, had been ordered to attack after intercepting Memo's clandestine receiver. Wracked with guilt, Memo flees Santa Ana del Río for Tijuana to work in the sleep dealers to help his family. Here Rivera introduces the question of representation in the reality television program. Memo not only sees his father killed on the screen, he also sees his life and his world "presented and packaged as other" (Calit2ube). Rivera continues to explain that, while the drone contains hours of footage, it may be "all-seeing, (but) it isn't all-knowing" (Calit2ube). The fact that the reality show presents a false representation of Memo's family as aqua-terrorists shows the "real weapon is the narrative," the lives of victims, their families, their communities, histories are erased (Calit2ube). Therefore, Rivera and other hacktivists use digitally mediated narratives and images that depict the realities of migrants to combat them.

Tijuana is an unknown, urban, artificially lit space where nothing green seems to push through the pavement. Even the Río Grande is paved and channeled. Here Luz, the blogger/*coyotek*, surgically fits Memo with nodes so he can enter the world of the *infomaquila*, plugging himself into the machine like a marionette, his movements controlling a robot working construction on a high-rise building in California. While

Memo crosses a virtual rather than a physical border, he is thrust into a borderland that is as radically new to him as a new country. Interestingly, when he inserts the contact lens-like apparatus that allows him to see through the robot's "eyes," they go from brown to blue. We wonder how much of himself Memo will lose to the other side. The imagery suggests he is being exploited by the corporation. At first all seems well: he happily sends money home through a call center. Eventually, however, he weakens, his eyes growing exhausted. At this point, Memo tells Luz about the *milpa*. She is fascinated and values the fact that he has done "real" physical work, only having read about the way *maíz* and *frijol* (corn and beans) are cultivated together employing ancient technology. After doing work that is so distant and disconnected from his local reality and from the earth in the sleep dealer, Memo begins to appreciate the value of the *milpa* and his labor and life in Oaxaca.

The difficulty of exploitative labor is a major theme in migrant cinema globally; Deveny refers to the 3 Ds of immigrant labor (dirty, difficult, dangerous) (230). While Memo's work isn't dirty or difficult in a conventional sense, it is dangerous. Incidents of exhaustion and blindness are common and the more deadly short circuit a possibility. We get a sense of Memo's vertiginous experience in the *infomaquila* in the opening scene where, explaining that he and the others would hallucinate during long shifts, he recalls life in Santa Ana del Río. Rivera employs brilliant special effects to visualize the memory sequences with fragmentary images that emerge and recede out of a watery darkness amidst reflections of light and color. Memo's voiceover guides the narrative above muted underwater sounds. These cinematographic techniques encourage viewers to contemplate the physical, psychological, and virtual distances migrants living far from home may cross on a daily basis. Thomas Prasch identifies the film's dystopian theme of "technoalienation" as related to the exploitation and insecurity of undocumented worker conditions today (47). Similar techniques are employed to depict this surreal aspect of contemporary migrant life in Rivera's 2003 documentary *The Sixth Section*. The film, which contributed conceptually to *Sleep Dealer*, portrays a circuit community from Mexico living in Newburgh, NY that not only maintains strong ties to its home community through use of money transfer centers, cheap phone service and home video, but has built roads, a water system, a baseball field, and an ambulance service in Boquerón, Mexico. Dominguez argues that "immigrants are always presented as less-than-human and certainly not part of a community which is establishing and inventing new forms of life" (quoted in Bird). *The Sixth Section*, like

*Sleep Dealer*, subverts negative representations of immigrants as stealing jobs from citizens or even as easily exploited labor by depicting the ingenuity, creativity, sacrifice and collective spirit of many immigrant communities. In this case, Mexican immigrants, some undocumented and some with papers, overcame their isolation through their efforts and made tremendous political impact. The governor took interest in their projects and now partners with Boquerón locals to continue the progress there. As Rivera says on his website alexrivera.com, beyond what they have created, it is the migrant stories that "shatter our assumptions about national identity, globalization and the 'American Dream.'"

Luz is an aspiring journalist with student loans to pay off who sells her memories of people south of the border uploading them via her nodes for a company called *TruNode*. Her blog is entitled "*del otro lado del muro*" ("from the other side of the wall"). Rudy, our drone pilot, buys Luz's memory of Memo and requests more information. Not knowing who Rudy is and in need of money herself, she spends more time with Memo in order to find something more she can sell. With regards to the above-mentioned *Star Wars* character allusions, Luz would be Princess Leia, who sends a hologram distress call to Obi Wan Kenobe through the robot R2D2. The situation is reversed here since it is Luke who intercepts the message meant for the Jedi knight, here Rudy.<sup>13</sup> Finally, Memo reveals the whole story about his father's death. When he finds that Luz has sold his memories, he is upset and throws himself into working overtime, exhausting himself. It is at this point that Memo sees the sleep dealer for the exploitative instrument it is. A co-worker collapses on the job after being hit by an electrical surge and has to be carried away. This worker's robot drops a beam that swings out, destroying a mirrored pane that Memo's robot was holding. Just before it shatters, Memo sees the robot's reflection in the mirror as if it were his own. This reflection figures a moment of anagnorisis for Memo: he senses the dehumanizing forces at work; he is a replaceable cog in a machine that will drain him of life and humanity. Apropos of this he says "Me estaba derramando la energía y mandándola lejos. Lo que pasó al río me estaba pasando a mí." ("It was draining me of energy and sending it far away. What happened to the river was happening to me.") As Memo says these words, the idea is manifested cinematographically in an image of his veins turning into a pipeline that we suspect carries water north. This correspondence between Memo and the dammed river was so central to the film that

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<sup>13</sup> Rivera has Rudy's hoodie strategically placed in one scene to allude to the knight's hooded robe (DVD interview with director).

Rivera and producer Anthony Bregman considered calling it "Las venas abiertas de Memo Cruz" after the classic *Las venas abiertas de América Latina* (1971), Eduardo Galeano's telling of Latin America's history of conquest, exploitation and environmental plunder and destruction by Europe and the United States (director's comments on DVD). Memo's story is the story of Latin America. It is fitting that this initiation of Memo's conscientization coincides with this allusion to Galeano's book that awakened a generation of people around the world to the legacies of colonization.

The three characters, all "node workers," cross over, connect, or are thrown together due to the Internet and Luz's writing. Luz's digital memories function as a figure for activist or testimonial writing in the network society, such as Galeano's books and numerous recent digital writings and Rivera's digital media. As a coyotek, she is a connecting figure who says she wants to use the nodes for good, to bridge the distance, and cross the invisible borders that separate people. The nodes do allow people to literally connect with one another and experience the other's inner world - this is what Luz wants to do with her stories. This coupled with the fact that she provides unauthorized access to the Net demonstrate her hacker ethic. She is educated, living on her own in Tijuana (a fact her mother doesn't approve of). In the border town, she meets people from all walks of life and hears their stories gaining insight into the larger system at work. In this, Luz is moving towards a project identity, one interested in transforming society actively. The final piece for her to discover is her own position in the system, which Memo allows Luz to understand: how her memory blogging could be complicit in oppression, functioning as a surveillance tool for a militarized corporation. She begins to understand, as they all eventually do, how interconnected we are and, further, the exploitative and destructive impact globalization has on communities of the global south.

The coyote figure is almost always depicted as exploitative and/or heartless regarding the wellbeing or fate of those he crosses over in border films, or he is employed by someone of this nature. Among films with this image are the two most viewed Hollywood films on the subject before the 1990s, *Borderline* (1980) with Charles Bronson and *The Border* (1982) with Jack Nicholson. More recently Pablo Véliz's *La tragédia de Macario* (2005) recreates the worst case of immigrant death on the U.S.-Mexican border when 18 died of suffocation in a train car in Victoria, Texas in 1987. While Luz may be opportunistic at first, as she becomes romantically involved with Memo, she becomes increasingly uncomfortable with her memory sales and returns them to him. Luz is

complex, yet her role alludes to another familiar character seen in migration films around the globe: the citizen savior or helper. The citizen helper often functions to highlight the goodness of a particular nation's people (offering distinction from racist or callous attitudes) and also the victimized nature of the migrant. Robert Young's 1977 *Alambrista!*, a film outside the commercial industry that Maciel claims is the best English film to date on Mexican immigration, introduces a white woman who saves a Mexican migrant worker by bringing him home to stay with her after she finds him lying on a sidewalk exhausted from overwork (382). She takes care of him and even initiates a romantic relationship with him, but cannot begin to comprehend his reality, which is not aided by the fact that she can't speak Spanish. Eventually, the realization that he is repeating his father's mistakes by sleeping with an American woman contributes to his alienation.

Two recent films work to subvert negative or stereotypical coyote and citizen helper characters (not to mention images of migrants): *Coyotes* (Brian Petersen 2014) and *The Girl* (David Riker 2013). While these films merit a full discussion that is beyond the scope of this paper, a note on character development and the ethical issues around migration is useful here. The coyotes here, while interested in monetary gain, grapple with their responsibility to the migrants and their wellbeing in the same way that Luz does. They are complex, well developed characters that go beyond ideological functions in the films. While they do serve as alternatives to the image of racist Americans, the Mexicans are not seen as victims here. In *The Girl*, Rosa, while vulnerable in her position, is not silent: "it's your fault my mother isn't here!" Rosa talks to her Texan companion about herself and her life in Mexico, opening the woman to a new world. In *Coyotes*, certainly the migrants are not well developed, they have no back-stories. However, they are treated like intelligent consumers and we see them in situations that break stereotypes of migrants as pathetic victims: considering their border-crossing package brochures, swimming in the coyote's pool and accepting gift baskets after making it over the border. As director, David Riker says of *The Girl*, these films turn "the central myth of the border upside down – that hope flows north" (Director's Note). In *The Girl*, a poor, young Texan mother trying to hold onto her son is stuck in her life until she meets Rosa, a Mexican girl, who she takes home to Oaxaca and in the process begins to see a way out of her own troubles. In *Coyotes*, an Anglo and a Mexican American set out on a naive capitalist scheme to cross people safely over the border and, in the process, one of them finds love and freedom living south of the border. The comedy pokes fun at border patrol and rich

entrepreneurs who attempt to horn in on foreign markets they really don't understand and treats the subject of migration superficially, but with enough seriousness and realism that the humor works. These films, like Rivera's, appeal to a growing number of viewers in the U.S. who resist reactionary politics around migration and Mexico and feel that migrants ought to be given just, compassionate, and respectful treatment taking into consideration their contributions to society. It is important to note that the dangers and tragedies of border crossings are no laughing matter and are rarely treated in depth and with compassion in the media. Luz is attempting to address this issue with her blog. Luz's character combines a complex coyote figure, similar to these contemporary filmic representations, with the activist journalist/writer. As a borderland character living in Tijuana, Luz bridges the gulf of the border by installing clandestine nodes in those without access and by uploading her testimonial memories on the Net. She facilitates the crossing over of not only Memo, but also Rudy.

Rudy, the drone pilot, is a futuristic recast of the border patrolman in border films. In Mexican films, the border patrol is almost consistently a villain. This is true of *Espaldas mojadas* (1955) a Mexican commercial film that Maciel claims is the single best on the subject and was banned due to its social commentary and remade into an inferior version called *Los mojados* (1979) (4). In Hollywood films, the border patrolman is often corrupted, but through heroic action is redeemed. For instance, in *The Border*, Nicholson's character rescues a Mexican woman and her child. Like the coyote examples above, the citizen-savior is redeemed by going south. A notable exception to the corrupt border agent is the first Hollywood film on migration. *The Border Incident* (1949) casts Mexican actors in star roles and, devoid of the negative stereotyping of Mexicans in previous decades, it treats migration issues with sensitivity (Maciel 3). Here immigration officers on both sides (played by Ricardo Montealbán and George Murphy) work together to uncover and arrest a violent gang exploiting and murdering migrants. Rivera's Rudy is complex beyond the villain/savior dichotomy. Through Memo's memories posted by Luz, Rudy understands the full effect of what he has done and sets off to find Memo and make amends. Initially, Rudy represents a legitimizing identity, in Castells's construction; he is trained by the military and a son of military parents who express their pride at his deterring terrorists. In that first mission to Mexico, the "Eagle Eye" drone vision permits Rudy to see the face of his victim, which makes him seek more information about Memo and his family. Discovering that he has killed an innocent man transforms his identity into a resisting one that allows him to take



radical action going against his upbringing and training. We might imagine drone pilots as desensitized video gamers, when the reality is that many such pilots suffer trauma due to witnessing the consequences of their actions in ways never possible for pilot bombers in the past (Harris).

Indeed, all three characters are impacted in unexpected ways by plugging in. Prasch explains that the film's themes "dovetail around the conceit of the technologized body" (50), and that "...all three characters share essentially the same basic arc in their interactions with the new technology...They begin their engagement with the nodes innocently, with what seem reasonable, limited goals. Imbedded in the node realm, they lose their course, themselves, control of their own destinies. Each has a share of guilt to bear" (51). This is a classic science fiction scenario, as Donna Haraway explains: "Science fiction is generically concerned with the interpenetration of boundaries between problematic selves and unexpected others and with the exploration of possible worlds in a context structured by transnational technoscience" (cited in Nelson 287). In losing their way, losing their innocence and ignorance, aspects of their "problematic selves," the characters find a deeper, more authentic human connection. The technology not only permits their unlikely meeting, but also enables them to truly see one another and their interconnectedness. If the node technology represents our engagement with the global economic system, are we being called to get more fully present to our impact on and responsibility to all the others we are inextricably interconnected to? No one is without a sort of guilt or responsibility perhaps, but each one possesses potential agency armed with the most powerful of weapons, knowledge and ideas. Memo, Luz and Rudy finally meet physically, overcome their differences and succeed in a climactic hack: bombing the dam in Santa Ana del Río by accessing Rudy's drone from Memo's factory. This transnational pattern is seen in contemporary global justice movements where, according to sociologist Jeffrey Juris, activists "use digital technologies to coordinate actions, build networks, practice media activism and physically manifest their emerging political ideals" (Juris 189). This is certainly a first in border film history, a border agent joining forces with a coyote and a migrant to fight corporate greed.

In this final shift the three now "aqua-terrorists" must go into hiding; Rudy goes further south and Memo and Luz leave the neon urban center of Tijuana and the bleak factory to go off the grid into the expansive *colonia* (border shanty town). Memo says, "Tal vez hay un futuro para mí aquí, en la orilla de todo, un futuro con pasado..." ("Perhaps there is a

future for me here, on the edge of everything, a future with a past...") As he says this, we see him carrying water down a dirt road to his own *milpa* where again we see the time-lapsed corn sprouting from the earth as we did in the earlier sequence, a symbol of regeneration and new life. He is building a future connected to his past, reconnecting with the land and to his roots - using the ecological knowledge he has inherited. He continues, "...si me conecto..." ("...if I connect myself...") He no longer desires to escape his surroundings; he connects himself in all senses, to his campesino past and to the earth. At this point, we see the image of Memo's memories projected on a computer screen, and we realize that this story we have been watching and hearing through voiceover is an online recording. He may be off the grid, but he is still on the Net. Memo finishes his thought, "...y lucho." ("...and fight.") He plugs into the Net on his own terms, not run by the machine, but using it for his purposes, perhaps to bring about a potentially better future.

Memo has learned to resist the dehumanizing forces that cut us off from one another and nature and he uses technology against those who would use it for greed, exploitation and oppression. If we look at the whole film as Memo's story told by himself (which the voiceover indicates it is), it becomes a public form of resistance. According to Castells's schema, Memo has become a transformative subject, an agent of social change in the new network society, a hacktivist. Moya would refer to the story as his "theoretically mediated interpretation" of the significant events of his life. As she explains, it is this "experience in its mediated form [that] contains an epistemic component through which we can gain access to knowledge of the world" (39). Indeed, Memo's story can be conceived as an act of electronic civil disobedience, a form of knowledge that can help others wake from the "American dream" – or nightmare, depending on where one is located - and reconnect and fight. In the final scene after Memo's profound words, we see the edge of the *colonia* where a vast green space extends and a heavy rain is falling, watering his *milpa*...for free. Then the camera pans up to the cloudy open sky inviting us to imagine the possibilities for a more just world even as a drone speeds by overhead.

Among other things, Memo's story exposes the fact that, contrary to what anti-immigrant narratives would lead us to believe, the causes of poor worker immigration from Mexico (and other nations) to the U.S. very often lie in the destruction of local environments and economies by neoliberal policies of collusion between government and corporations out of the United States and other nations. What, then, should be the U.S. stance vis à vis undocumented migration? As these powerful corporate

entities plunder land and people with ever more technologically sophisticated means, indigenous and other groups around the globe armed with what technology they can access and create are inspiring one another and enlisting support from around the world to resist and oppose these forces. Radical action happens in *Sleep Dealer* as a result of solidarity between people of very different, yet interconnected, social and geographical positions. Neoliberal ideologies would have us laboring and consuming and remain isolated from one another, believing we have no common ground across borders, classes, races, genders or any of the divisions created to keep us apart. Rivera's work disrupts the image of the undocumented immigrant, bringing it more in line with the 21<sup>st</sup> century realities and inspiring us all to get connected and fight, to join global coalitions working for justice.

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