CYBORG BODIES, STRATEGIES OF CONSCIOUSNESS, AND ECOLOGICAL REVOLUTION IN THE MÉXICO-US BORDERLANDS

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Alex Rivera's 2008 science fiction film, Sleep Dealer, *visualizes broad implications regarding the recovery of historical memory as a form of cultural resistance to a world in which the masculinist gendering of technology threatens individual and collective identity. This paper explores Gloria Anzaldúa's theories surrounding the mestiza body, conocimiento, and nepantla as they relate to* Sleep Dealer *to develop the possibilities inherent to Chela Sandoval's emancipatory method of oppositional consciousness. The third-space methodologies of Anzaldúa and Sandoval help chart a counternarrative against an environmentally inequitable hegemonic enterprise that, in the film, is positioned between bodily materiality and an increasingly destructive political and militarized border. To further contextualize a critique of borderlands labor power that culminates in ecological revolution, I apply Homi Bhabha's ideas surrounding the third space. The works of these scholars allow me to tie the decolonizing movements of the film's main characters to broader ideas of environmental racism and social justice on the borderlands.*

Key Words: *conocimiento, cyborgs, mestiza consciousness, México–US borderlands, nepantla, social justice*

During the first few minutes of Alex Rivera's dystopic film, *Sleep Dealer* (2008), the audience is reminded of one of the most pernicious lessons of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: "Who controls the past, controls the future: who controls the present controls the past" (2003, 35–36).[1] The scene takes place at sundown, and is filtered by the warm orange glow of the Mexican desert. It combines expansive long shots with close-ups to fuse the characters' emotional state to the landscape. The men stand before their small cornfield, preparing to water the few rows by hand; a warm air rustles the plants.

Memo Cruz, a young man who dreams of life outside of his hometown, asks his father why their family remains in the rural town of Santa Ana, México.

> Memo: Hey, Pop, can I ask you…why are we still here?
> Father: Well, let me ask you…Is our future a thing of the past?
> Memo: (laughs)
> Father: You think it's funny?
> Memo: Well, yeah. That's impossible.
> Father: No. We had a future. You're standing on it. When they dammed up the river, they cut off our future.[2]

Memo's baseball cap, baggy jeans, and basketball jersey accentuate his youth and his distance from his culture. His father, darker and sun ravaged, wears the traditional attire of a farmer: long-sleeved cotton shirt, boots, and a straw cowboy hat. The scene narratively and visually establishes a central conflict: the power shift that has transformed their community's economic and cultural status. Significantly, the scene both foreshadows and parallels the film's final sequence in which Memo comes to terms with his own history as well as how his future, and that of his entire community, can become "a thing of the past."

In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa describes an environmental ethic that juxtaposes the exploitation of the borderlands with the oppression of its native peoples. Similarly, Rivera's *Sleep Dealer* destabilizes the boundaries between humans and the natural environment on the borderlands to underscore the metaphoric potential of individual responsibility that must attend an escalating environmental crisis of the México–US border.[3]

Sleep Dealer directs our understanding of the great potential in unearthing environmental concerns and themes of social justice along the México–US

borderlands of the twenty-first century. As scientists and citizens from all walks of life have become increasingly aware, we are on the cusp of a global environmental crisis of increasingly limited natural resources where loss of access to clean water and sustainable landscapes threatens the existence of entire communities. Policies steeped in environmental racism and environmental marginalization of indigenous cultures along the México–US borderlands in the twenty-first century often focus on the impacts and effects of NAFTA. In *Sleep Dealer*, the Bracero Program, the agricultural guest worker initiative prompted by the US demand for manual labor during World War II that began in 1942 and ran through 1964, is the catalyst that indicts a destructive American capitalist system at the expense of its wage earners. The antagonist here is not technology, unchecked industrial development, or even the environmental damage that the passage of NAFTA in 1992 brought to the borderlands. Rather, as Miguel López-Lozano has argued of dystopian novels in general, governmental systems that continue to "instrumentalize[d] humanity for the ends of the dictatorial state or the needs of the market" are clearly implicated (2008, 19). Like other Chicano and Mexican writers who employ utopian or dystopian rhetoric, Rivera's *Sleep Dealer* disrupts twenty-first century projects of modernization that systematically contribute to the erasure of poor, marginalized communities via dehumanizing labor practices.[4] As such, it contributes to current debates surrounding the global expansion of capitalism; more importantly, it presents a model of decolonization that begins with the self and ends in collective identity and revolutionary change.

This study of *Sleep Dealer* begins with a brief overview of Anzaldúa's theoretical frameworks and Donna Haraway's cyborg metaphor to claim that the two meet at the site of the technobody. This framework allows me to engage the body as a discursive construction that is a bearer of signs and cultural meanings that can be read and decoded. Throughout the film,

technobodies signify sites in flux. Significantly, changes wrought by the shifts in consciousness of Memo and Rudy, main players who are represented as technobodies, or intermittent cyborgs, result in ecological revolution. With the help of Luz, the film's technosavvy neplantera, both men successfully confront ignored knowledge from their past, what Anzaldúa has called personal desconocimientos. Their encounters culminate in a de-colonized landscape capable of bringing tangible social change on the borderlands.

To further contextualize a critique of borderlands labor power that culminates in ecological revolution, I apply relevant theoretical parallels, such as Chela Sandoval's method of oppositional consciousness and Homi Bhabha's ideas surrounding the third space. The works of these scholars allow me to tie Memo, Rudy, and Luz's de-colonizing movements to broader ideas of environmental racism and social justice on the borderlands, an intervention which I argue is central to the utopian pulse of the film, but which is lacking in contemporary discourse. Finally, I conclude by thinking about *Sleep Dealer*'s testimonio-style format, which compels viewers to consider the film's Chicanafuturist implications within cutting-edge Chicana/o cinema whose ultimate purpose is to bring about social and political change.

The American Dream in a Vacuum

Sleep Dealer presents plausible cybertechnologies to disrupt policies steeped in economic globalization and unrestrained industrialization of the México–US borderlands. Water rights and usage sustain the ecological pulse of the film, and at the heart is the disturbing alliance of technological imperatives that have become energized by a deadly coalition of paramilitary and corporate interests. In this future dystopia where the México–US border is closed, sealed by brute paramilitary force, Mexican workers telecommute from Tijuana, described as "The City of the Future," and transmit their labor while

physically connected to the global economy via nodes implanted into their body's nervous system.

The film begins with Memo, a young man who lives with his family in the fictional town of Santa Ana del Rio, Oaxaca, as he recalls the days before the horrible tragedy that forced him to seek work in the sleep dealers of Tijuana. His memories are structured around his father, the milpa (cornfield) his father owned and worked, and a huge dam built and operated by an American conglomerate based in San Diego, CA. Memo dreams of a world outside of dusty Santa Ana, where the most striking indication of a future twenty-first century is the hi-tech dam built and controlled by Del Rio Water, the US-based company that secures its investment via remote drones and paramilitary might. The company virtually holds the community hostage, charging outrageous amounts for water and hiking up prices on a whim. By night, Memo hacks into the global network using a homemade device. One evening, he stumbles upon the transmission of a security force seeking "aqua-terrorists" in the area of Santa Ana. He shuts down his radio, but it's too late. Unknown to him, his home has become the target of a terrorist intercept. The next day, a drone plane flown by a remote pilot, Rudy in San Diego, annihilates the family home, killing Memo's father. Guilt-ridden, Memo leaves his hometown and migrates to Tijuana to earn money so that the surviving members of his family may live.

On the bus ride to Tijuana, Memo meets Luz, a struggling but brilliant writer who sells other people's memories as stories via the global network. She talks to Memo on the long bus ride into Tijuana and downloads his memory via "TruNode," described as "the world's number one memory market." She does not tell Memo that she has used his memory. To her surprise, however, the memory sells and the unknown buyer prepays for more memories. The buyer wants to know why Memo is in Tijuana, and where his family is—notably

his father. So begins the strangely intimate triangle that propels the highly original, socially minded plot of *Sleep Dealer*.

In Rivera's dystopian future, maquiladoras are called "sleep dealers" by workers because they toil until they collapse. The sleep dealers have become virtual factories. Here, human bodies are plugged-in, operated like so many marionettes, and drained of their labor. With migrant labor totally dematerialized, workers' bodies and minds are dissected to the point of invisibility, absence, and echoes. This haunting image of "Cybraceros"—a concept Rivera refined for over a decade—indicts neoliberal discourses of technology and dehumanizing models of capitalism that exploit working brown bodies on the "global assembly line" (Nathan 1997, 22).[5] In short, this system of virtual labor provides the United States with all the workers it wants without the immigrants.

Laying the Groundwork: Cyborg Bodies on the Dystopic Border

This paper takes up the position of scholars such as Donna Haraway and Gloria Anzaldúa who have proposed frameworks for discussing the body as a discursive construction that is a bearer of signs and cultural meanings that can be read and decoded. *Sleep Dealer* is set in México and is the story of Mexicans and Mexican Americans who regularly cross both geopolitical and bodily borders; actors travel by bus, car, and virtual network. Moreover, Rudy, Memo, and Luz all function as intermittent cyborgs. They embody hybridized, plural subjectivities, a "coupling between a human being and an electronic or mechanical apparatus" (Balsamo 1996, 11). Sara L. Spurgeon proposes "that borderlands theory may be viewed as the offspring of two iconoclastic Western foremothers: Gloria Anzaldúa and Donna Haraway" (2009, 9). Her framework recognizes that cyborgs and Anzaldúa's borderlands mestiza are similarly transgressive figures of a dominant cultural order. Like

Anzaldúa's mestiza, cyborgs, by their very nature, exist on the margins. Cyborgs belong "simultaneously to at least two previously incompatible systems of meaning—'the organic/natural' and the 'technological/cultural'" (Balsamo 1996, 5). These technobodies, supreme boundary figures, are familiar subjects of postmodernity, hybridity and pollution.

Haraway's pioneering "A Cyborg Manifesto" (1991) grounds the cyborg body in the context of women, labor, and technology. Central to her conception of cyborg identities, however, are social categories such as "woman," "black," and "white" that she exposes as social fictions. With regard to cyborg bodies, or what Anne Balsamo calls the technobody, coalitions are formed based on position and affinity, rather than on an essential identity. In other words, the cyborg bodies in *Sleep Dealer* have much in common with workers in labor-grade sectors within our present-day global economy. In "New Sciences," Chela Sandoval begins her theorization of cyborg consciousness in direct parallel to "the muscles and sinews of workers who grow tired in the required repetitions, in the warehouses, assembly lines, administrative cells, and computer networks that run the great electronic firms of the late twentieth century [sic]" (1999, 248). These labor-grade sectors of workers are predominantly US people of color, recent immigrants to the US, and those who tend to be hierarchized by race, gender, sex, class, language, or social position. Sandoval's theorization is key in *Sleep Dealer* because both Rudy and Memo, the film's most prominent cyborg figures, although male, are nonetheless disembodied brown workers—hands, or commodities, that in the age of globalization represent disposable labor.

Proficient in negotiating a simultaneity of experience constructed around binaries, Anzaldúa's mestiza, argues Spurgeon "intersects, interacts, and plays with Haraway's complimentary borderlands subject, the cyborg, in ways that generate startling new visions of the borderlands and powerful new ways of

theorizing them" (2009, 12). Pushing a cyborg consciousness to what she proposes are its natural limits, Sandoval argues that "colonized peoples of the Americas have already developed the cyborg skills required for survival under technohuman conditions as a requisite for survival under domination over the last three hundred years" (1999, 248). These scholars engage a theoretical framework that underscores what Catherine S. Ramirez has called "links with others based on position and affinity" (2002, 392). These links highlight the complexities of twenty-first century technobodies alongside the ever-shifting parameters of cultural identity.

In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault (1990) proposed the term "technology" to designate the connective processes between discursive practices, material effects, and institutional relations that ultimately produce meaning, what he called a "truth effect" for the human body. Balsamo writes that, for Foucault, technology "names the process whereby discursive practices work interdependently with other cultural forces to produce effects at the level of the body" (1996, 21). In *Sleep Dealer*, the ultimate destruction of the Del Rio Dam by the collective action of Rudy, Memo, and Luz offers a narrative of resistance as well as a potent metaphor for liberation from the capitalized commodification of a natural resource. The dam serves as a truth effect for key players. Visually, it looms over Santa Ana, a man-made signifier of the corporate machine that serves as a concrete reminder of the citizen's colonial legacy. Twice, in flashback, Memo's father casts rocks at the monstrous barrier, in futility and rage because he knows the truth: the dam has cut off the townspeople's future prosperity, just as surely as it has cut off their past way of life.

When we first meet Rudy, he is twinned, a visual counterpart of the machine he operates. As a cybersoldier framed within his drone, he is a symbol of US corporatization of the military machine. Naturalized by a militarized

discourse of corporate dominance, Rudy's early identity is mired in an ideology incompatible with an Anzaldúan vision of social and economic justice on the borderlands. His physical body is estranged from the labor he produces, and he remains separated from his identity and his history, aspects that feed what Anzaldúa has called "desconocimientos." Desconocimientos are "ignored knowledges," the "shadow side of seeing," or a position in which one's reality is so overwhelming that he or she chooses to ignore it (2009c, 277). Rudy has roots in the machine; he tells us that both his father and mother before him served in the military. It is his legacy and a marker of his cultural identity.

When Rudy visits his parents after he has had time to assimilate the consequences of the aqua terrorist episode in which he killed Memo's father in cold blood, he asks his father whether he has ever had "doubts," referring to his father's own military career. Specifically, as he sits at the dinner table with his parents, Rudy adds, "I didn't think I would. Most of the time I don't feel anything." The conversation, comprised of close-up shots of Rudy, his father, and his mother, is significant both narratively and visually. The close-up shot of Rudy's father is framed by a painting of *The Last Supper*, suggesting the singular power of a militarized weapons system and the projection of a masculinist gendering of technology that is both omnipotent and iconic. The painting is further attached to a colonial legacy of Christianity that blankets the spiritual order of indigenous peoples, a key aspect of the film central to Memo's awakening consciousness that harks back to the requisite recovery of history and cultural memory by Anzaldúa's borderland subject.

Anzalduá's mestiza relishes the fluidity of borders and the destruction of binaries, as does the transgressive cyborg. Just as the politics entwined within Anzaldúa's mestiza bodies are described by inclusivity rather than

exclusivity, so the cyborg is "a contradictory boundary creature…sympathetic to difference rather than hostile to it, and necessarily based on the possibility that new and strategic alliances can be forged between unexpected groups," regardless of how limited or inconsistent those alliances may be (Wolmark 1999, 4). Cyborgs are concurrently animal and machine, transgressing worlds both natural and crafted. For Haraway, the cyborg metaphor is an ironic challenge and ultimate subversion of binarisms—human and machine, self and other, inside and outside—inherent in the twenty-first century world. Wolmark writes, "the transgressive nature of the cyborg means that it can provide a crucial means of contesting meanings, thus developing a more radical set of inclusive politics that cuts across traditional categories of difference such as race, gender, and class" (1999, 4). With regard to the politics of difference, cyborgs, by their nature, subvert ingrained binarisms of contemporary culture.

In *Sleep Dealer*, actors successfully effect change as cyborgs. Luz establishes this pattern. When she initially signs on to TruNode, she remembers and rewrites Memo's story, which is picked up by Rudy. As a cyborg, the second before Rudy fires upon Memo's father, the audience feels a moment in which we imagine that he identifies with the man; we sense this through the red, cyborgian eyes of his helmet. But the moment of recognition is fleeting, and ultimately overruled by the machine. However, when Rudy hooks up again and discovers Luz's story, his identification with Memo's father as a human being is seeded. His transformation begins, and as we will see, ends, with his cyborg body.

The Ties That Bind: Landscape and Conocimiento

Under the threat of "Anglo terrorism," writes Anzaldúa, those living in a borderlands of constant transition remain "separated from our identity and

history" (1999, 30). In the first few minutes of the film, in the scene by the cornfield that opens this paper, Memo's father tells him, "*no sabes ni quién eres*" (you don't even know who you are). With these words, he unknowingly sets in motion Memo's eventual pursuit of his identity, a search that begins in the sleep dealers of Tijuana and ends in ecological revolution as well as Memo's understanding of his father's implication of a "future that is a thing of the past." Initially, Memo does not comprehend how one's future can be a "thing of the past." His father's pronouncement, however, is an admonishment of Memo's desire to erase the history ensconced in his father's traditional environmental knowledge.

Memo's father asks him if he would like to see the family milpa destroyed, and Memo answers "exacto." This exchange is directly related to a pervasive American corporate-military influence in the region, signified by Del Rio Water. Memo is too young to recall the change in land use exemplified by Del Rio Water. His father, however, recognizes Del Rio Water as the basis of a power shift that altered the local community from a land-owning culture of self-sufficient Mexican farmers, to a class of poor, landless laborers. The site, the floundering milpa where his father grows beans and corn—staples that thrive symbiotically—is Memo's cultural inheritance. This symbiotic relationship is a cornerstone of Mexican traditional environmental knowledge, which underscores communal expressions of identity and is "a particular form of place-based knowledge" that harks to the Mayan concept of *in lak ech* ("you are my other self") (Peña 2005, 53,198).

In *Sleep Dealer*, technobodies, like the landscape itself, signify sites in flux. In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa describes the México–US border as a landscape in "a constant state of transition" where "the only 'legitimate' inhabitants are those in power, the whites and those who align themselves

with whites" (1999, 25–26). The historical exploitation of the landscape directly parallels Anzaldúa's mestiza consciousness. Central to the ideology of a mestiza consciousness is the idea of the material body as marked by transgression. Similarly, the México–US border is a pluralistic site of enunciation and contradiction. As she describes how the land has endured centuries of ill treatment by various and shifting political regimes, Anzaldúa merges the land's abuse and the mistreatment of its native inhabitants: "Our psyches resemble the bordertowns and are populated by the same people" (1999, 109). Any emancipatory, consciousness-raising struggle, she recognizes, is inner, and yet it is played out in the outer terrains. Integration within the material body may be achieved by un-covering, re-membering, and re-appropriating the desconocimientos of an internal colonialism born from the shame and terrorism of cultural tyranny on the borderlands. For Anzaldúa, acts of recovery—whether of history, memory, or culture—reside within the material body as well as the body of the earth. She insists: "Every essay, fiction, poem I write is grounded in the land, the environment, the body, and therefore in the past/ancestors. Every piece enacts recovery" (1999a, 292). In this paper, I link this idea of recovery to the utopian pulse of *Sleep Dealer*, which is powered by the protagonists' recovery of history and memory. Central to this recovery is Anzaldúa's ecological ethic that positions the México–US borderlands as a distinct bioregion.

Bioregions have a unique cultural identity, often spanning the borders of two or more countries, and are small enough for local residents to consider home. Lawrence Buell writes, "a bioregion or ecoregion is a geographical area of similar climate where similar ecosystems and groups of species are found on similar sites" (2005, 135). Notably, argues Buell, bioregions encompass "a domain of consciousness" as well as a "focus of citizenly allegiance that challenges conventional political boundaries" (135). In "Borderlands as

Bioregion," Priscilla Solis Ybarra discusses Anzaldúa's environmentalism. She positions a central concern of Anzaldúa's as the exploitation of the borderlands bioregion, and writes that her "environmental awareness helped her see the human crisis in [the] region as well as how the land's exploitation relates to injustices in the human community" (2009, 185). The landscape, then, designates a common ground for radical action.

Anzaldúa positions the México–US border as a distinctive bioregion *Borderlands/La Frontera* when she likens the South Texas landscape to a coiled serpent: "I know Earth is a coiled Serpent," she writes. "Forty years it's taken me to enter the Serpent, to acknowledge that I have a body, that I am a body and to assimilate the animal body, the animal soul" (1999, 48). In "El retorno" she returns home to "watch the curling, twisting serpent, a serpent nailed to the fence where the mouth of the Rio Grande empties into the Gulf" (1999, 111). Anzaldúa's depiction of the river as "a serpent nailed to the fence" leaves us with a vision of the region and its people nailed to the unnatural built environment of a border fence that cuts and separates rather than heals and unites. Anzaldúa, in effect, fuses her physical body with the body of the earth to enable us to understand how a master narrative in which the colonization of a natural resource directly relates to broader human injustices in the borderlands.

Anzaldúa's consciousness is directly tied to the Earth, as is Memo's. For Anzaldúa, "[t]he snake is a symbol of awakening consciousness—the potential of knowing within, an awareness and intelligence not grasped by logical thought" (2002, 540). In *Sleep Dealer*, Memo "awakens" when he puts his "history through a sieve" (Anzaldúa 1999, 104) and re-learns to embrace his indigenous ties to the landscape. Anzaldúa maintains that when this is done, we reinterpret history through the use of new symbols and the shaping

of new myths. Moreover, we can trace the trajectory of those who aim to communicate such a rupture with the goal of re-constructing individual identities so as to work to "transform the small "I" into the total Self" (1999, 104–105). The total Self is achieved only as it is contained within a viable relationship to the terrain. Transformation, emergence and renewal occur—just as does consciousness—*within*; such changes, however, are reflected in, and reflective of, outer terrains. This trajectory is evident in *Sleep Dealer*, as Memo's conscious rupture with an oppressive cultural tradition of disposable labor (maquiladora, or cyber-maquiladora work) that estranges his physical body from the actual work he performs ends with the successful destruction of the dam. The dam is a signifier of the machine, but it also represents a rupture in time; it has symbolically detached his entire community from its prior self-determining, precolonial landowning and farming heritage.

Memo's shift in consciousness, or his conocimiento, is aligned with Anzaldúa's mestiza consciousness, as it is directly tied to his indigenous landowning culture, an all-but-vanished way of life in his hometown of Santa Ana. In "Speaking Across the Divide," Anzaldúa suggests that the promise of psychic integration rests in the recovery of an indigenous landscape. This idea of "the interconnectedness of people and nature and all things, an awareness that people [are] part of nature and not separate from it" (2009a, 282) undergirds Anzaldúa's theory of nepantla. Nepantla is the Náhuatl word meaning "in-between space." Neplanteras are "supreme border crossers… agents of awakening" who "think in terms of the planet" (293). For Anzaldúa, nepantla is a liminal, transitional space, a zone of possibility where:

> you're two people, split between before and after. . . . In *nepantla* you are exposed, open to other perspectives, more readily able to access knowledge derived from inner feelings, imaginal states, and outer

> events, and to 'see through' them with a mindful, holistic awareness. (2002, 544)

The tech-savvy writer, Luz, is an example of a neplantera, as she facilitates both Rudy's and Memo's passage from rewriting the self to collective action. Luz initially brings Rudy and Memo together with her TruNode story, but she is also the one with the technological knowledge to hack into the military system in the final moments of the film. Even when Memo acknowledges that Rudy is ready to act against the machine, he can do nothing without Luz. Ultimately, Memo recovers his history, while Rudy recovers his body. And although Rudy and Memo decide for themselves that they will destroy the dam, Luz is the conduit for their actions.

For Anzaldúa, only when we come to grips with our deconocimientos, can we rethink the borders of our bodies, our identities, to engage strategic acts of reparation. Both Rudy and Memo confront personal desconocimientos to transform what they initially believe are the prescribed limits of their bodies. Their de-colonizing movements directly result in a de-colonized landscape. Once Memo has come to terms with his personal desconocimientos, and Rudy has psychically moved from a position of objectification to identification, they are both empowered to "become sentinels, bearers of witness, makers of historias" (Anzaldúa 2009b, 248).

Rudy: Oppositional Consciousness and Third Space in Action

Rudy, Memo, and Luz meet in a collective act of agency to de-colonize a precious natural resource—water—in a postcolonial third space. Their decolonizing movements establish a conduit for action that will have a direct and immediate impact on the México–US bioregion. As these players engage what Sandoval argues forms the basis of the methodology of the oppressed,

"that mode-of-being best suited to life under postmodern and highly technologized conditions in the first world" (1999, 259), the trio inaugurates tangible, egalitarian social change on the borderlands.

Homi Bhabha argues that the third space must be considered within the locality of cultural translation. For Bhabha and other third space theorists, this site of in-betweenness is an intercultural site of enunciation, a dialogical site existing within an "asymmetrical and unequal engagement of forces" (2009, x). Rudy inhabits a third space, a place in time that exists "in-between the violent and the violated, the accused and the accuser, allegation and admission" (Bhabha 2009, x). This site is a contact zone of opportunity where Rudy effectively, and in Memo's words, "crosses over." Anzaldúa uses the term "cross over" to describe the Coatlicue state, a kind of "way station" where one kicks a hole out of "the old boundaries of the self" to become truly vigilant, "that which abides…[a] thousand sleepless serpent eyes blinking in the night, forever open" (1999, 71, 73). Rudy is an American citizen who has internalized conflicts analogous to those experienced by many Chicanas; he can now, however, with the help of Luz and Memo, break through such desconocimientos.

In the final minutes of the film, Memo approaches Luz with the proposition that they join forces with Rudy. Initially, Luz cannot comprehend Memo's position. Yet Rudy's words contain the echo of an earlier conversation between Luz and Memo in which she relates the story of her own crossing of what she calls an "invisible border." This echo of the word "crossing" solidifies Memo's belief in Rudy, and Luz's faith in Memo:

> Luz: You want me to plug him in?
> Memo: Yes.
> Luz: This is crazy. He's a killer.

> Memo: He's here because of you, because of your stories.
> Luz: That doesn't mean we have to help him.
> Memo: Luz—Think about it. Remember what you told me about crossing to the other side?
> Luz: Yes.
> Memo: That's what he did. He crossed over. All we have to do is help him.

A postmodern figure who alternates between the organic and technological body, Rudy eventually comes to terms with the subject-object duality that holds him prisoner within an ideology of fixed borders. He crosses over, and, in this way, we can position him within the bounds of Sandoval's differential consciousness.

Sandoval defines differential consciousness as a "topography of consciousness in opposition . . . which identifies nothing more and nothing less than the modes the subordinated of the United States (of any gender, race, or class) claim as politicized and oppositional stances in resistance to domination" (1991, 11). For Sandoval, differential consciousness is a powerful strategy of oppositional consciousness because it is mobile, "a kinetic motion that maneuvers, poetically transfigures, and orchestrates while demanding alienation, perversion, and reformation in both spectators and practitioners" (1991, 3). Of Haraway, Sandoval writes: "her cyborg feminism is capable of insisting on an alignment between what was once hegemonic feminist theory with theories of what are locally apprehended as indigenous resistance, 'mestizaje,' US third world feminism, or the differential mode of oppositional consciousness" (1999, 253). In *Methodology of the Oppressed*, Sandoval examines the juncture that connects the disoriented first world citizen-subject who longs for a new sense of identity and redemption in a postmodern space alongside forms of oppositional

consciousness as developed by subordinated or colonized Western citizen-subjects (2000, 9). This idea relates directly to Rudy.

Rudy virtually crosses into México as part of his job as a drone pilot for Del Rio Water. Only after he decides to track Memo down does he physically cross into México. *Sleep Dealer* is presented in Spanish with English subtitles; Rudy and his parents, however, speak English. Although Rudy is light-skinned and of Latino ancestry, he appears to self-identify as white. As Sandoval describes in "New Sciences," a white male, indeed, *any* citizen subject existing under first world conditions of transnationalization—may act in opposition to and beyond a dominant ideology when engaging the tactics of a differential consciousness.

Rudy is crucial to revolutionary action in the film. Luz is necessary for her technological knowledge, and Memo supplies access to the sleep dealer where Rudy will "hook up" to the military system. Rudy must pilot the drone and push the button; his hand must ultimately fire the weapon. In the film's first half, Rudy's gaze is bifurcated. From above, as a cybersoldier and in his drone, he is hypnotized by a corporatized, ideological system in which the Other (Memo's father, the mistaken man behind the erroneous terrorist intercept) signifies "terrorist." Rudy is held captive by the "linkages between perception, bodily sensation, and intellectual comprehension" (Sandoval 2000, 96) of what Barthes calls "metalanguage" (1972, 146). Rudy is a weapon, a mirror of the corporate machine. As a cyberworker, where his labor power "is jacked in, tuned out, and systematically drained of its value by an invisibly remote ruling class" (Clover 2009, 8) he is disembodied mind from flesh; he signifies what Daniel Dinello and others have called a "technologist vision," one facet of which is to elevate technology to a divine status. In *Sleep Dealer* this is fitting because Rudy "plays God" when he obeys a disembodied directive and

opens fire from above on Memo's father, an innocent man helplessly crawling from the wreckage of his obliterated home.

Rudy first appends Memo's father to the signified: terrorist. But he increasingly desires to own his actions. In time, he chooses responsibility in order to "enact recovery" (Anzaldúa 2009a, 292). His physical and psychical search leads him to disclose a narrative that will push him from a state of objectification to identification; this catapults him, like Luz, into a state of nepantla.

In the linkage between perception, bodily sensation and intellectual comprehension, Rudy eventually comes to acknowledge and subsequently apprehend the signified—the concept "terrorist" in the *form* of Memo's father—as "empty." This is an example of "sign reading," a technology of the oppressed in Sandoval's (2000) methodology. In this case, sign reading emerges as a tool of survival and, ultimately, transformative change.

For Bhabha, it is the "openness or 'emptiness' of the signifier—the untranslatable movement between the intended object and its mode of intention—that enables a speech-act to become the bearer of motivated meanings and deliberative intentions, *in situ*, at the moment of its enunciation" (2009, xi). It is somewhere between the distance, somewhere within the shift across the open frame of signification that now marks Rudy's body where Rudy and Memo, toward the film's end, meet in new flesh. Two moments mark this third space of enunciation. First, Rudy offers to effect justice; he holds out his arms to Memo, displaying his implanted nodes, and says "I'll do anything." This is not an empty gesture; it is an invitation to action. Memo comprehends this, and tells Luz that Rudy has "crossed over." These moments in time and space are bridges. Rudy's disembodied action of killing Memo's father can mean something in the new space of his body only when he can connect, or bridge, that initial action to a subsequent action of reparation.

Rudy embodies a differential consciousness via the specific technologies of semiotic reading and the de-construction of signs, vectors of expression within the purview of Sandoval's methodology of the oppressed. In time, however, and more importantly, out of his own growing need to confront and interrupt his actions—his performance in the present—he consciously breaks from this forked ideology, this "double system" (Sandoval 2000, 96) in the México–US borderlands, where José David Saldívar writes, "peoples geopolitically forced to separate themselves [now] negotiate with one another and manufacture new relations, hybrid cultures, and multiple-voiced aesthetics" (1997, 13–14). When he does, no longer will the serpent be staked to the fence of fetishized greed in the guise of pseudo-religious corporate nationalism. The third space becomes seized as opportunity and contact zone, and in this space, in Bhabha's terms, "cultural difference becomes the momentous, if momentary, extinction of the recognizable object of culture in the disturbed artifice of its signification, at the edge of experience" (1994, 126). It is here where the practice of (re)membering and (re)writing leads to the formation of autonomous self-identity and politicized consciousness.

When Rudy comes to terms with his desconocimientos, he dis-locates his technobody from his cultural body, thereby marking the distance from a corporatized, master narrative of colonization in which he can easily absolve himself of any responsibility. In confronting and finally apprehending an ideology deprived of true historical meaning, his consciousness is "interrupted." For Anzaldúa, "Once conocimiento (awareness) is reached, you have to act in the light of your knowledge" (2009a, 292). By the film's end, Rudy makes a conscious decision to perform an action—push the button and destroy the dam—contrary to the "machine," signified by Del Rio Water. But he is only able to do this when he becomes the conscious operator of his own flesh. "In our very flesh," writes Anzaldúa "(r)evolution works out the clash of cultures" (1999, 103).

Only outside, or externally removed from his cyberbody, is Rudy able to take what Anzaldúa calls an "evolutionary step forward" to "become the quickening serpent movement" (1999, 103) where transformation can occur. Rudy's "performative utterance"—to borrow a term from Bhabha—in an ecological borderlands space, transforms the three actors into "agents of a new hybrid national narration" (Ikas 2009, 129). This is achieved as the triad moves from what Haraway deems the "standpoint of the subjugated"—whereby subaltern peoples put into practice the cyborg skills they must necessarily develop as "outsider identities," through what Sandoval terms a "rhetoric of resistance" (1999, 255, 257). These moves are performed within the third space, via a technology of differential consciousness. As such, their collective performance "occurs in a register permitting the networks themselves to be appropriated as ideological weaponry" (Sandoval 1999, 260).

Sleep Dealer reveals how memory—individual and cultural—must form "part of a social project of hope" (Baccolini 2004, 521). Baccolini argues that a utopian outlook sustains the critical dystopia: "It is in the acceptance of responsibility and accountability, often worked through memory and the recovery of the past, that we bring the past into a living relation with the present and thus begin to lay the foundations for utopian change" (2004, 521). The film is a critical dystopia that embraces an ecological, decolonizing approach to individual and collective history by reasserting the idea of nature and the natural world as historical actor. In the end, both Rudy and Memo remain hopeful even though each understands that he can never go home.[6]

Testimonio: The Key to Environmental Revolution

Sleep Dealer opens with a series of fluid images and swirls of super-saturated colors. Slowly moving hands, eyes, and the electric blue tendons that connect Memo's nervous system to the net flash across the screen and bleed into the

gauzy, hallucinatory images of his mind. Here, drifts a procession of Mexican women in peasant garb, and there stands his father amidst the arid desert landscape of his home. These are Memo's memories, and they float dreamily across the screen, a mirror of his mind's eye. A heartbeat links the images, and now we hover, as we might in Rudy's drone. The images fade, as does Memo's voice, and the first realistic frame is the careful pouring of water into a bowl of cornmeal, or masa de maíz. Memo's mother, who wears an apron, is making tortillas on a comal. We have slipped with Memo from his present as a cyber-maquiladora worker, into the past, to a time when his father was alive. This early scene establishes traditional gendered roles and foregrounds Memo's indigenous Mexican culture: Memo's mother cooks for the family, and in the next scene, his father handles money and works the land to provide food for the family.

Shaped by Memo's memories, the events in *Sleep Dealer* are related in the past tense to viewers, making the film a visual testimonio. In the introduction to *Telling to Live*, The Latina Feminist Group situates testimonies, or life stories, as "critical in movements for liberation in Latin America, offering an artistic form and methodology to create politicized understandings of identity and community" (2001, 3). In *Feminism without Borders*, Chandra Talpade Mohanty explores the work of Anzaldúa and others to theorize a common strategy of testimonio that foregrounds questions of memory, experience, history, consciousness, knowledge, and agency. Mohanty affirms that the "primary purpose" of testimonio is to "document and record the history of popular struggles, foreground experiential and historical 'truth' which has been erased or rewritten in hegemonic, elite, or imperialistic history, and bear witness in order to change oppressive state rule" (2003, 81). The testimonio strategy is to speak from "*within* a collective, as participants in revolutionary struggles, and to speak with the express purpose of bringing about social and

political change" (81; italics in original). Testimonios are about building relationships between subject and receivers in order to invite and precipitate change. *Sleep Dealer*'s testimonio format supplies an intertextual mode of storytelling to focus the relation of past to present, but it also is meant to rouse, perhaps incite, an audience's thinking.

Sleep Dealer is told in the form of Memo's testimonio to emphasize the significance of recorded history as a basis for the constitution of memory. The film foregrounds questions of ideology politics, social reality, and countervisions of history. Because it is "by, for, and about" brown bodies resisting via an oppositional politics, it is closely aligned with earlier Chicana/o films which Rosa Linda Fregoso has persuasively argued "developed within the context of the Chicano Power Movement's struggle of anti-racism," and encompass efforts for equality, self-determination, human rights, and social justice (1993, xvii). However, its emphasis on water rights, disembodied workers, and disposable labor practices that continue to threaten the livelihood of marginalized communities foregrounds broader, universal themes that have become increasingly tied to our globalized world. Additionally, the film "questions the promises of science, technology, and humanism" as it reflects the diasporic experiences of Mexicans and Mexican Americans, thus aligning it with works Catherine S. Ramírez has called Chicanafuturism (2008, 187). For all of these reasons, I suggest that *Sleep Dealer* effectively pushes the "for" aspect of Fregoso's trinity; this film is "for" anyone who is, first, troubled by the dehumanizing labor practices of today's global market economy, and, second, hopeful about the power of individuals to enact change.

The collective action of Memo, Luz, and Rudy is hardly an organized movement. Rather, it is organic, arising from the everyday life situation of individuals who represent a people in the midst of altering their history

from below. The film is framed by Memo's act of remembering, signified by his voiceover in the first and final minutes of the film. Luz's rewriting of Memo's account serves as a corrective to the gaps and erasures of his own memories. When Luz rewrites Memo's story on TruNode, this galvanizes Rudy's wakening consciousness. More importantly, Luz's stories directly lead to the formation of the trio's politicized consciousness; she is the catalyst for change. Her creative capacities—her stories—result in an action that has an immediate effect on the entire community of Santa Ana.

As we engage *Sleep Dealer* via *testimonio*, we enter a third space of cultural critique and political confrontation, as the potential of memory as a form of cultural resistance coalesces wide-ranging possibilities for local responses to broader ideas of environmental racism and issues of social justice on the borderlands. By according sustainable ecological principles a place in the narrative of cultural and historical memory, the film moves from a confining, post-industrial, corporatized model of nature where natural resources are managed and controlled for profit towards a more sustainable, model where in order to thrive, we actively, and in the spirit of mimesis, "make ourselves 'like' the environment, not as object, but in the deepest sense of visceral remerging with the earth" (Merchant 1989, 267).

Environmental historian Carolyn Merchant maintains that ecological revolutions are major transformations in human relations with nonhuman nature that arise from changes, tensions, and contradictions that develop between society's mode of production and its ecology, as well as between its modes of production and reproduction. These dynamics, she adds, "support the acceptance of new forms of consciousness, ideas, images, and worldviews" (1989, 2). As part of her organizational framework, she demonstrates how forms of consciousness are power structures. "When

one worldview is challenged and replaced by another during a scientific or ecological revolution," writes Merchant, "power over society, nature, and space is at stake" (1989, 22). In *Sleep Dealer*, the complex actions entwined in the protagonists' coming to consciousness culminate in an ecological revolution. A revolution in which a natural resource—water—bound, capitalized and corporatized for profit, is effectively liberated and redirected to run its natural course, thereby immediately impacting nonhuman nature alongside the indigenous economy.

I submit that when Gloria Anzaldúa attests, "[l]ike the ancients, I worship the rain god and the maize goddess, but unlike my father I have recovered their names" (1999, 112), she is speaking of an ancient, continuous story that mestizas/os must recover on their way towards a new consciousness. In *Sleep Dealer*, this is a mestiza consciousness directly seeded in a recovery of history and cultural memory by the main characters, Rudy and Memo. Their conocimientos are situated in a borderlands ethics of knowledge and landscape that reaches its apex in a synthesis of Indian, Mexican, and Anglo cultures. Anzaldúa's struggle, the struggle of the mestiza, culminates in return and rebirth, and the final image she presents us with in her *Borderlands* chapter, "La conciencia de la mestiza" is one of sowing and planting on her homeland terrain in the American Southwest. "Growth, death, decay, birth," she writes. "The soil prepared again and again, impregnated, worked on. A constant changing of forms, *renacimientos de la tierra madre*" (1999, 113). *Sleep Dealer* ends similarly, with Memo watering the seeds of his own small milpa on the edge of Tijuana. His final words hark to a "history with a past" and a commitment to fight for a sustainable future where diversity and difference are central values. "But maybe there's a future for me here," says Memo. "A future with a past. If I connect…and fight."

Notes

[1] I am indebted to Miguel López-Lozano for his intuitive use of Orwell's quotation in the introduction to *Utopian Dreams, Apocalyptic Nightmares*.

[2] *Sleep Dealer* was produced in Spanish with English subtitles. Specific passages quoted throughout this paper are taken directly from the film's English subtitles, in order that the text of this paper remain consistently in English.

[3] At the excellent request of an early reader of this draft, I invert the more commonly used term "US–México" to read México–US. This overturning serves two purposes. First, it challenges the hierarchy of writing the US first, and secondly, it underscores the fact that the film's perspective is viewed from México primarily, rather than from the US.

[4] For more regarding Chicano and Mexican writers who employ utopian or dystopian rhetoric see Miguel López-Lozano's *Utopian Dreams, Apocalyptic Nightmares* (2008), in which he discusses the work of authors such as Carlos Fuentes, Alejandro Morales, Carmen Boullosa, and Homero Aridjis in terms of dystopian science fiction.

[5] A special feature that can be found on the 2009 DVD is a twelve-minute documentary titled "Before the Making of *Sleep Dealer*." Here, Alex Rivera discusses his early motivations for creating the film. Of particular importance is an early satirical piece he produced in 1997 titled, "Why Cybraceros?" in which he discusses his use of the Prelinger Archives to create early images of cyberworkers. Other features of this documentary include discussion of early artwork and storyboards, as well as comments regarding set design and digital footage used in the actual film. For more information on Braceros, go to: http://www.prelinger.com/

[6] In the film, we learn much about Rudy and Memo's home life, as we meet both sets of parents and are invited into each of their homes. When we first meet Luz, however, she is travelling by bus. We know she was once a university student, and that she now lives singly in an apartment. At the film's conclusion, we can only assume that she stays with Memo.

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