Robo Sacer: "Bare Life" and Cyborg Labor Beyond the Border in Alex Rivera's *Sleep Dealer*

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Abstract

Alex Rivera's *Sleep Dealer* (2008) uses the backdrop of a dystopian near future to shed light on the ways that transnational flows of labor, technology, and capital become an institutionalized state of exception that dehumanizes the inhabitants of the Global South. Within his world, Mexican laborers use technology to virtually transport their labor to the US, and North American companies use drone warfare to defend their financial interests. Despite the bleak conditions in the film, Rivera also imagines what I call *robo sacer* resistance. At its core, the *robo sacer* is a cyborg articulation of Giorgio Agamben's *homo sacer*; as such, it is imbued with resistant qualities. As third-world subjects subversively use technology to undermine the prevailing structures of power, they denaturalize the suppositions that have constructed their dehumanized status. The following study tracks the potential, and shortcomings, for *robo sacer* resistance as represented in Rivera's film.

Shortly after the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994, the Peruvian-American artist and filmmaker Alex Rivera created "Cybracero Systems" (Martín-Cabrera 590-91), a mock corporate website that advertised a supposedly new technology in which Mexican workers would use the Internet to export their labor to robots on the U.S. side of the border.[1] According to the website, "Cybracero Systems was created with one objective in mind: to get all the work our society needs done, while eliminating the actual workers and all the difficulties that workers imply: health benefits, housing, IRS, INS, union conflicts, cultural and language differences etc."[2] Rivera used this parody to critique contradictory U.S. attitudes that decried the presence of Mexican bodies in national territory even as American citizens consumed the inexpensive labor that these bodies provided. Given the website's problematic tone, it is significant to note that the director received numerous inquiries from interested parties soliciting his services (Martín-Cabrera 590). The director's idea clearly resonated within North American circles, where the racialized economies of the earliest European colonists had produced systemic racism (Omi and Winant 14-50; Feagin and Elias 935-44; Prashad 1-36; Quijano 534-35, 560-61).

Rivera would later add a mockumentary, "Why Cybraceros?", and the feature film *Sleep Dealer* (2008) to his Cybracero project. Through these media he challenged U.S.—particularly Anglo-Saxon—attitudes of white supremacy by exaggerating anti-immigrant discourse. In the short film, which plays like a five minute contribution on a cable news program, a female nar-

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[1] The company's name invokes the *bracero* movement of 1942-1964 in which large numbers of Mexicans entered the US to take agricultural jobs (Calavita 4-10). Of course, the exploitation of Mexican labor continues to exist to the present (Mize and Sword xxxii-xxxvi). The word "cybracero" also alludes to the technologized modes of production of late twentieth and early twenty-first century industry.

[2] Debra A. Castillo views Rivera's imaginary, multimedia Cybracero project as a form of "rasquache aesthetics" in which people like Rivera retool and recycle images, sounds, and other media to create original pieces of art (8-11).

rator states, "As the American workforce grows increasingly sophisticated, it is [. . .] harder to find the hand labor willing to do these grueling [agricultural] tasks." Rivera's reporter celebrates the fact that the United States can continue to consume cheap, Mexican labor while foreign workers remain comfortably outside of the country. In *Sleep Dealer*, Rivera investigates the level to which such economies of production dehumanize third-world,[3] and particularly Mexican, labor.[4] Beyond simply chronicling bilateral relations between the United States and its southern neighbor, his movie imagines Mexico as the focal point of the struggle between imperializing, U.S. capital and Latin Americans across the world. By centering his film on a Mexican protagonist, Rivera shows how first-world technologies exacerbate racial and socioeconomic divisions across humanity. Indeed, transnational flows of technology and capital produce what I term as *robo sacer* subjects: beings who are intimately connected to and influenced by foreign technologies of power. Although *robo sacer* identity necessarily entails subservience to the Global North, it can also open a space for political and economic resistance as oppressed people embrace and use their ties to technology to undermine the dehumanizing effects of global capital in their local contexts.

My notion of *robo sacer* weds Agambian biopolitics with cyborg theory. When juxtaposed together, these frameworks explain the mechanism for oppression—as well as some avenues for resistance—in countries like Mexico. The first-world countries of the film view their technological monopoly and the transnational flow of capital from the Global South to the North as an institutionalized, yet precarious, state of exception that must be defended at all costs.[5] For Agamben, "states of exception," are (inter)national emergencies that produce a "no-man's land between public law and political fact, and between the juridical order and life" (*State of Exception* 1). These arise when arbitrary borders—be they legal, geographical or otherwise—are crossed. During such times of emergency, biopolitical states display a surprising knack for killing that seems to go against the fact that they stake their legitimacy on their ability to defend life. Agamben explains this latent drive to kill by showing how the reigning biopolitics code only certain individuals as fully human. Reaching back to ancient Greece, he identifies two terms: *bios* and *zoê*, which are both translated as life in English and Italian. Nevertheless, these words denote very different types of existence: *Bios* refers to "good," fully human life, while *zoê* denotes a "bare," dehumanized existence (*Homo Sacer* 9-14; 80-83). During states of exception, those in power code certain segments of society as *zoê*, thus stripping them of their rights and placing them beyond the protection of the law. The resulting *homines sacri* (the singular is *homo sacer*) "may be killed and yet not sacrificed" (*Homo Sacer* 12) because society extends no value to their "bare lives" or even to their deaths. The corporations of *Sleep Dealer* turn third-world subjects into *robo sacri* by using their technological advantage to code life in the Global South as *zoê*. This designation allows them to use lethal force when defending their business interests. Most people acquiesce to global capital, but some *robo sacri* use their ties to technology to undermine the reigning structures of power.

Robo sacer subjectivity is a relatively new condition that has emerged—or at least gained

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3   In using the term "third-world," I do not buy into a worldview that separates the inhabitants of different nations based on their degree of Westernization. Instead, I use the term because I find that it encapsulates the dehumanization of countries and/or regions that exist outside of the global center.

4   Alfredo Suppia asserts an aura of documentary in "Why Cybraceros," and *Sleep Dealer* ("Quando a realidade").

5   At its core, the term Global South refers to those people living in poor nations to the south of North America and Western Europe. Certainly, the idea of the South as a single monolithic whole is emblematic of the fact that it has been largely defined by the North. See Roxanne Lynn Doty (1-14).

prominence—with the rise of both neoliberal economics and globalization.[6] J. Andrew Brown is right to observe that "one increasingly finds cybernetic bodies and technological identity at the sociopolitical intersection of [. . .] neoliberal policy" (2). I concur with Brown and other scholars of posthumanism as I define cyborgs as people who either form close relationships with their machines (Brown 11), or that fuse their body with technology in even the most mundane ways (Gray 2). Cyborg identity is especially literal in Rivera's work, where human beings connect nodes to their bodies and use their nervous systems to remotely control machines in the United States. Within the film, *robo sacer* resistance holds the potential to politically overthrow those who currently control globalized modes of production in favor of a more equitable economic system. Even when it is not brazenly political, the use of technology can undermine certain assumptions that validate the Northern domination of the South. Rivera's "cybraceros" serve as metaphors for the less spectacular cyborg identity that presently emerges between third-world subjects and their technologies—particularly those associated with capitalist production (Sandoval 168).[7] While the potential for *robo sacer* resistance emerges in *Sleep Dealer* as workers use their cyborg identity to deconstruct the social constructs that signal them as inferior, the film posits a similar potential for *robo sacer* resistance in the real world.

Robo sacer resistance buoys Donna Haraway's theorization of a cyborg that, despite its roots in patriarchal capitalism (151), can, due to its indefinable nature, dissolve socially constructed categories like race, class, and especially gender (155). Haraway largely ignores the ramifications of her work in the Global South; however, the cyborg's ability to undermine (neo)colonial constructs of power is what most interests her colleague, Chela Sandoval. As Sandoval argues, "the technologies developed by subjugated populations to negotiate this realm of shifting meanings can be recognized as the very technologies necessary to all first world citizens who are interested in renegotiating postmodern first world cultures, with what we might call a sense of their own power and integrity intact" (176). Sandoval's quote refers to an inherent conflict that emerges between North and South as subjugated populations "develop" their own technologies by appropriating those of the North. This occurs in *Sleep Dealer* as people from Mexico use U.S. technologies to undermine the transnational flow of labor and resources from South to North. What is most interesting about *robo sacer* identity, then, is not that technology facilitates the North's oppression of the South, but that this very domination sows the seeds for the oppressed to politically and discursively resist the encroachment of foreign powers in their lives.

In the pages that follow, I discuss both the dehumanizing effects of technology on Rivera's dystopian Mexico and on the potential for subversive, *robo sacer* resistance that this creates. A brief plot description will facilitate our discussion. The film depicts Memo Cruz (Luis Fernando Peña), a young peasant from Santa Ana del Río, Oaxaca. Prior to his birth, a foreign corporation, Del Rio Water, dammed the local river and began charging for its use. The company runs *Drones!*, a reality show that follows U.S.-based pilots who plug into the Internet and merge their nervous systems with unmanned bombers so that they can take out those who oppose their corporate interests. Memo takes up a hobby of hacking conversations and accidentally breaches a military line. The corporation sends drones to destroy Memo's home. The pilot, Rudy (Jacob Vargas), blows up the house and kills Memo's father, Miguel. Memo leaves Santa Ana for Tijua-

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6   Articulations of cyborg identity have existed in Mexico since before the neoliberal era, but cyborg identity is more visible now than before. See Sara Potter, *Disturbing Muses: Gender, Technology and Resistance in Mexican Avant-Garde Cultures* and David S. Dalton "Embodying Modernity in Mexico: Race, Technology, and the Body in the *Mestizo* State."
7   Brown provides a masterful reading of Adolfo Aristarain's *Tiempo de revancha* in which he asserts a cybernetic quality to capitalist production and to the alienation that this produces in laborers (15-22).

na where he becomes a node worker and virtually exports his labor abroad. On the way north, he meets Luz (Leonor Varela), a female node worker and digital journalist, on a bus. Luz posts the story of her interaction with Memo and sells it online. Rudy buys it and requests more information. Luz seeks Memo out, forms a relationship with him, and asks about his past when they go on dates. Memo realizes that Luz has sold his information and leaves her. Rudy goes to Tijuana, finds Memo, and offers to blow up the Santa Ana dam. Memo reunites with Luz, and the trio breaks into Memo's work. Rudy plugs into the Internet and blows up the dam. The protagonists go into hiding as the film ends.

The film's provocative subject matter poses serious questions about the morality of drone warfare, U.S. immigration policies, the nature of digital privacy, and the effects of transnational capital on the world. Given this fact, it is of no surprise that *Sleep Dealer* has inspired a great deal of scholarly attention.[8] This article shares points of contact with most of the previous studies, but of especial interest are Javier Duran's theorization of the biometric border and Hernán Manuel García's focus on the picaresque hacker.[9] Duran uses the film to theorize contemporary border politics because *Sleep Dealer* "depicts the ultimate biometric state and its ensuing virtual borders as the logical developments of current global capital technocratic efforts" (224). Duran uses the film to illustrate his notion of an Agambian border discourse, but he elides the possibility for the oppressed to use technology to resist (226). García, however, posits Memo as a picaresque hacker who learns how to use technology toward subversive ends as he comes in contact with different mentors (188-202). García recognizes the oppressive nature of technology in the film (188), but he suggests that the hacker ultimately transcends technology's oppressive potential as he "asume control y pasa de la pasividad a la resistencia" (189). While not exactly contradictory, these two studies reach antithetical conclusions about the revolutionary potential of cyborg identity. What García views as liberatory, Duran sees as a means for institutionalizing "bare life." My own theorization of the *robo sacer* helps reconcile these competing postures. Similar to Duran, I view foreign technology—at least as understood in the film—as key to establishing a biometric border that dehumanizes those who live on the periphery. People like Memo remain expendable *zoê* even after (or perhaps because) they connect their bodies to the global economy. Nevertheless, as *robo sacer* individuals articulate their own interests, they challenge the status quo and acquire revolutionary potential. García's reading is perhaps overly optimistic, but his assertion that people can use foreign technologies to undermine exploitative structures of power certainly rings true in the film.

The film emphasizes the developing world's technological deficit to the developed world because it is this distinction that allows U.S. corporations to construct and assert their hegemony within Mexican territory. Indeed, Rivera treats modernity as a "technology" of power—in both the Foucauldian and technical senses—that imperializing nations export to developing countries like Mexico.[10] His work reflects a reality that Manuel Castells notes in which the new, global information economy "is not fully in place, and its development will occur at an uneven pace and with uneven geography in the coming years" (357). This unequal distribution of technology

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8   The focus on labor and consumption inspires numerous Marxist readings. See Alfredo Suppia and Igor Oliveira ("Cibertíteres); Luis Martín-Cabrera ("Potentiality"); Jelena Šesnić ("Dreams"); Lysa Rivera ("Future Histories"). These studies provide fascinating insights about Rivera's critique of twenty-first century late capitalism.

9   Louise Amoore documents a troubling trend where the control of bodies through the "Biometric Border" has ceded to privatized—rather than traditional military—forces (340-49).

10   Within Foucault's thought, the only way that oppressed people can articulate their subjectivity is through the systems of knowing of their oppressors (145-69). When applied to nation-states this suggests that peripheral countries must modernize in the image of their neoliberal oppressors.

between the developing and developed worlds lends credence to Agamben's thought because it reflects a globalized biopolitics that favors North American and Western European subjects. Because they exist outside of the main innovative sectors, countries like Mexico become coded as technologically bare. Even when Mexicans use technology, they generally use apparatuses that were engineered somewhere else. Viewed in this light, technology becomes a two-edged sword; on the one hand it improves efficiency and connects people across space, which allows people from around the world to interface with one another. On the other hand, technologies that enter Mexico are explicitly coded as foreign.[11] Rivera captures this perception by placing Mexican bodies alongside (foreign) technologies, a strategy that amplifies notions of "bare life" south of the Río Grande. However, he postulates a resistant third-world person who uses technology to resist constructs of Mexican *zoê* both discursively and (especially) politically.

Any discussion of the resistant potential of *robo sacer* identity in *Sleep Dealer* must begin with the heavily policed borders that figure so prominently throughout the film. Shots of physical space show a militarized concrete wall separating the United States from its southern neighbor. Within Mexico, the divisions between the urban (*mestizo*) and rural (indigenous) communities are also heavily guarded (Lysa Rivera 425-27; Duran 224). Even cyberspace becomes a collection of interconnected borders that divides—and alienates—people, machines, and information one from another along racial and geographical lines. Those who suffer the most from these systems of division are the indigenous peasants of rural Mexico who find themselves on the wrong side of each of the aforementioned borders. Although the movie's allegorical nature—which inevitably causes problems with the plot development—led to mixed reviews upon the film's release (Prasch 46-47), this very element facilitates its sophisticated criticism of tendencies within the United States to view Mexican labor as a product of *zoê*. We see the first *robo sacer* iteration at the beginning of the film as Memo and his father hike through a dried up riverbed to buy water from a dammed up corporate compound. Throughout this sequence Rivera employs high-angle longshots and occasional close-ups that emphasize his protagonists' marginalization. When they reach the dam, Rivera employs high-angle close-ups from the point of view of an automated machine gun that threatens to kill Memo and his father if they do not pay a toll. As these filmic techniques so masterfully demonstrate, the current structures of global capital do not extend *bios* to Memo or Miguel; both are reduced to local bodies whose value goes no further than the level to which they can be exploited.

Del Rio Water takes extreme measures to exclude third-world *robo sacri* from protection under the law.[12] It proactively dehumanizes and intimidates the people of Santa Ana through programs like *Drones!*. The show's premise—"blow the hell out of the bad guys"—depends on the extralegal, *homo sacer* status of political dissidents as it kills them without due process.[13] What is more, the program's success is such that most peasants—including Memo's brother, David—

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11   Néstor García Canclini challenges this idea to an extent during his discussion of the *glocal*. Even technologies that come from outside of Mexico become Mexican upon arriving, especially as locals begin using them in ways that the original creators had not imagined (79-84). Also, the fact that the richest man in the world is Carlos Slim, a Mexican businessman who oversees a telecommunications empire, attests to Mexico's technological sophistication. That said, as an export-based economy, the country generally provides labor in the production of technology while innovation tends to occur in other countries. See Arturo A. Lara and Jorge Carrillo ("Technological Globalization").

12   The company's name, which is spelled without an accent (Carrol 493), linguistically illustrates the extent to which it favors US (particularly Anglo-Saxon) knowledge over the local. Whether the spelling error is deliberate or accidental does not matter; the corporation clearly did not consult with Spanish speakers about its name. The corporation's linguistic indifference underscores its ambivalent, even antagonistic stance towards Mexican people.

13   Carrol views these drones as the embodiment of a preemptive doctrine prevalent in the 21st Century U.S. following conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and along the US-Mexican border (494).

generally affirm the multinational corporations' right to defend themselves against so-called "aqua terrorists."[14] David's affinity for the show underscores the multinationals' disturbingly successful strategy. By getting uneducated, oppressed citizens to watch, and even enjoy, a program where political dissidents are killed on live television, they produce an "imagined community" that leads oppressed, third-world subjects to collude with the holders of transnational capital against natural allies (Anderson 7). As Memo's brother watches this program, he uncritically accepts the targets' questionable guilt.

Drone technology further institutionalizes third-world *zoê* by keeping attackers and victims on different sides of the border. Because the executioners pilot their aircraft from a base in San Diego, they rarely see the people they kill. Within this context, drone warfare becomes a type of videogame that absolves the killer from any wrongdoing (Šesnić; Prasch 49-50). As such, pilots generally do not have to cope with the effects of post-traumatic stress syndrome because they are not physically present when carrying out executions. This lack of contact between the victim and the victimizer makes drone warfare especially brutal, both in the film and in real life. Within the context of the movie, the commonplace nature of drone warfare produces what McKenzie Wark refers to as "Gamespace," or a post-digital Symbolic Order (1-8). In Santa Ana, Gamespace rules stipulate that local peasants acquiesce to the economic and military demands of Del Rio Water. What is perhaps most chilling about this construct is that the "Game" structures the lives of everyone in Santa Ana—and by extension the entire Third World—despite the fact that none of these will ever pilot a drone fighter. The inhabitants of Santa Ana have learned through programs like *Drones!* that any act of perceived resistance will mark them as "aqua terrorists" and turn them into military targets. These conditions transform all of the inhabitants of Santa Ana into *robo sacri* as the technologized state of exception limits their agency in very real ways. Most *robo sacri* never become activists, but their cyborg nature imbues them with the power to expose the fissures in the oppressive constructs that run rampant throughout the film.

Despite the threat that all *robo sacer* pose, the film emphasizes that, while companies like Del Rio Water can kill the oppressed with impunity, it is generally more profitable to exploit them economically. We see this with Memo; no one (initially) tries to hunt him down, yet he still lacks the freedom to live as he desires. In one shot near the beginning, Rivera captures a Santa Ana sunset using low angles, big skies, and several endemic cacti. This strategy conjures images of the Golden Age of Mexican film (1935-1956), where directors like Emilio "El Indio" Fernández used these filmic techniques to oppose U.S.—particularly Hollywood—cultural hegemony and imperialism (Ramírez-Berg 15-17).[15] Unlike the proud discourses of a rugged, untamed terrain that abounded during the Golden Age, however, these same images become melancholic testaments to Mexico's continued coloniality (Quijano 536-40). The influence of mid-century nationalist cinema becomes even more apparent as Memo and David, who are visiting their grandmother, watch a clip of a film from that time period and chuckle about its dated representation of Mexican identity. The rupture between idyllic, mid-century representations of Mexico and their futuristic, colonized moment occurs as David changes the channel to *Drones!* To their horror, the brothers realize that their home is the most recent target for a televised airstrike.

The military's decision to destroy the family's home results from Memo's transgression of

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14   The aqua terrorists are a fascinating construction because they are those people who oppose the water corporation's power. They become a necessary figure in a society that fetishizes the accumulation of capital—which is, according to Marx, an imaginary construction (47)—because they can become a natural scapegoat when the corporations fail to accumulate as much as they had hoped.

15   Markus Heide points out that shots of the globe, the border, and region-specific tropes have long been a practice of Border Cinema in both the U.S. and Mexico (92-96).

a cyberborder—a real, physical, yet difficult to map entity that functions alongside, and in tension with, the geographical border. As we watch Memo hack, it becomes useful to abandon the notion of cyberspace as a disembodied cloud and to imagine it as numerous interconnected borders in which machines send information to one another. The film illustrates the existence of these cyberborders through parallel edits that follow radio and digital signals from one cyberborder to another. Memo places his headphones over his ears, and the footage crosscuts to a satellite that receives the signals from his computer and transmits data back to him.[16] The director further crosscuts to a military office in San Diego, where intelligence analysts detect Memo's actions. Rivera's use of film conventions like parallel editing not only serve to increase the suspense level of the movie; they also posit a heavily policed cyberborder in a way that would be difficult to express through other media. Even as people stay grounded in physical space, their influence can be felt on the other end of numerous cyberborders at the same time.

What is most troubling about Memo's designation as an aquaterrorist is that nothing that he has done up to this point undermines the authority of Del Rio Water or any other transnational corporation.[17] He primarily uses technology for what Iskandar Zulkarnain calls the voyeuristic "thrill" of uncovering hidden information (221-24). Cyber resistance is an act in which physical beings move within virtual space to subvert physical actors on the other side of a cyberborder; Memo certainly has not done this. Nevertheless, his breach of a military line defies the cyberborder and places his home on the *Drones!* hit-list. One of the most troublesome aspects of the ensuing attack is the means by which "justice" is passed. As Rudy prepares for his mission, a male reporter, who seems more like a sportscaster than a journalist, explains that the military intercepted a signal from a dangerous terrorist the night before. Rather than engage in costly litigation, the "sovereign" company simply designates the Cruz home as an aqua terrorist stronghold, which automatically justifies the use of lethal force. Agamben can further elucidate the surprising absence of judicial review as he notes that one defining characteristic of the historical *homo sacer* of the Roman Empire was that "the person whom anyone could kill with impunity was nevertheless not to be put to death according to ritual practices" (47). Because a trial in a court is a civil ritual, it is categorically denied to the *zoê*. Instead, if a person in the community acts in a suspicious manner, the company takes immediate action. One *robo sacer*'s death can serve as an example for the rest.

The only remarkable aspect of this frighteningly routine military action is that Rudy fails to kill Miguel when he blows up the house. Instead, Memo's father crawls outside with serious leg injuries. The resulting confrontation between attacker and victim shatters the symbolic world of Gamespace for Rudy. As the drone feeds the image of his target's helpless eyes into the pilot's brain, Rudy finds himself suddenly face-to-face with his kill. This experience leads him to question the validity of a system of power upon which he has based his personal and professional identities. The female narrator says, "This is unusual. Rarely does a drone pilot get to see the enemy face-to-face," as if it were the most exciting development possible, but Rudy finds no sport in his task. Throughout this scene, Rivera crosscuts between both sides of the cyberborder; Miguel stares at the drone that will kill him while the pilot hesitates when he sees Miguel not as *zoê*, but as human. Interestingly, Rudy carries out a similar strike on "aqua terrorists" in Colom-

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16   This scene draws to mind N. Katherine Hayles's assertion of the instantaneous flow of information between different bodies—organic, silicone, etc.—as the defining characteristic of posthuman society (1-2).

17   Thomas Prasch discusses numerous similarities between the dystopian world of *Sleep Dealer* and that of the War on Terror, particularly the use of drones in both cases (49-50; 51-52). One key difference that he does not mention is that terror threats in *Sleep Dealer* are explicitly enunciated as threats to capital rather than national security.

bia in a later scene, but because he does not see the suffering, helpless bodies that he destroys, he feels no remorse. Rudy ends supposedly bare lives in both attacks, and it is probable that his Colombia strike has killed more people than that of Santa Ana. Yet the murder of Miguel Cruz weighs heavily on his conscience because in that case he faced his target's humanity. The soldier's remorse comes not from abstract statistics regarding *homo sacer* casualties but from the intimate connection he establishes with his victim.

Rudy's experience shows that, while necessary to constructing this brand of corporate game-space, technology holds the key to deconstructing the "bare life" status of the subaltern. This is one of the first cases where cyborg identity undermines the technologized state of exception. Rudy's existential crisis stretches the conventional understandings of posthuman theory, where cyborg resistance generally occurs as technologized bodies articulate themselves in ways that force society to reconfigure the reigning body politics (Haraway 173-81; Sandoval 167-70; González 268, 269-78). In Rudy's case, the cyborg is the agent—rather than the object—of oppression. As he plugs into the net, he blurs the distinctions between machine and human to the point that he becomes both. When he carries out attacks, he perceives everything through the sensory equipment of the machine he embodies. These abilities are the result of the military industrial complex's vested interest that its pilots have the most sophisticated diagrams of their targets. However, Rudy's reluctance to follow repeated orders to kill suggests a secondary potential in which this same technology can evoke feelings of compassion. When his drone—which he uses to enforce continued constructions of third-world bare life—forces him to confront the humanity of his victim, Rudy can no longer support the mission of his work. Cyborg identity remains at the core of his newfound search for social justice; however, in this case it is not the ambiguous nature of the technologized body that catalyzes his efforts. Instead, technology forces him to see the humanity of those people he previously viewed as *zoê*. Significantly, he does not eschew technology, but embraces it as the only effective means for resisting the deadly flow of global capital.

While the film equates technology with oppression, its continuity and storyline suggests that this may be because it already rests in the hands of global capitalism. *Sleep Dealer* shows two ways in which subaltern *robo sacri* can react to the encroachment of foreign technologies. Some follow the example of Miguel, a man who originally led an armed resistance but was later subdued. After losing his freedom, he dedicated himself to his corn farm and other physical—rather than virtual—labor, thus refusing to engage the technologies that brought about his subjugation. Others, like Memo, choose to live by the rules of the game and connect their bodies to the global economy. In order to do this, he must migrate to Tijuana because this city provides opportunities to interface with the U.S. economy that do not exist in rural Oaxaca. Memo's father and brother view migration as a type of acquiescence to imperial pressures and hence as disloyalty to one's heritage, but the film shows such sentiment to be self-defeating. If the oppressed wish to liberate themselves from the shackles of unfettered capitalism, they must resist in a way their oppressors can understand. Memo's path reflects what Sandoval calls a "middle voice," or a subject that is "transformative of itself and its own situation while also being acted upon" (174). As such, he can access greater revolutionary potential than can those who choose to remain on the periphery of the global economy. Transnational companies continue to view Memo as an expendable body whom they can drain, but Memo's cyborg status gives him a "transformative" potential that he develops by joining a cybernetic community that politically and militarily resists global capitalism.

The fact that Memo has to migrate in order to connect to the global economy alludes to an-

other key component of the cyberborder: if the Internet is nothing more than numerous bodies transmitting information across invisible borders, then a person's physical location can affect his or her access to discourse. Within the context of the film, becoming a node worker is the best way to connect to the global economy; however, no such opportunities exist in Santa Ana. This largely reflects supply and demand, but also results from the decision of multinational corporations to focus their investment on numerous historically industrial cities, such as Tijuana, along the U.S.-Mexican border.[18] This strategy requires less investment in infrastructure, which is now technological, even if it perpetuates racial and class divisions within Mexico. Because cyborg node workers must dock into a system to transcend borders and perform labor (and military strikes) remotely, their online labor is still very much grounded in a specific space. Only by leaving Santa Ana can Memo connect his body to the global economy. Economic privilege, then, is limited to those who live in urban areas; indeed, an internal system of borders emerges within Mexico that separates indigenous peasants from city dwellers. We see this especially clearly with the bus that transports Memo to Tijuana, where several armed guards check people for weapons. According to Duran, this is a case where global capital follows "a process of '*borderization*' through its own *dispositive of security* to the degree that the biometric state relies more and more on the delimitations of risk, bodies and subjectivity to activate this process" (224). Viewed in this light, the Mexican security apparatus views its rural citizens as dangerous, and it carefully monitors their movement. The bus becomes an exceptional site because it is the vessel that takes people from rural areas—separated from the global economy—to urban centers that provide the labor for modern society.

When Memo sees Luz's nodes after meeting her on the bus, he asks her how he can acquire such prosthetic extensions for himself. The woman responds that first he must find a *coyotec*—a type of underground surgeon—who will connect the nodes to his nervous system. The black market aspect of the node worker industry is one of the most perplexing issues in the film. Given its material benefits to society, it seems illogical that Rivera's near-future Mexican government would not oversee the process of cyborgization. The state's noninterventionist economic posture, as represented in *Sleep Dealer*, underscores the subservient biopolitical status of indigenous/rural laborers, like Memo, who travel to urban centers in search of employment. The *coyotecs* and the dangers associated with node implants serve as an obvious allegory for the present-day use of shady coyotes who charge hefty prices to traffic (particularly indigenous) migrants to the United States (Alonso Meneses). Similar to Rivera's Mexico, the real-life country also tolerates coyotes despite their infamous disregard for human rights. The fact that the state generally looks the other way when confronted with coyotes underscores these actors' vital role in the economy. Despite their crimes, these human traffickers help poor Mexicans cross the border, and many later find work and begin sending much of their earnings back home. The decision to allow coyotes to circulate freely throughout the country, then, favors the possible earning potential of migrants in the United States over their human rights, a fact that suggests that indigenous Mexicans are still *homines sacri* in their own country (Acosta 117-19). Rivera shows the perils of the black market node system in a scene where a *coyotec* lures Memo into an abandoned building, knocks him out, and steals his money. When the disoriented migrant awakens, he goes to the outskirts of town and occupies an abandoned shack with no electricity or running

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18   The technologically privileged position of cities like Tijuana in *Sleep Dealer* alludes to the decision of U.S. corporations to build factories called *maquiladoras* in border cities, a practice that increased greatly following the implementation of NAFTA (Barry 143). Yet *Maquiladoras* are a two-edged sword; they provide greater wealth to their communities, but they also frequently cause great harm to people's health (Frey 320-38).

water; even his shelter attests to his bare life.

Luckily for Memo, Luz—a coyotec herself—has to seek him out in order to send more information about him to Rudy. This financial interest leads her to implant his nodes and attempt to establish a relationship of trust with him. Luz knows nothing about Memo's family situation or her customer, yet she becomes a bonding force between them. As Luz sells Memo's pictures and stories without his knowledge, she both violates his rights to privacy and places his life in danger. At one point Luz suggests that they plug their nodes into each other as they make love—"para poder[se] ver"—ostensibly because this will intensify the experience. Where technology has generally served to tear people apart throughout the film, cybersex becomes a means by which partners can share thoughts in a way that transcends language. As they come together, both bodies become organic borders that the lovers circumvent, sending their thoughts—represented as images rather than words—through nodes and cables. The following sequence consists of several dissolves that create a montage that moves between the eerily robotic movement of the lovers' bare bodies and the thoughts that they send to one another. Through this means, Rivera juxtaposes their bodies and memories one with another, thus blurring the point where one ends and another begins. These filmic elements underscore the fact that, as they share their memories with one another through their nodes, the characters engage in an especially intimate process where they become, in many ways, a single body.

Lovers must consciously send their mental images to one another. Luz starts by sharing thoughts that consist of numerous apparently mundane moments of her childhood and adult life. Memo follows by sending images of his village, and also of what appears to be an explosion—although it may be a filmic representation of a synapse—that could refer to the strike that killed his father. Given that Luz has sold so much information about Memo already, one wonders if she will sell these personal images to her client as well. The film is silent on whether Luz uses Memo's memories in any of the reports she sends Rudy, but she does send one final story to her reader after this event. Given her motivation, Luz's decision to peer into Memo's mind is telling. The late capitalist, cyber world in which she lives has managed to depersonalize the most intimate of human relationships, reducing them to mere business transactions. In another context, the lovers' sexual and cybernetic union could represent the sublime fusion of both mind and body (Naam 202-05). In this case, however, their bare bodies become a grotesque metaphor for both characters' *zoê*. As Alfredo Suppia and Igor Oliveira note, "a dystopia de *Sleep Dealer* especula sobre uma drástica colisão entre as esferas pública e privada em favor do capital" ["the dystopia of *Sleep Dealer* speculates about a drastic collision between the public and private spheres in favor of capital"] (192). Memo's bare life becomes public spectacle as his thoughts and emotions have been sold against his will, while Luz has been coerced to sell secrets about her significant other, thus alienating her from her own sexuality.

Memo gets his first hint about Luz's work when she shows him her stories about other people. In response to Memo's sentiment that her profession is odd, the self-proclaimed writer justifies her line of work by saying that she uses technology to bring people together.[19] This assertion seems antithetical to much of what the film has shown up to this point. As Memo virtually constructs a skyscraper in nearby San Diego, for instance, technology seems more like a means of keeping people apart. M. Elizabeth Ginway notes that Memo's virtual labor allows him to

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19   Lysa Rivera views Luz as a "progressive cyber-writer" because she uploads these stories "solely for the purposes of exposing the injustices visited upon the vanishing indigenous Mexican communities" (425). While it can be tempting to romanticize Luz's character on these grounds, we should be careful not to absolve her of her violations of privacy. Her paternalistic act of sharing stories about Amerindians, especially without their consent, tends to reaffirm the very racial hierarchies she seeks to overcome.

work in the United States "without the complications of race and immigration that embodiment specifies" (166). Her observation emphasizes how U.S. society enjoys the benefits of foreign labor without its supposed pitfalls,[20] but the film also emphasizes how technology exacerbates racist paradigms by signaling Memo's robotic extension as racially inferior (Castillo 11-13; Lysa Rivera 426). In a scene reminiscent of that in which Rudy kills Miguel, Memo powerfully and unexpectedly confronts his "bare life" when he sees the reflection of his prosthetic self as he/the machine labors on the building. Several critics signal this moment as key to Memo's awakening into revolutionary consciousness (Orihuela and Hagerman 177; García 189). It is here that the protagonist, having transformed into a machine, realizes that, as a node worker, he lacks any tangible ties to humanity.

Similar to Rudy, Memo realizes that he must embrace his robotic/cyborgian nature to resist the technological state of exception. Interestingly, it is Luz who facilitates the film's exploration of *robo sacer* resistance; if it were not for her, Rudy and Memo could never take out the dam. As the movie ends we witness several surprisingly easy reconciliations between Memo, Luz, and Rudy. As these characters make good one with another, they create what Sandoval calls "joint kinship," which "is analogous to that called for in contemporary indigenous writings in which tribes or lineages are identified out of those who share, not bloodlines, but rather lines of affinity" (20). The previous antagonism between Memo and Rudy was not personal; it resulted from their positions at opposing sides of a highly policed cyberborder. Memo forgives Luz because he realizes that he would never have met Rudy had she not shared his secrets online. Their reconciliation is problematic at a moral level, but it serves as a heavy-handed advocate of *robo sacer* resistance as it is through the connections that these characters form online that they can attack Del Rio Water. The newly unified trio enters Cybraceros SA de CV, where Rudy plugs into the "integrated circuit" and bombs the Santa Ana dam, thus returning the water to the people.[21] One of the last scenes from the film is a video call between Memo and his family in which his brother shows him the joy of the people as they celebrate.

The movie suggests that these *robo sacer* subjects can break free from their social bondage as they subvert technologies of domination and use them against their creators. Their actions seem to come right out of Haraway's myth, where cyborgs—as the bastard product of the military industrial complex—act against their creators in favor of social justice. Labor and space may remain racialized, and perhaps the exploited continue to be interpellated into *zoê*, but the trio proves it is possible to use the system against itself. Their surprise attack frees a town (at least temporarily) from corporate imperialism, thus scoring a symbolic victory. At the same time, it is difficult to view this act as truly revolutionary. In taking out the dam, Rudy has removed a limb of oppression, but not the root. Militarized corporate interests remain in foreign lands, and transnational corporations continue to use technology to signal third-world life as *zoê*. More troubling still, the characters cannot carry out similar acts because they are forced into exile from the "integrated circuit," which reads people's biometric information before letting them connect. Sharada Balachandran Orihuela and Andrew Carl Hageman argue that these characters' "mode of resistance too readily operates within the structures of power and control it is meant to resist" (173); however, Manuel F. Medina asserts that the film presents a case in which

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20   Joshua Clover notes a similar dynamic in which Mexican laborers "need not drain U.S. resources, but their labor is imported frictionlessly" (8). Once again, they are *homo/robo sacer* subjects who must be stripped down to "bare life" while the powerful exploit them for economic gain.

21   Haraway refers to the "integrated circuit" as the space where cyborg subjects, particularly women, are "intimately restructured through the social relations of science and technology" (165). Of course, marginalized actors can also take advantage of this medium to find their voice and resist a patriarchal society. See Haraway (170-73).

"el bien triunfa sobre el mal" (55). Neither argument is particularly satisfying. One is left wondering what type of resistance would be acceptable for Orihuela and Hageman, while Medina's assertion seems overstated. The tension, and even slippage, between failure and success, and the question of how to treat the strike on the dam, are palpable as the film ends.

Rudy's airstrike gives the people hope, especially since corporations have previously punished similar acts of resistance with death. The strike may catalyze further action if people in other parts of the country hear about it. Marissa K. López alludes to this possibility when she asserts that the protagonists "vow to continue the struggle against multinational capital" (202). The trio has shown that a small group can make a sizable impact against global capitalism, but it is also clear that they will need more voices—preferably in diverse locations—to truly succeed.[22] Certainly, Memo and his friends are not the only people to oppose the monopolization of Mexican resources by foreign corporations: Rivera uses fictitious 24-hour-news programs to identify the Mayan Army of Water Liberation—an official aqua terrorist organization—as one possible ally. The aforementioned group's interest in water rights alludes to a "joint kinship" with Memo and his friends that could mature into coordinated resistance. Of course, this potentiality can only come into fruition if these characters find subversive ways to collaborate, and this will almost certainly entail the subversive use of technology. Clearly, *robo sacer* resistance has yet to meet its full potential by the time the film ends. Rivera emphasizes the border's continued exceptional status by closing with a high-angle shot of Memo's recently planted cornfield which sits parallel to a no-man's-land between the Mexican and U.S. border fences. On the one hand, the protagonist's crops look insignificant next to the armored wall. On the other hand, they challenge imperial constructs of third-world *zoê* as they show how marginalized people can carry on in the face of dehumanizing technologies of power. *Robo sacer* resistance entails tenacity; Memo and his friends have carried out their impressive attack, but now they must regroup, find like-minded allies, and continue the struggle.

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22   Hacktivism has been successful previously in Mexico, where people from across the world accessed a government website to protest the treatment of the *Zapatistas* in the 1990s and later in 2006 (Zulkarnain 230-42; Wiegmink 31-33; García 197-202). However, one key problem with the protagonists' actions in this film is that, as Jorge Alberto Lizama notes, *hacktivism* only works when massive numbers of people attack sites using what he calls "táctica enjambre" (9-13).

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