Disembodied and Deportable Labor at the U.S. Mexico-Border: Representations of the Mexican Body in Film

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The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada (Tommy Lee Jones, 2005) is the story of a Mexican undocumented immigrant who is killed by *la migra*. Melquiades Estradas's story is told by way of his death and, most importantly, by his burials. *Sleep Dealer* (Alex Rivera, 2008) portrays the use of Mexican and U.S. Latino cyborgs that are contracted to handle machinery or drones from a remote place. In this film, people are contracted for their labor via a computer connection to manipulate and control the equipment that is located in the United States. As I argue in this essay, *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* and *Sleep Dealer* portray the devaluation of the Mexican body as it feeds into the U.S. labor market. The Mexican body is perceived as foreign as its labor is welcome. As a result, it suffers the physical effects of this system. Both films can be said to have hybrid points of view. Tommy Lee Jones and Guillermo Arriaga collaborated to make *The Three Burials*, bringing together influences from both Hollywood and the Mexican film industries. Alex Rivera's mother is from New Jersey and his father from Peru. Neither film seeks to construct an alternative definition of Mexican identity, but what they do instead is to point out the ways that these constructions are used to separate Mexicans (or those perceived as Mexican) from the United States. While these two films are from different genres, they similarly use fictional elements to represent the current context of labor and migration on the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, and they present similar critiques of how migrant and *maquiladora* labor is welcomed in the United States even though the Mexican laborer's body is unwanted.

Labor is defined as productivity, the group of people who contribute to that productivity, and the physical and mental work that goes into that. At the core of the problem is the desire to extract the work without the physical presence of the Mexican body. The Mexican body is understood to be an outsider and a foreigner to the United States. The need for labor without the presence of the body hinges on the existence of the nation-state and the differences that it creates within and outside of national borders, which affects people within the United States as migrant laborers, as well as those outside of the country who work in maquiladoras. Those born in the

United States may technically have the rights of citizenship, but they are discriminated against because their body is still judged as deportable.

Maquiladoras and other forms of outsourcing represent "disembodied labor," work that is performed outside of U.S. boundaries. To contextualize this type of labor, Raúl Delgado Wise and James M. Cypher argue that NAFTA has led to Mexico's deindustrialization; and what is exported from the country is labor through the maquiladoras, disguised maquiladora sector, and emigration from Mexico to the United States. The manufacturing process moves the products in and out of Mexico so as to derive the highest benefits from the lower wages in Mexico. The authors argue that this occurs beyond the maquiladoras and seeps into other manufacturing sectors, which they call "disguised" maquiladoras. The exportation of labor further depresses wages in Mexico and pushes Mexicans to migrate to the United States. As Delgado Wise and Cypher argue, manufacturing in Mexico offers a "disembodied" labor market for the United States:

> The first two processes constitute the disembodied export of cheap labor, with this labor actually embodied in the exported products. Emigration, on the other hand, is the direct export of labor, but in all three instances Mexico is not really exporting goods because, with minor exceptions, the only Mexican-made/input in this complex transnational process is cheap labor. (121)[1]

I would add to Delgado Wise and Cypher's conclusions that, while Mexican migration offers an exportable type of labor, the export hinges on the existence of national boundaries and the existence of a deportable labor force.

Migrant laborers are physically in the United States to perform the contracted work, but for those who are undocumented and even those who are residents to some degree the threat of deportation creates a complex system of disposable labor. Nathalie Peutz and Nicholas de Genova explain the complex relationship of the undocumented to the state:

> deportable populations do not embody the supposed absence of the state but rather become the object of its sovereign power to exclude, even while it incorporates them. After all, the deportable may only become such to the extent that they are already counted *within* the purview of a state's power, as an effect of their inclusion in the space as an abject population, usually eminently disposable labor. (15)

For Mexican migrants to work in the United States, they must undergo a difficult process of migration, especially if they are undocumented, and they must endure the discrimination against them.

The disposable labor comes at a high cost to the migrant laborers, especially those who cross the U.S.-Mexico border without documents. *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* and *Sleep Dealer*

both represent the physical damage that the migrant body undergoes because of the physical effects of crossing the border. In "Migrant Bodies: Corporality, Sexuality, and Power among Mexican Migrant Men," Rodrigo Parrini, Xóchitl Castañeda, Carlos Magis, Juan Ruiz, and George Lemp argue that the body is transformed by the process of migration and is especially marked when migration is undocumented. The study was based on a series of interviews done in San Diego and Fresno, California and the states of Oaxaca, Michoacán and Jalisco. Those surveyed for the study described the migrant journey as one that took its toll on the body, especially in the cases when the migrant was undocumented. Parrini and his collaborators explain, "In the United States, the migrant body symbolizes otherness and thus attracts discrimination and racism, whereas upon its return to the place of origin, the body signifies success and so invites exhibition and celebration" (62-63).[2] The body of the undocumented immigrant is particularly susceptible to the physical effects that the journey entails. Once in the United States, the undocumented migrant body comes to represent an intrusion to its host country: "the body is the ultimate basis of the illegality that is attributed to it: a body that inhabits a certain space contrary to the laws of a country" (66). The respondents in San Diego and Fresno reported that they were called "aliens." Parrini and his collaborators argue that the use of the term demonstrates the embodiment of racism and exclusion:

> This term can be interpreted, on the one hand, as a way of establishing migrants' foreignness; on the other, the word emphasizes their strangeness and their invasive nature. What does it mean to be an alien? Perhaps what the word indicates is the paradoxical condition of the migrant body, which is perceived yet negated. The migrant is treated as an invasive body that interrupts the daily routines of the locals. An alien is a being without a place, strange by definition, present but not integrated. What sort of body does an alien have? First, the body itself visually places the migrant as a stranger. Second, the migrant body is emptied of subjectivity and history in that its strangeness inhibits identification and obstructs its integration into the local symbolic networks that name it. (67)

This feeling of placelessness of the "alien" is represented by both *The Three Burials* and *Sleep Dealer*. The Mexican workers in these films are "without a place" in the United States and "present but not integrated."

Both films represent the racism and discrimination against Mexicans or anyone who might "look" Mexican. The criticism is pertinent given the treatment of Mexicans in the United States. In the case of Mexican migrants, the body is read or understood as being illegally in the United States simply by its physical signifiers. Karma Chávez analyzes "the translation of body as text" and how such interpretations are made my law enforcement officers. Chávez analyzes the "Chander Round-up," an immigration raid in Arizona that took place in July 1997. Chávez looks at the ways that

people were chosen for questioning, and she concludes that the officers used the body as a way to interpret illegality. Such interpretations were based on the assumption that any physical features that looked Mexican could be equated with illegality. As Chávez notes, such readings of the body have implications for all those who may look illegal:

> The metaphors of alien, criminal, and parasite not only discursively interpellate those people who reside in the United States without documentation, they also hail many who could be mistaken for an undocumented migrant from Mexico. This historical rendering is still very apparent today in the ways that many Americans regard brown bodies, specifically those viewed as Mexican. (22)

The Three Burials and *Sleep Dealer* criticize the ways that the body is read as text and how that is used to discriminate against Mexican and Mexican American laborers.

I would like to point to the type of reduction and stereotype within the United States that equates all undocumented immigrants as Mexicans. As the Pew Hispanic Center reports, "In 2012, there were 6.0 million Mexican unauthorized immigrants in the United States" (n.p.). This number represents more than half of all unauthorized immigrants, estimated at over eleven million. Because Mexican nationals account for such a large portion of the undocumented population, the stereotypes of both the migrant body and the Mexican body are collapsed and often handled and represented as one in the same from a mainstream context in the United States. The films analyzed in this paper respond to these stereotypes and how they affect Mexican and Mexican American laborers.

The Three Burials and *Sleep Dealer* stretch the fictive elements to describe the ways that the Mexican body is mistreated at the U.S.-Mexico border. Melquiades and Memo suffer from the same type of discriminatory system that offers enough space to admit their work but not enough to accept their bodies. *The Three Burials* follows the classic Western, and *Sleep Dealer* is a science fiction film set in the future. It might seem as if these two films have little in common; however, they both stretch the fictional elements in such a way that they seem unbelievable in our current world. Fiction, as farfetched as it may be, comes to represent our current social context of labor along the U.S.-Mexico border.

Seeking the Death of the Migrant

In *The Three Burials*, Pete Perkins decides to carry Melquiades's body back to Mexico to his supposed hometown. Pete, Melquiades's friend, is a foreman who hired Melquiades when he first arrived to the United States. He forces Mike Norton, the Border Patrol agent who killed the migrant, to help him return the body to Mexico. The film is a Western featuring long shots of west Texas

landscapes, most noticeably the mountains and valleys often associated with Big Bend National Park.[3] The classic Western style often features bandits and outlaws, but this film twists the narrative in such a way that there are several bandits. Mike kills Melquiades, and Pete illegally takes Mike and the dead body to Mexico. The key difference with the traditional Western is that the Mexican is not the bandit in this case, but the victim. The narrative hinges on an almost unlikely plot where Pete crosses the border illegally toward Mexico. Americans can travel to Mexico with very few restrictions, but Pete must run for the border if he intends to take Mike Norton with him by force. In this way, the film forces a southward movement, contrary to the northern migrations from Mexico to the United States. Would an American really carry a Mexican body back to Mexico illegally as is shown in *The Three Burials*? The answer is probably no. The purpose is not to present a believable story but to allegorize the relationship between labor, migration and the policing of national borders.

The question of the death carries the narrative of the film rather than the migrant's life story within the United States. Death has been represented as part of Mexican national identity, but the Mexican images of death are living and functioning as if they were alive. Melquiades Estrada has no life; he is dead. His body is badly handled, decomposed, and decaying. This dead body represents Mexican national identity as it is constructed from within the United States. More typical migrant narratives concentrate on the migrant defining himself/herself from others, particularly the white or mainstream population, and the migrant as she or he crosses the border. In *The Burial of Melquiades Estrada*, the story is told mostly from the perspectives of Pete Perkins and Mike Norton. Parts of Melquiades's life are shown in flashbacks through Pete's reconstruction of the stories Melquiades told him. The film also shows Mike's perspective throughout the film, and we see the events around Melquiades's death through his eyes as well. Some of the flashbacks show Melquiades telling Pete about his life in Mexico, and then we see those memories on the screen. The film never really shows us Melquiades's perspective but instead what we see is how others see him and how they construct his identity. The body then represents the foreman and the Border Patrol agent's construction of Mexican identity.

The Three Burials presents a triad between migration, labor, and the militarization of the border that is represented by the three main characters Melquiades Estrada, Pete Perkins, and Mike Norton respectively. What the film depicts is the uneasy and contradictory relationship that the United States has to migration. Melquiades is the migrant who travels to the United States in search of work. As a foreman, Pete Perkins hires him and befriends him. The relationship between

Melquiades and Pete seems synchronous, but we can easily forget that the employer does not necessarily work for the laborer's wellbeing but his own. Mike Norton represents the immigration and border restrictions that seem to limit the access that laborers have to employment. While the U.S. militarizes the border, it hires migrants to do its labor. Pete and Mike are at odds with each other in the same way that the need for labor conflicts with the state system that seeks to close the borders. The film plays with the viewers' perception, so it is easy to overlook Pete's negative traits and his faults, which we actively see in the film. The film leads us to believe that Pete seeks to punish Mike for killing Melquiades, since the state does not investigate the murder. Pete is cruel and punishes Mike in his own way for Melquiades's death. The way the film sets up the story, we may feel inclined to overlook Pete's cruelty toward Mike and his role in Melquiades's life, but it should be no surprise that the foreman does not impose the death penalty as a punishment. In the end, Pete lets Mike go after they have finally buried Melquiades in Mexico. We are quite apt to believe that the problem is the Border Patrol and the immigration laws, but we forget that the employers are those who gain the most from the disembodied and deportable labor that only exists through the militarization of the border.

While we see images of Melquiades alive via Pete's perspective, we mostly see his corpse. Melquiades's corpse undergoes a process of decomposition that is worsened by how others mishandle it. The film is divided by the sequence of three burials as the title reminds us. The structure of the film□ three narrative parts separated by intertitles numbering each of the burials□ is characteristic of Arriaga's projects both as screenwriter and director. He uses the three-part narrative, out of chronological order and divided by intertitles in *Amores perros*, *21 Grams*, *Babel*, and in *The Burning Plain*. In *The Three Burials*. The divisions within the film are meant to highlight the various ways that Melquiades is mistreated in both life and death.

Through the flashbacks of Pete's memory, the film gives us some clues about the friendship between Melquiades and Pete. Pete contracted Melquiades to work on the ranch, because he is a foreman. The film softens this detail by showing Melquiades and Pete working side by side with the cattle as they discuss how the owner is nowhere in sight, but the detail is significant because it brings to light the relationship between migration and the need for labor. While they work together, Pete holds some power over Melquiades as the foreman in charge. While the viewer is impelled to trust Pete as a character, the film also gives us enough information to be suspect of his point of view. In one scene, Melquiades gives Pete his horse, and Pete questions the gift but accepts it in the end. The scene is another flashback of Pete's memory. Why would Melquiades hand over the only possession

that he owns? We never know because we are never shown Melquiades's point of view. Pete's memory is distorted.

The Three Burials does not follow the pattern of representation of death in Mexico. Roger Bartra delves into the issue of death as one of the tropes of nationness: "A partir de ese crisol legendario se alienta el mito del mexicano indiferente a la muerte, del hombre que desprecia a la muerte; éste es uno de los lugares comunes más socorridos del pensamiento mexicano moderno" (74). While death is one of the most common national archetypes, Claudio Lomintz writes, in *Death and the Idea of Mexico*, that the three great totems of Mexican national identity– Guadalupe, Juárez, and Death– arouse in the foreign press after the Mexican Revolution as a supposedly inbred flaw inherited from the Aztecs (43). While Lomintz analyzes some dimensions of how death is represented in Mexico, the topic goes far beyond the context of the Mexican Revolution. This indifference to death is associated to the Day of the Dead celebrations in which the loved ones are believed to return to visit. The images of death in Mexico tend to be moving and still alive in some way. If we think of José Guadalupe Posada's art, skeletons are always in action. We can also think of the Catrinas, the female skeletons that are dressed in lively colored dresses as they pose, carry umbrellas, and display death beautifully. Of course, not all the representations of death are celebratory. La Llorona is one example of a dead woman who is characterized by movement but not by lively celebration. It is a transnational archetype of a woman who roams around looking for the children she drowned in order to be with the man that she loved. There are various versions of this story in Mexico and the United States. Sandra Cisneros named her collection of short stories, *Woman Hollering Creek: And Other Stories*, which is reminiscent of both La Llorona and the name of the river that runs through Central Texas. While these are just some examples of how death is represented in Greater Mexico, they entail some type of movement or presence of the dead body that we usually understand as living. In the film, Melquiades is an inanimate, decomposing body and a mere memory, and he must be moved by others.

The topic of death as presented in the film incorporates the militarization of the border. *The Three Burials* questions the policing of borders since it was inspired by Esequiel Hernández Jr.'s story. He was a sheepherder that was killed by a marine in field near Redford, TX. The story made news headlines because the young man was a U.S. citizen. He was herding sheep when he was shot. His death is representative of the ways that the body is read as text and the Mexican body is understood as illegal and undocumented. The young Mexican American man's death brought to light the problem of using the military to police national borders. After directing *The Three Burials*, Tommy

Lee Jones narrated a documentary, *The Ballad of Esequiel Hernandez* (Kieran Fitzgerald, 2008), demonstrating a continued concern over the militarization of his west Texas community. *The Three Burials* was partially filmed in Redford, TX, the town where Esequiel Hernández Jr. was shot.

The film imitates the type of confusion that was prevalent in Hernández's case except that the mix-up is not over identity but place of origin. As Pete and Mike carry Melquiades back to Mexico, they search for his hometown, Jiménez, but it is impossible to find. Jiménez actually exists in the state of Coahuila, but this part of the film was shot in Redford. Mike and Pete roam through the mountains, and they finally reach the Mexican border with the help of a *coyote*. Since Mike is wounded from a snakebite, the coyote takes him to see a *curandera*, who happens to be the same woman who Mike punched in the face as he attempted to stop her from crossing into the United States. When Mike finally wakes from his sleep, he discovers that he is Ojinaga, which is a border town in the state of Chihuahua. Jiménez is in the neighboring state of Coahuila, so it is clear that they have roamed in the wrong direction. The film cuts between scenes of Pete asking people for directions. Pete continues to search for the town and passes a group of men who sit outside watching television. Guillermo Arriaga has a small cameo appearance in this scene as he offers the wondering men food, confirms that they are finally in Coahuila, and gives him the directions to El Tostón. In the next scene, Pete enters a small store with two women standing at the counter and a man sitting to the side. When Pete asks them for directions to Jiménez, all three deny the existence of the town. Pete takes out a picture of the woman who is supposed to be Melquiades's wife, but the man says that her name is Rosa, not Velia. At this point in the film, the people do not confirm any of the details that Pete remembers from Melquiades's story. Pete talks to Rosa who says she has never heard of Melquiades and does not understand why Pete has a picture of her and her children. Another man tells Pete that Jiménez does not exist, so Mike begins to question Pete and tells him that Melquiades must have told him lies. Is Melquiades's home really in Mexico? The film never attempts to answer this question because Melquiades is dead and cannot answer it himself. We must trust Pete, his friend and employer. After the string of conversations that put the memories into question, Mike starts to argue with Pete and tells him, "The place doesn't exist. There is no fucking Jiménez." Pete holds up the small piece of paper looking at it from different directions. The map is a significant detail because it is a scrap piece of yellow paper that has Jiménez drawn in the middle of small hills. The film cuts between Pete's memory of Melquiades speaking and the landscape that they are seeing. Pete and Mike sit on their horses as the camera pans though the open space with hills. Pete decides then that he knows where he is despite all the evidence to the contrary.

The portrayal of death in this film demonstrates how the "other," the United States, constructs Mexican national identity. Pete desires to put Melquiades right back in his place, but where is this place? If we consider that *The Three Burials* was inspired by Hernández's death, the film plays with the generalization that all those of Mexican descent have their home in Mexico. Pete and Mike find a town that fits Melquiades's supposed description although there is no one around to confirm Pete's conclusions. Pete decides that Melquiades's house is an abandoned home with no roof in the middle of nowhere. He checks the picture that Melquiades gave him, compares the markers, and concludes that this is the home of which Melquiades spoke so fondly. A curious detail of the film is that Pete shows Mike the photograph sideways for him to confirm that the place looks the same. We can see that their point of view is distorted. There is no way to check to see if Pete is correct. Pete was never there with Melquiades, and the picture is not enough to verify his claim. What is certain is Pete's need to find Melquiades's lost home.

Mexico is often perceived to be a lost paradise, a place that is closer to an Edenic past. Bartra argues that "la nostalgia del edén perdido se transforma en una búsqueda intelectual de la dimensión auténticamente humana que la civilización industrial moderna ha sepultado" (76). While the images of death within the film do not conform to those prevalent in Mexican society, this connection to Mexico as an Edenic place is present. When Mike and Pete arrive to the battered home, Pete decides by the look of the area that it must be the same place that Melquiades described. The adobe house is falling apart, has no roof, and is vacant. It is not much of a home. We hear Melquiades's voice describing a beautiful scene, that place that he calls home. Melquiades's voice also guides the viewer to believe that this must be the same place, but it is Pete's memory speaking and not Melquiades. Once decided that Melquiades is home, Pete forces Mike to help him reconstruct the building, that imaginary home that they have found. This house may not be Melquiades's home, but it is his final burial ground. Mike and Pete place Melquiades's dead body inside the structure, gather rocks and sticks to use, and finish building the home. While we can doubt if Melquiades ever lived in this space, we know that this becomes his true resting spot. After two other burials, this is the third and the last.

The Three Burials delves into the ways that Mexicanness is constructed within the United States and how it is associated with undocumented immigrants. If we consider that the sheepherder Esequiel Hernández was not an undocumented immigrant, we can see that such constructions of the immigrant have come to define all Mexican Americans, even those who are residents and U.S. citizens. The need to construct a home, a Mexican hometown in some other place, reminds us that

Mexican Americans are many times not thought to be part of the United States. It is that play with nativism and the desire for labor that characterizes the ambivalent and contradictory stance toward Mexican immigrants and by default all Mexican Americans. What would happen if Pete Perkins were to admit that the lost Eden was only a construction of his imagination? Perhaps he would have to admit that Melquiades's home was close to his own and that Melquiades's body actually belongs to the United States, specifically to Texas. He would no longer be that Other that he has imagined all along.

Sleep Dealer

Although *Sleep Dealer* is Alex Rivera's first feature-length film, he previously directed a variety of short films on the topic of migration. *Papapapá*, one of Rivera's first short films, is a personal exploration of his father's migration from Peru to the United States. As the title demonstrates, the piece plays with the words potato and father, *papa* and *papá*, as a fusion of both Peruvian and U.S. cultures. Rivera portrays his father as a couch potato. In the United States, this phrase is used to refer to watching too much television, but the potato is also a Peruvian vegetable. Later in his career, Rivera switched from his personal explorations of identity to Mexican migration to the United States, particularly to New York. Perhaps his most known documentary is *The Sixth Section*, a short film about a transnational hometown association of migrants in Newburgh, New York, which posits a new cartography for understanding how transnational communities bring together people living in two different countries. While *Sleep Dealer* continues to explore Mexican migration to the United States, Rivera switches his focus from the topic of transnational communities to the militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border. Rivera developed the idea for *Sleep Dealer* several years before actually working on the film. He built a website that marketed the cyber labor that he portrays in the film. Although the commercial advertisement was not real, Rivera received several queries for his imaginary cyborgs.

Sleep Dealer presents the topics of maquiladoras and migration to the United States in a futuristic setting. In the film, people hire coyoteks to help them plug into this cyber-globalized world. The root of the word "coyotek" makes reference to technology and the coyotes, the migrant smugglers, but the coyotek's function is to implant nodes for people who want access to the cyber-world. The factories are much like maquiladoras, but instead of working on an assembly line manufacturing real products, the laborers control machines in the United States to work. As a science fiction film, *Sleep Dealer* uses the futuristic elements to paint a panorama of the current

context of labor and migration at the U.S.-Mexico border. The workers depicted in the film send their labor without being physically present; they are the producers of disembodied labor. While the future in which people connect physically to a computer might seem far stretched, *Sleep Dealer* uses the fictional elements to portray the contradictions implicit in welcoming migrant labor but rejecting migrant bodies. One significant detail of science fiction films is that they feature innovations in technology, a key theme within *Sleep Dealer*. The futuristic setting is characterized as a place where information and drones run freely but national borders are closed for people. Even though Americans are discouraged from traveling to Mexico, companies still use cheap labor through the high-tech factories, which represent migration and maquiladoras. *Sleep Dealer* also posits military labor as comparable to the hiring of migrants and maquiladora workers. In this film, both types of node workers are tied to labor that crosses national boundary lines.

The film starts with a voiceover by Memo Cruz describing his living situation. While initially the viewer may not be privy to the reference until later in the film, Memo tells his story electronically. While Memo never states it directly, we can deduce that his narration in the film is done through True Node, an Internet-based memory bank that makes these memories available for sale. In the film, Memo narrates his journey to Tijuana retrospectively and starts in his hometown, Santa Ana, a small Oaxacan village. Santa Ana's water is controlled by the Americans who built a dam and sell the water at an exorbitant price. What was once a green-and-vegetated place is now dry and barren due to the excessive control of the water supply. The sandy-looking images of the drought in the small town tie the water rights issues to the drying up of Mexican agriculture by U.S. businesses on a larger scale because of the NAFTA. While Memo is the narrator of the film, Luz functions as an intermediary between him and the Internet-based, globalized world. She is both a coyote and a storyteller, who gives Memo his nodes and who initially tells his story. After meeting him, Luz starts to electronically recount her encounters with Memo using True Node.

As he describes his past, Memo and his family live modestly with some access to technology, but we know from Memo's conversations with his brother that he resents using what he considers old equipment. His family uses a flat-panel television that for the viewers is up-to-date, but the technology in the future has moved beyond what we know. The home is a small shack made out of wood; parts of it are uncovered and incomplete as the family sits in open spaces within the house. Instead of understanding the financial limitations that have placed his family in poverty, Memo resents his father's longing for his *milpa* (corn field). Without the necessary water, the plants do not grow. Memo walks with his father to buy water. While the payment system is advanced and quickly

takes their money, they must use the most elementary method of grabbing the water with a sack. The technology exists but only to favor the company with the rights to the water. The rest of the film then represents Memo's attempt to access technology, but he pays the consequences for not accepting his meager position in society. Memo mentally escapes the town through virtual reality by illegally hacking into other people's conversations online, but he is caught tapping into a drone mission that guards various dams across the world including the one in his town. Rudy, a young U.S. Latino drone pilot, is sent to bomb Memo's house, as the source of the digital intrusion, killing Memo's father. Seeking his safety and that of his family's, Memo migrates to Tijuana in search of work in a high-tech factory.

Sleep Dealer uses a variety of visual devices to portray the differences between real life and the virtual computerized one. When we first meet Rudy who is in the United States, the film introduces maps to demonstrate his geographic location and his movement. Rivera first used maps within his documentary *The Sixth Section* to connect a transnational community visually, so the maps showed lines that represented the extension of the relationship between those in Puebla to the migrants living in New York. In *Sleep Dealer*, the spatial movement is similar but more sophisticated. The camera quickly seems to move on terrain that somewhat resembles a map, so that it shifts from Memo's hometown to the United States where Rudy is working.

Another characteristic of the film is that it represents the production of labor using animations, especially when the connection is via nodes. This technique stands out to the digital communications that we already use and that are also present in the film. Once in Tijuana, Memo uses a service that allows him video communication with his family that is much like Skype or Google+ but with the added Western-Union-type feature that allows him to send cash on the spot. Once the node workers are connected, they see through the robots' perspectives or as the pilot of the aircraft. The futuristic detail is portrayed as a cartoon. In a sense, the fictional elements of the extraction of labor as shown in the film are highlighted visually because there is no attempt to make them seem real in any way. Their reality then is not in the actual cyber-connection but in the relationship of the laborer to the source of work. The electronic network that is represented in the film is much like the Internet, but it is capable of also transporting human strength and labor across borders. The nodes allow people to link directly to the system because the network transfers both electronic and biological signals. Luz explains to Memo that the connection functions in both directions. Sometimes the person controls the machine, but the machine can also control the person. Memo's narration informs the viewer that the web is a direct link to the global economy. The node

workers stand at their stations with the cables hooked up to each of their nodes. They move and work as if they were physically present at the site and as if they were the robots in the United States. As Memo explains how the system works, the film shows blood with its platelets, and then it cuts to the large pipes used to remove the water from the town. The film visually posits the extraction of water and labor as similar resources that the United States takes from Mexico. Whereas the water is a direct resource that the United States extracts from Mexico, the blood and platelets refer to the extraction of Mexican labor to support U.S. businesses. We think of blood and sweat representing hard work, but in this case the hard work is exported without the actual bodies of those who perform the labor. While the film makes a direct reference to maquiladoras through the high-tech factories, it is also clear that the system of cyber-labor has wiped out any need for migrants in the United States. Apart from the assembly-line production of actual goods, the fictional laborers replace the work that real migrants do in the United States, such as construction. Memo controls a robot in the United States that is stationed high up on the skeleton of an unfinished building. The experience is so real that Memo suffers from vertigo although he is not physically on the building. Displayed as an animation, the robot moves chaotically mimicking Memo's motions at the other end, and he hears the foreman shout orders from below. The film thus shows the disembodiment of both *maquila* and migrant labor and demonstrates the contradictory relationship between the need for labor and the discrimination against the Mexican body.

We can see that, although Memo and the other node workers gained access to technology, their living conditions have not improved in comparison to Memo's lifestyle in Santa Ana. The extraction of labor comes at a physical cost to the node workers; the network debilitates the workers and robs them of their energy and sight. These workers and by extension the migrants and maquiladora laborers that they represent are disposable labor. At work one day, Memo witnesses his coworker's shock as he is taken off the machine and take away to be resuscitated. Memo also sees the effects that node work has on the older men that he meets. The contacts or glasses that they use rob their eyes of their color. These men warn Memo not to work at the factory for too long because he will share the same fate. Unable to work, the debilitated node workers live in the outlying areas of Tijuana in shantytowns, so they become a burden for Mexico where they must grapple with the physical effects of their past work. These neighborhoods resemble the *colonias* outside of Tijuana and Ciudad Juárez where the internal migrants settle after migrating to northern Mexico from the country's interior. Memo begins to show signs of the physical wear from working in the factory. His mother tells him in a video call that he looks tired and worn out. Unfortunately, the physical tear of

the body has limited monetary results. Memo is able to send his family money to help them survive after the father's death. Even the process of sending money to his family is draining. He inserts $270, and his brother receives $180. The film makes reference to the money that Western Union charges to send money to another country. Despite the financial loss, Memo's family is happy and content with the money that he sends, but Memo's situation does not improve.

Sleep Dealer demonstrates that Latinos in the U.S. military perform a similar type of labor to those who migrate and work in maquiladoras. While it is clear that Rudy's life in the United States is much more comfortable than Memo's, he still does the dirty military work that no one else wants to do. Rudy also works as a node worker, but he controls the drones used to guard the water dams in other countries. When he learns more about Memo's life through Luz's True Node entries, he responds, "It's interesting to know he's a node worker. I'm a node worker, too." We can suppose, although the film does not go into detail, that these military workers also suffer from the same physical effects as those who work in the sleep dealers. Rudy killed Memo's father with the drone, so he grapples with the guilt of killing an innocent man and questions his role in his death. Rudy discusses his concerns with his parents, who show no signs of interest. On the contrary, they tell him that they are proud of him for serving and for demonstrating his patriotic loyalty to the United States. Rudy, however, is not content with his parents' response. His guilt leads him to find Memo through Luz's entries, transcending the national boundaries between them. While we do not know for sure if Rudy suffers any physical effects from controlling the drone, it is clear that he does feel the psychological effects of being involved in the drone operations to control the dam.

The node workers do have agency, albeit on a small scale. Rudy is unable to resist U.S. military operations on a grand scale, but he is able to help Memo's family. After contracting Luz for more information about Memo through True Node, Rudy goes in search of Memo in Tijuana, knowing from Luz's diary where to find him. Rudy goes to the factory where Memo works, connects with his military drone account, and bombs the dam in Memo's hometown. Rudy's opposition to the drone strikes, while successful, comes at a huge cost for him. In the process, Rudy loses his status, his work, and his life back in the United States. Earlier in the film from the little that is shown of his life in the United States, we see that he and his family live relatively well in comparison to Memo and his family in Santa Ana. His resistance mission makes him a criminal for the rest of his life. To hide from the American authorities, Rudy decides to take refuge in Mexico and disconnects from the network. Rudy's resistance likens him to Memo. At the beginning of *Sleep Dealer*, Memo lacked the ability to tap into the network, and at the end of the film Rudy rejects the

connection. Rudy symbolically assumes Memo's life. While his resistance to the system represents a huge decline in his standard of living, Rudy's gain is psychological because he is no longer a tool for domination.

In the futuristic world in *Sleep Dealer*, migrants no longer need to cross the border to work because the maquiladora system has been transformed to include migrant labor without migrant bodies. While the future has become more globalized, national borders become so reinforced that people no longer move between countries. The factories eliminate the need for the physical presence of the migrants. In this fictional world, Mexico pumps labor through electronic connections that represent the disembodied and deportable labor that is currently used to fuel the U.S. economy. The migrants, the maquiladora workers, and even the drone pilots pay a physical price for sending their labor and their energy across national boundary lines. Their bodies are damaged in the process as they provide the disembodied labor that is needed in the United States.

Comparing the Filmic Representations

One of the main differences between both films is that *The Three Burials* places the migrant body physically within the United States and *Sleep Dealer* does not. Lee portrays the complex relationship between the discrimination against the Mexican body and the labor market. Rivera represents the contradictory treatment of Mexican labor by setting the storyline in a future when the migrant body is no longer needed. Their stories are told from different perspectives, not just because the films are of different genres, but because they are told from different points of view. Melquiades's tale is much bleaker than Memo's and is filtered by Pete Perkins memory. Although he is a friend, he is also Melquiades's boss, reminding us that the labor market will always appear to be friendly to the workers that it needs. *The Three Burials* does not really tell Melquiades's story; the film tells of the fictions that people in the United States create about Mexicans, their labor, and Mexican bodies. In comparison, we hear Memo's voice in *Sleep Dealer*; he narrates his past using the same type of connection that he uses to work. While his story ends on a brighter note with his family gaining access to water, Rudy's resistance mission does little to destroy the system in the long term.

On the surface, these films seem quite different from each other, but they reveal the same conclusions. While we may be quick to dismiss national borders as a thing of the past, the policing of boundaries is central to globalization. Just as many goods are produced in other parts of the world, we can think of labor crisscrossing the globe; however, national boundaries limit worldwide access to people or to migrant bodies. As *The Three Burials* and *Sleep Dealer* show us, the extraction of

labor functions as part of a global system that incorporates other imperialist mechanisms, such as the U.S. extraction of Mexican water. The attitude in the United States that rejects Mexicans or those who look Mexican feeds into the system and creates a perverse system that damages laborers' bodies as it incorporates their hard work.

Notes

[1] Delgado Wise and Cypher's study was published in 2007, prior to the economic downturn that has led to a sharp decrease in emigration. Despite this change, I would argue that the emigration must still be considered because of the large Mexican population already in the United States.

[2] While I do not discuss this dynamic within my paper, the authors point to the different ways that migrant bodies are understood. The dynamic changes upon their return to their countries of origin because their journeys are seen in a positive light from within their communities of origin. Their perceived success is then celebrated.

[3] This connection is important because Mexican director Gabriel Figueroa is known for this visual detail in both Mexican film and the Hollywood Westerns that he filmed as cinematographer.

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