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# MIGRANT FUTURES

*Decolonizing Speculation in Financial Times*

*Dealing in Sleep, Trading in Futures*

In "A Visible Border," the third part of his 2002 series of film shorts titled the *Borders Trilogy*, filmmaker and new media artist Alex Rivera investigates surveillance technologies at work at the border, developed by American Science & Engineering, Inc. The entire length of the film is preoccupied with one image, which is at first unintelligible but is eventually revealed to be the x-ray image of a semi containing a shipment of bananas and a concealed container of human laborers on their way to the United States. It is important to note that the opening orientation of the image is upside-down, purposefully defamiliarizing what viewers will eventually come to identify as a human head. The eerie, filmy outlines generated by the x-ray impart a certain ghostly appearance on the image, and the human bodies pictured are rendered alien and spectral by the transparency of their bodies. As the camera spirals and simultaneously zooms out from the image, a voice-over of a market analyst explains the x-ray technologies that produced it and the occasion for its application. For over a decade, the company called American Science & Engineering has provided the U.S. government with the technology to x-ray trucks crossing the border between Mexico and the United States with the explicit purpose of separating desirable and undesirable subjects. Rivera's filming of this still image directs our attention to the ways this policing technology renders certain bodies alien. Yet his insistence on using new media and film technologies to issue these critiques is significant. He is unwilling to capitulate the terrain of technological production as something that only serves state or capitalist enterprises. The spectator must question the mechanisms through which we come to assimilate subjects into our visual understanding.

*Sleep Dealer* could be considered the outgrowth of Rivera's 1997 science fiction film short *Why Cybraceros?*, in which the multimedia artist first plays with the idea of cyborg labor: "all the labor without the worker."<sup>45</sup> Taking up the *cybracero* (cyber migrant worker) figure, who can "jack in" and operate machines remotely from *el otro lado* (the other side), Rivera's feature-length film *Sleep Dealer* intervenes at a later moment in the neoliberalization of the border, when the maquila industry, a decade or so later, has firmly implemented NAFTA in the economic and ecological systems of the borderlands. By 2008, when the film was released, the INS had been absorbed into the larger entity of the Department of Homeland Security, and SIGMA had already pulled up a chair to its table.

While there are continuities across the border discourses in the late 1980s and early 1990s of risk, terror, and insecurity exemplified by the War on Drugs and the rhetorical flash points of the War on Terror and post-9/11 anxieties about the border, one significant difference between the two moments resides in the role of spectacle in producing the conditions of exception. Spectacle and speculation share etymological derivations from the Latin *spectare*, meaning to see or behold. Given the pivotal role that spectacle plays in the formation of a homeland security state, it is perhaps fitting that a post-9/11 critical border speculation such as Rivera's *Sleep Dealer* speaks back to its historical moment through visual culture.

New biometric technologies along the border facilitate the proliferation of identificatory systems, including passports with radio-frequency identification tags and facial recognition software at border checkpoints. The implementation of such technologies in the U.S. risk society accelerates alongside vigilante border militias such as the Minutemen, as well as myriad police dramas like *CSI*, *24*, *Person of Interest*, and *Hawaii Five-O*, which conscript audience members (already conveniently primed by the "scopic drive" of televisual engagement)<sup>46</sup> to become citizen-detectives taking part in an ongoing battle to secure the homeland through surveillance systems tailored to the amateur user.

*Sleep Dealer* introduces us to a near-future borderlands, in which the border itself has been officially closed because technology has supplied the means to effect a neoliberal fantasy of extracting cheap and disposable labor from the Global South without those bodies ever crossing the border physically. Maquiladoras still exist but in the form of "sleep dealers" — vast factories where workers "jack in" virtually via data port implants called "nodes" to remote-controlled jobs in the North. The protagonist Memo Cruz makes his way from his "dry, dusty, disconnected" town in the southern state of Oaxaca, Mexico to Tijuana where he hopes to find work remotely driving a cab in London or a high-rise construction robot in San Diego. Though off-site, this work remains precarious in that electrical surges can leave plugged-in laborers blind, disabled, or dead. Working hours are not regulated. "Sometimes," Memo's opening voice-over discloses, "during long shifts, we'd hallucinate . . . [and] if you work long enough, you collapse."

Though node technology has significantly changed the realms of labor and leisure (nodes also facilitate more direct access to pleasure receptors), the near-future landscapes of everyday San Diego, Tijuana, and Oaxaca depicted in the film reflect modest yet notably uneven degrees and areas

of technological change. The shiniest new tech radiates around corporate interests and military defense — two arenas that find themselves increasingly enmeshed in this future because privatization and remote securitization feed one another's needs. Remote-controlled automatic weapons guard local water sources, and biometric scanners monitor and control people's access to work and home. Meanwhile, Tijuana's infrastructure remains ramshackle: factory workers still occupy makeshift shelters on the hills surrounding the city, but door latches have given way to biometric scanning devices. While an army of surveillance cameras and automated weapons guard the local water supply, Memo gets jumped and robbed when he goes to an unmonitored back alley to find a *coyotek* to implant his black-market nodes.

In these ways, *Sleep Dealer* demonstrates its preoccupations with the politics of futurity. The film offers bookend pieces of dialogue to signal this self-conscious problematic of narrating the future. At the beginning of the film, Memo helps his father bring water to the family *milpa*, that ancient technology of Mayan agriculture where cultivating the right mix of maize, beans, and squash produces a mostly self-sustaining plot of land. Though Memo, who is an amateur hacker enthusiast, criticizes his father for not knowing "the world is bigger than this milpa," his father explains that the *milpa* is an investment in the future. "Is our future a thing of the past?" he asks Memo. "No. We had a future. You're standing on it. When they dammed up the river . . . they cut off our future. You weren't even born yet. You don't know how that felt." Linking the corporate privatization of Mexico's water supply to a colonization of the future, Memo's Papa hopes to secure a future by clinging to an agrarian past. The film, though, is careful not to over-romanticize this past, posing instead a critique to organizing a politics around mythical homelands that get taken up by primitivist racializations of brown people as naturally closer to an agrarian past. The film ends with Memo's concluding voice-over: "But maybe there's a future for me here. On the edge of everything. A future with a past. If I connect. And fight." The film refuses to relinquish the realm of technology and the worlding of futurity to corporate discourses of innovation and science fiction writers working on behalf of the Department of Defense. Instead, *Sleep Dealer* argues for and instantiates the production of alternative futures that fight against not only obsolescence but also obfuscations of the past that pave the way for the colonization of the future.

*Sleep Dealer* brings to bear one pivotal component of critical specula-

tion: transnational collaboration. It is the transborder coalition of Memo the *cybracero*, Rudy the Chicano drone pilot, and Luz the online storyteller that facilitates the eventual takedown of the dam that stole Memo's father's dreams of a future. This team of activists connects through the shared means of their labor. While working for a sleep dealer requires the physical transformation of laboring bodies through nodal implants into tissue, blood, and nervous systems, remote-controlled work also exists north of the border. Drone pilot Rudy Ramirez, whom we first encounter at the Del Rio Security Headquarters in San Diego, "works at protecting the assets of Del Rio Water." Piloting a drone plane also requires Rudy to obtain nodes, and in this way, the film marks his labor. Rudy's first mission sends him to eliminate a "terrorist target," which turns out to be Memo's hacker listening device in Santa Ana del Río. Facial recognition technology and profiling systems overseeing Rudy's mission identify Memo's father as a suspect terrorist. Rudy obeys his order to kill Memo's father, and the ensuing compunction he feels for his actions sends him searching online for traces of what he obliterated. The search brings Rudy to Luz, who is a writer selling her memories of Memo to TRUNODE, "the world's number 1 memory market." Luz's creative process also requires her to have nodes, as TRUNODE invests only in true stories, monitored and regulated through nodes by a "bio-thentication" process akin to an extreme lie detector test. Rudy explains his interest in Luz's stories about Memo by expressing their connection to remote labor. "It's interesting to know that he's a node worker. I'm a node worker, too," Rudy says, linking the three protagonists via these connective biotechnologies.

The conditions that bring Memo, Rudy, and Luz to their work also inform their future collaboration. Rudy understands his work at the Del Rio Security Headquarters to be a form of military service. He explains: "My mom and dad went military, so I'm following in their footsteps." A Mexican American born to parents who both served in the U.S. military, Rudy becomes part of a longer history of Chicano soldiers who fought in Vietnam and Korea as one way to secure an education, work, and/or citizenship in a country that perpetually seeks to evict, deport, or incarcerate Chicanos. Despite his pride in his family's military service, it is this state-level contradictory logic of recruiting some while executing others that cannot sustain itself after Rudy sees someone like his own father in his face-to-face encounter with Memo's father, who has been misidentified as an enemy of the state.

We also understand that Luz sells her memories to TRUNODE to pay down her student loans, which, she is notified, are in severe default. Student loans constitute a capitalist infrastructure for financing education; they instantiate financial speculation in that loans are issued with the expectation that the student has a lucrative future. The moral bankruptcy of lending institutions that bank on students not being able to repay their loans except at exorbitant interest rates shadows Luz's venture into writing for TRUNODE. She calls her collection of stories "El Otro Lado del Mundo" (The other side of the world), a title that announces not only a Third World perspective but also resonates with the science fiction genre of the film in which her character appears. Amid this coagulation of various forms of speculation, Luz's labor of compiling and curating her memories must also be understood as speculative in nature. The visualizations of her creative process reappear across Rivera's film as well, as if *Sleep Dealer* itself works like a TRUNODE story. *Sleep Dealer* asserts this continuity across Luz's TRUNODE memory collection and the film's aesthetic choices to enact the practice of producing futures with pasts.

*Sleep Dealer* capitalizes on the speculative genre by blurring the distinction between realism and fantasy, taking on the dreamlike qualities of the state between waking and sleeping. The dissolves bleed like watercolors, a seemingly impossible medium for telling the story of the parched, drought-enforced landscape Mexico has become in this future where multinational corporations based in the United States have privatized and militarized the regulation of water through a system of dams and aqueducts.

The hacker sensibility that emerges from the cross-border cooperation works against state uses of technology, and the cinematography articulates this contrast between on-the-ground, pedestrian tactics and the more surveillant modality of looking from the top down. In his essay "Walking in the City," Michel de Certeau theorizes the difference between, on the one hand, the vantage point from the top of the World Trade Center, which offers a god's-eye view of the city's ordered grid, and, on the other hand, the pedestrian acts of the passer-by whose movements position the walker in constantly changing relation to the surrounding city.<sup>47</sup> In *Sleep Dealer*, the drone that pursues supposed terrorists and enemies of the state is equipped with "Fly-Eye Cameras," and a reality TV show uses these images to articulate a narrative about "blowing the hell out of the bad guys." Rudy, who flies on behalf of the U.S. military in the service of the Del Rio Water Corporation, has the ability to "see every angle of the action" through these

cameras, which are enlisted to deliver this flying superhero perspective — what de Certeau calls a “voyeur-god” perspective<sup>48</sup> — to viewers of the show *DRONES!*

The scene cycles rapidly among several cameras at play. We cut from the *DRONES!* footage to a shot of Memo and his brother watching the show on their television set in Mexico, to the pilot’s-eye view of the ground from the drone, to Rudy’s targeting system screen, to a shot of the live audience silhouetted against a large screen playing the show. The reality TV show invites its at-home audience, including Memo and his brother, to participate in the spectacle of pursuing and eradicating supposed bad guys. Through these practices of looking, the *DRONES!* audience members occupy a policing gaze. Even Memo and his brother join Rudy in the cockpit, right up to the moment when they themselves become part of the show, running toward their home, which is about to be mistaken as a terrorist threat and destroyed. As the two brothers race home, they move from the space of the spectator to the space of the spectacle. At this point, it becomes clear that Rudy and the television audience cannot possibly see every angle of the action; theirs is not a perfect or all-seeing vision. The only camera that follows the brothers on foot as they sprint and stumble across the desert is Rivera’s camera, which reorients our gaze from that of the voyeur-god-drone to that which hovers at foot level, where we witness urgency and helpless haste. From this vantage point — the viewing position of Rivera’s film — so-called reality has suffered a glaring case of misperception. Memo may be a hacker to the extent that he has retooled a radio to eavesdrop on other people’s conversations, but he is an innocuous listener, not a terrorist threat.

In an earlier scene, we see that Rivera’s cameras follow Memo and his father as they wind their way through the dried riverbed canyon to get to the Del Rio dam. To walk with Memo through the river canyon evacuated of its water, its local livelihood, and its past is to maintain a stubborn resistance to the Del Rio vision of consolidated water and power, guarded by guns and security cameras that see in Santa Ana only a blur of desert to be exploited. As *Sleep Dealer* bounces between drone cameras and more pedestrian perspectives, we in turn must come to terms with the ironic fantasy of reality TV and the gritty realism of science fiction film. In *DRONES!* reality helps fabricate the state’s fantasy of risk and terror at the border, while *Sleep Dealer* uses science fiction to interrogate the mediated production of terror and imminent threat.

Through its cinematographic and narrative interventions, *Sleep Dealer* highlights the need for on-the-ground hacker coalitions in lieu of technology imposed from above. By playing with the dynamics of spectatorship throughout the film, Rivera critiques the state’s use of technology, even as the film itself remains invested in technology as a tool that can be creatively repurposed. The film disrupts narratives of progress and U.S. exceptionalism by laying bare the fabricated tensions between reality and fantasy in the state’s efforts to heighten securitization and the proliferation of military technologies at the border.

Refusing to relinquish technology as a site under the purview of the state, science fictions such as Rivera’s *Sleep Dealer* work to reclaim the ever important imaginative terrain of speculation, of futurity, so as to contest the ways in which capitalism has already bought, sold, and parceled the future into portions of risk to be managed, waves of fear to be stemmed, and threats of terror to be contained. The notion of “homeland security” pivots on an imagining of the future that demands the assessment of risk and projections of threat. Rivera’s science fiction, employing a kind of critical speculation, provides a useful way to reimagine both homeland and futurity.

This chapter has focused on the California borderlands by dint of the two cultural texts that anchor the conversation. However, I want to conclude it with the broader space-time configuration of the borderlands that includes Arizona and New Mexico as two more places where science and fiction collide. Proximate to the U.S.-Mexico border as well as the Isleta, Laguna, and Sandia Pueblos, U.S. Southwest locations like Albuquerque, New Mexico constitute what Alex Lubin has called a “transnational crossroads,” entangled in “multiple legacies of colonialism.”<sup>49</sup> One of these crossroads is that of military science and science fiction at sites like Los Alamos and Area 51, as well as all the nuclear testing sites and waste repositories in between — which Joseph Masco has named the “nuclear borderlands.”<sup>50</sup> Like the Los Angeles basin, the U.S. Southwest also harbors an intense conjuncture of science, industry, and military interests that generates speculative fictions of the multiple kinds this project engages.

One of the most chillingly iconic sites of science’s collusion with U.S. military aggression, Los Alamos is a national laboratory installed on behalf of national security. Operated either entirely or in part by the University of California since its establishment in 1942, the laboratory represents how scientific research affiliated with institutions of higher education bumps

up against state and military interests.<sup>51</sup> In addition to Los Alamos, New Mexico—called the Land of Enchantment on its license plates—is also home to the White Sands Missile Range, where the first testing of the atomic bomb occurred and when Robert Oppenheimer invoked the Bhagavad Gita in saying: “Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.” This meeting of science and myth is amplified at another site in the U.S. Southwest: Area 51, a tightly guarded, secretive military base in southern Nevada around which rumors of UFO sightings and conspiracy theories accumulate with ongoing zeal, fascination, and horror. Protected by one of the last remnants of the Internal Security Act of 1950 (also known as the McCarran Act), officials at Area 51, along with those at Guantánamo Bay, retain the authority to detain and use deadly force on suspicious subjects crossing its borders. Though much of this McCarthy-era legislation has been repealed, its legacy of emergency detention clauses was recently re-suscitated during President George W. Bush’s War on Terror.

I began this chapter with a discussion of SIGMA and homeland security, and I now conclude by connecting Area 51, the science fictions that surround it, and the McCarran Act’s capitalization on discourses of emergency. These conjunctures of science fiction and national security rely on discourses of emergency as part of a risk management program designed to extract profit from projections of an ever-susceptible border. In her analysis of “shock doctrines” and “disaster capitalism,” Klein provides a close reading of the document that originally called the Department of Homeland Security into being. This alarmist text declares: “Today’s terrorists can strike at any place, at any time, and with virtually any weapon.”<sup>52</sup> Designed to incite fear and panic that would provide the occasion to securitize against looming uncertainties—or, as Klein puts it, to protect against “every imaginable risk in every conceivable place at every possible time”<sup>53</sup>—the document invokes a homeland against which it plots a simultaneously abstracted and racialized terrorist threat. These border speculations seek to turn a profit on imaginable risks and yoke military mobilization and financial speculation in the way the Bush administration “played the part of the free-spending venture capitalist” in the wake of 9/11 as it encouraged the proliferation of security-oriented lobbying firms—whose numbers grew from 2 in 2001 to 543 in 2006.<sup>54</sup> The preemptive logics that undergird financial derivatives markets also sustain the profitable growth of the military-tech industry in the name of homeland futurity.