

# RASQUACHE AESTHETICS IN ALEX RIVERA’S “WHY CYBRACEROS?”

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Since June 2008, the homepage of Alex Rivera’s<sup>1</sup> over ten-year-old spoof migrant labor outsourcing website has begun with a warning:



Figure 1: Cybracero homepage

“PLEASE NOTE: Cybracero warns people that the movie *Sleep Dealer* . . . is an inaccurate and undeservedly critical portrait of our pioneering business model and is not representational of our business.” In this manner, the revamped cybracero site immediately sends the viewer off to watch the feature film, suggesting that—in good Web 2.0 fashion,<sup>2</sup> this website is an ongoing creative supplement to the fiction movie. While the continuity between the two projects is clear, nevertheless the website actually preceded the movie by over ten years, and while retooled after the feature film’s successful release, the two visual forms continue to speak to different audiences and from different generic perspectives. Furthermore, the original website included as one

<sup>1</sup> Alex Rivera is a New York based, Peruvian-American digital media artist and filmmaker. His academic background is in political science, in which he has a degree from Hampshire College. Since the mid-1990s he has been making numerous short films and documentaries (“Día de la independencia,” “Conspiracy Club for Men,” “Signs of the Times,” “Latinos on TV,” “UFW March for Women’s Rights,” “The Borders Trilogy,” “The Sixth Section,” “Las papas de papa,” “Apparitions on Tortillas,” “Papapapá,” “Consulta Zapatista”), as well as creating and maintaining the cybracero website—inaugurated 10 November 2000—and the embedded video “Why cybraceros?” (which has also gone through several edits since 1997). His award-winning feature film, *Sleep Dealer* (2008), set in a near-future dystopic Tijuana, expands upon the cybraceros concept.

<sup>2</sup> “Web 2.0” references evolving use of internet technology beyond passive webpage viewing, including user generated content, mashups, social networking, and the use of blogs, wikis, etc.

of its most prominent features an embedded short mockumentary video, a role now substituted by the alluded-to fiction film in the most recent iteration of the website. This short film remains available in other venues, including Rivera's website link to his older videos. Depending on the version of this short film, approximately 2/3 to 3/4 of the visual material is recent and historical documentary footage, repurposed with a new voiceover narration. Thus, the evolving website and its associated film materials engage different forms of reading and film appreciation: the documentary film and the internet user in the earlier iteration, the science fiction genre and feature film spectators in the later.

Although to judge by Google hits Alex Rivera is now best known for his first fiction feature, since 1995 he has been producing these award-winning documentary and mockumentary films at the rate of about one a year, and circulating them partly through the traditional festival rounds, but more importantly through uploading them on his website at the "Invisible Cinema" or "SubCine" pages:



Figure 2: Invisible Cinema homepage

These videos, and especially his well-received 27-minute documentary on a New York area Mexican hometown organization, "The Sixth Section" (2003) parallel his work with "Cybraceros," in that they are also written from a background of political activism around issues of globalization and transnationalism. As he writes on that medium-length documentary's website: "In the story of Grupo Unión we see a small Mexican town behaving like a transnational corporation- reversed." Yet, the video's length and prize-winning record means that "The Sixth Section" circulates more conventionally—through

PBS television, author tours, and DVD sales—than Rivera's other short videos, where the primary home is the computer and means of distribution is the internet viewer. In this context, "Why Cybraceros?" has a more complex history than most of the other films on his website, since the video, in one format or another, has been associated with the mock-industrial website referenced above.

Yet point of access is only part of the story, though an important part. Increasingly, video scholars have been highlighting the specific qualities of computer-assisted production that challenge our understanding of the visual medium itself. Thus, while many web-based films retain the format and style of older conventions of cinema, albeit in miniaturized forms, other creators—I count Alex Rivera among them—are aware of the potential for mixing conventions that earlier technologies by necessity had to keep separate. It is, of course, a scholarly challenge to write about a form that is so subject to mutation and that continues to evolve; this too is one of the challenges our current scholarly mechanisms are not readily designed to capture and evaluate. In this case, the flexible form of the mock industrial website surrounding the equally flexible mockumentary video reminds us that these are not fixed artistic projects, but rather protean forms that respond to current events, making pointed political critiques as well as providing implicit commentary on the evolving aesthetic expectations of an audience whose basic viewing platform is a computer rather than a television or a film screen (and of incorporating viewers through inviting comments and feedback).

Rivera's work in general involves a practice he calls a "rasquache aesthetic" of filmmaking (Ulises et al. 131). In a recent interview he defines this concept more precisely, commenting on how Latinos/as channel the creativity that responds to necessity, as people with limited resources turn to repurposing and recycling for their original work: "There's a lot of writing and awareness about the way so-called minority communities use sampling, whether it's in hip-hop or the recycled imagery of *Pocho Magazine* or the more traditional definition of what's *rasquache*: somebody fixing up an old car with pieces from three other cars; a collage aesthetic of the street. . . . It's ingrained in our spirit of survival, resistance, and innovation" (Guillen). In the hands of Latino/a artists associated with rasquachismo, like Guillermo Gómez Peña, Lalo Alcaraz and Coco Fusco, all of whom have influenced Rivera profoundly, this practice of collage becomes a conscious and conscientious cultural practice. In a parallel manner, in Rivera's work, the tearing apart and rebuilding of cultural images adds texture and depth, and both his fiction and documentary films include stock footage, rough animation, public domain Google map images, and a variety of other materials. An equally important influence cited by Rivera<sup>3</sup> is the web-based political activism of artists like Ricardo Domínguez who, among his many projects as a Hacktivist,<sup>4</sup> runs the Electronic Disturbance Theater and the Zapatista Floodnet. Domínguez considers the Floodnet as a conceptual art project at the same time it is a way to create virtual

<sup>3</sup> See director's commentary on DVD version of *Sleep Dealer* film.

<sup>4</sup> "Hacktivist" is a mashup of "hacker" and "activist" and refers to individuals who promote political and social change through internet activity, including cyberterrorism.

protests—what he calls “electronic civil disobedience” by targeting the computers of specific companies and institutions with spam to slow down their servers (Frank and Bond). Hacktivist projects suggest that we continually need to ask ourselves questions about corporate and political responsibility, and invite new ways to respond to oppression. They also remind us that ethnicity tends only to be made visible when and in ways that respond to other consumers. At the same time, while any Web 2.0 object (modular, recombinatory) is in perpetual beta release, we still need to remember that choices are defined and bound by limits of programming in an interactive digital environment. The Floodnet participant-activists push against these structural constraints, while targeting industrial marketing strategies and political propaganda.

Rivera’s philosophical/ideological concern, overall, has always been how to think together issues related to morality, globalization, and the invisibilized peoples of the global south, who bear the brunt of globalization’s noxious effects. The specific mockumentary video and website that are the topics of this paper, thus, employ a variety of techniques and styles, related to a specific technological and ideological vision. Thus, “Why cybraceros?” should not be viewed in isolation from its two primary contexts, neither of which is a cinema hall or a home television set: first, the body of other Alex Rivera short films, comprising mockumentaries and documentaries linked directly from the “Invisible cinema” page, and secondly and more importantly, from the fluid and evolving “cybracero” website in which it has traditionally been embedded and which created the original conditions for its viewability.

Theorists of new media technologies like Brian Rotman, Friedrich Kittler, Lisa Nakamura, and Henry Jenkins have long been studying the effects of new media on our experiences of our bodies and our sense of human agency. N.Katherine Hayles, for instance, sees human and computer moving ever closer together in Kittlerian fashion (*My Mother was a Computer 7*) through media effects, resulting in a formation she famously has called “posthuman,” in which humans and machines interpenetrate in novel and surprising ways. Most recently, she has argued that the material semiotics of this changing environment gives rise to a “new kind of subjectivity characterized by distributed cognition, networked agency that includes human and non-human actors, and fluid boundaries dispersed over actual and virtual locations” (*Electronic Literature 37*). Rotman, for his part, finds that the confrontation of text and image is being reconfigured as well “with the result that technologies of parallel computing and those of a pluri-dimensional visualization are inculcating modes of thought and self, and facilitating imaginings of agency, whose parallelisms are directly antagonistic to the intransigent monadism, linear coding, and intense seriality inseparable from alphabetic writing” (3). The important question in this context, Rotman suggests, is not about the “who” of the emergent self, but rather “*what and how is this self?*” (81), since “not only is thinking always social, culturally situated, and technologically mediated, but that only by being these things can it happen in the first place” (91). To this perception, Katerina Diamandaki would add the crucial questions: “In what sense, then, is virtual ethnicity different and novel? What are its defining characteristics? How can virtual ethnicities exist in a world of personalized media and communication? To provide some pointers

to these questions one has to consider the unique 'grammar' of the Internet as medium," a grammar that promotes transnational exchange, ambiguously disconnecting communication from transportation and creating novel digital nations and virtual ethnicities.

Lisa Nakamura contributes to the discussion a perspective on how racial understandings continue to play a prominent role in these electronically mediated identities. "Simply put, race and racism don't disappear when bodies become virtual," she argues, and she gives this recognition of racism's continuing relevance a historical point of origin: "It was only after the digital bloom was off the dot.com rose [around the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century] that it became possible to discuss cyberspace as anything other than a site of exception from identity, especially racial identity" (1677). Nowadays, she argues, questions about representation and technology cannot ignore the role of racialized bodies in producing the information society, whether in constructing computer parts or taking apart discarded devices, or in another context, working in virtual sweatshops performing outsourced jobs. As Nakamura writes: "In contrast with the Internet's early claims to transform and eliminate both race and labor, digital communication technologies today racialize labor, employing 'virtual migrants' who perform tasks such as help-line staffing" (1678). Rivera's "Why Cybraceros?" video anticipates both the utopian dream associated with the new media and its potential for doing real work, as well as the persistence of ethnic-based discrimination in this brave new world that hypes a technological fix for social anxieties.

It is highly relevant that the extradiegetic voice of the narrator in the "Why Cybraceros?" video is a woman, and that the only diegetic voice is that of a male heckler: "You stink, you smell, you're a lousy bunch of Commies!" While the United Farm Workers provide the most likely target of this ire, for daring to protest the structure of illegal wages and working conditions under which they labored, the Cold War-tinged accusation "Commies" reminds us of the way race, class, and ideology blur. The bigot's complaint is folded in seamlessly to the narration, so that his irritation is soothed by her nurturing tones, his complaint is accepted and resolved by her offer of a technological fix. Together the two voices underline the illusory nature of most choices for the Latino/a subject—in this case invisibilized stoop labor or deportation as undesirables. The term "cybracero" was originally a pun based on the a reference to the term used for Mexican farmworkers hired under the 1940s-50s bracero program in the US ("Alex Rivera discusses"), and indeed, the satirical video "Why Cybraceros?" pays homage to, as it highlights and repurposes—in good rasquache fashion—stock footage from the ca. 1959 "Why Braceros?" documentary film,<sup>5</sup> along with additional footage from news media and other sources. After a brief, 10 sec. title sequence, in the next 40 seconds the female voiceover narrator defines the problem created by the current unskilled labor

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<sup>5</sup> "Why Braceros?" is a 20 minute film produced by Wilding Butler for the Council of California Growers. It is in the public domain, and part of the Prelinger collection, housed in its entirety on the Internet archive. The "Why Cybraceros?" video is currently available online in two versions, the 4.5 min. 1997 video at "Invisible Cities" and 3.5 min 2002 updated version re-edited for the 2003 update of the cybracero website.

shortage in the United States as viewers watch a sequence of contemporary images of farmworkers engaged in grape pruning and lettuce picking. The narrator tells us that these “simple but delicate tasks” pose “a challenge for farm technologists” since the “increasingly sophisticated” US workforce has meant a sharp decrease in available farm labor. The next 1.10 minutes define a new solution (the cybracero) based on a previous program (bracero), over images from the beginning of the “Why Braceros?” film, explaining that in the early part of the twentieth century, “Mexican workers who were not involved in their own country’s economy would be invited to participate in the American economy as farm hands.” The following 30 seconds bring up the atmosphere of increased racial suspicion among some dominant culture groups following upon the implied subsequent ubiquity of Mexican-descended people in California and the southwest; in quick succession we see brief clips of a United Farm Workers march, a violent news clip of police beating people, pro-UFW demonstrations, and we hear the only diegetic sound in entire clip—the aforementioned white male heckler yelling, “You stink, you smell, you’re a lousy bunch of Commies!” The voiceover narrator resumes in the next 15 seconds with the chirpily bright suggestion of the cybracero as a solution to the problems that these impolite brown people have caused by impinging their bodily presence on comfortably white American eyes, accompanying the narration with a cartoon image of the border and a crude animation of disembodied hands bouncing over the fence: “under the cybracero program, American farm labor will be accomplished on American soil, but no Mexican workers will need to leave Mexico. Only the labor of Mexicans will cross the border. Mexican workers will no longer have to.” This will be done, the narrator explains, using robotic technology and high-speed internet connections. The images then cut back and forth for one minute between a cartoon robot image and a computer, a brown man’s hands and his eyes, ending with an 8 second still frame of the cute cartoon robot and 8 seconds of the man at the computer. The film in its longer version ends with a 15 second conclusion: “in American lingo cybracero means a worker who poses no threat of becoming a citizen, and that means quality products at low financial and social cost, to you, the American consumer.” The narration is accompanied by 5 seconds each of a clip from the bracero film, a white man stocking grocery shelves and a white woman selecting a product, and little blonde girl drinking orange juice, fading to swelling music. The shorter version of the video abridges the text, and includes footage of a more sophisticated robot from Rivera’s first attempt at filming the feature movie, repurposed here to substitute for the cartoon image.

The continuity between “bracero” and “cybracero” reminds us that representations of the body/machine matrix have been familiar to us since the industrial revolution; what is new is the particular pressure Rivera puts on the concept of the remixed body in a Web. 2.0 environment. On the one hand, the technological mashup suggests that the new internet platforms are particularly susceptible to a rasquache perspective on remixing. Conceptually, on the other, in his elaboration of this concept of the cybracero in the website and video, Rivera plays with the idea of the way engrained US racism can be imaginarily obfuscated by the idea that all the work currently done by undocumented and exploited immigrant labor could be accomplished without the unpleasant

consequences of having to deal with the presence of workers' very real, ethnic bodies. The key obfuscating concept is that of a familiar sounding celebratory take on technology, in its utopian configuration. The reconfiguration, however, comes from technology's invisible/rasquache underbelly. The central idea for this project, says Rivera, came from an article in *Wired* magazine about telecommuting, inspiring him to create his video and website as a far-fetched political satire that he imagined might located 70-80 years in the future ("Alex Rivera discusses"). Thus, the representative voice of the "farm technologists" (no longer simple farmers, or agribusiness companies) in this video has updated the "Why Braceros?" rhetoric to match the emancipatory discourse familiar from transnational telecommunications company ads and websites, adopting an all-too familiar perspective. They assure us that the ugly side of discrimination will necessarily vanish when the medium evolves sufficiently to hide the physical body of the worker. Thus, while responsive to mid-1990s technology-industry ads, the site was active long before the call centers in India made real-time outsourcing a reality ("long" in computer time, that is, about 5-8 years).

However, the shocking rapidity of first world adoption off-shore information processing has made Rivera realize a few years later that his timeline was woefully inaccurate, that reality was rapidly catching up to his fiction (Engler). Rather than a sci-fi satirist, he now looks like a near-future prognosticator, both on technological and human grounds. As technological advances in telecommuting and outsourcing have made the cybracero more of a current reality than a dystopic future projection, Rivera's vision has had to adapt as well, as he scrambles to keep up with the rapidly changing and ever-more technologized and globalized workforce in the various updates he has made to both website and video. Media convergence with real world scenarios has given rise to parallel media projects that echo uncannily with his. To give only one recent example, the signing of Arizona S.B. 1070 on 23 April 2010 has inspired comments by protesters in a very Rivera-esque tone, as they point to the obvious hypocrisy of a refusal to deal with the reality of the (brown) worker outside the work environment, and remind us that the U.S. anti-immigrant activists are themselves descendents of European immigrants.<sup>6</sup>

The Cybracero website and its associated video, "Why Cybraceros"?, offers an opportunity to meditate on how what has become technologically feasible often seems to trump what is morally correct. Throughout, his focus remains on the human element: "I want to look at the big dynamics from globalization to border policy to labor politics: in the immigrant story, you have great human stories, but you also have this launching pad

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<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, Archibold: "Gov. Jan Brewer of Arizona signed the nation's toughest bill on illegal immigration into law on Friday. Its aim is to identify, prosecute and deport illegal immigrants. The move unleashed immediate protests and reignited the divisive battle over immigration reform nationally. Even before she signed the bill at an afternoon news conference here, President Obama strongly criticized it." For a satiric take: Colbert Report's "The word—no problemo" 21 April 2010: tag line: "Harassing Latinos with racial profiling isn't an inevitable side effect of Arizona's anti-immigration law -- it's the entire point."

to see the future of the world" (Kaufman). In the conjugation of labor/globalization/border, Rivera invites discussion not just of the implications of outsourcing for laborers, but also and more importantly, he reminds us that sexed and raced non-white bodies labor to create first world economic and technological progress—mostly invisible to the US consumer who is content to pick up a bottle of orange juice from a grocery store shelf without considering how the orange got from the tree to the glass—from the invisible stoop laborers, to workers in off-shore maquiladoras or international call centers. In his contrast at the end of the video of the adult brown worker and the little blonde consumer he brings to the foreground a racially-specific embodied discourse in a time notable in more temperate zones for supposedly post-racial theorizing.<sup>7</sup>

As noted above, the mockumentary video has until recently appeared most familiarly in the context of a mock-industrial webpage, and the evolution of the webpage reframes continually how we read the video. The images reproduced below of Cybracero homepages show the major changes over the last ten years, as Rivera has sporadically updated the site to reflect current US political and economic anxieties. Thus, while the original site focused on the incoherencies of the so-called immigration debate with its careful avoidance of the glaringly obvious fact of racial discrimination, the update from 2003 specifically references post 9/11/01 anti-terrorist rhetoric, and the current, post *Sleep Dealer* version is framed by allusion to the 2008 global economic crisis:



Figure 3: Homepage 2002



Figure 4: Homepage 2003

<sup>7</sup> There is an unexplored south-south dimension to this project that I cannot take up in this short study. See, for instance, the tantalizing hint in this article from Outsource2India (Bangalore), which advertises its "Latin American arm based in Mumbai, India, which serves as an insurance agent in Chile with a center in Uruguay."





world: "American owned and managed, Bleum especially understands the language, business culture, and expectations of western-based IT organizations." This is nearly self-parody already, and Rivera knows it. While retaining the corporate visual veneer in the cybraceros site, it is only in the text where Rivera's language skews dangerously away from this unmistakable tone of corporate self-celebration. As a parody, Rivera's site can be more blunt, but perhaps, chillingly accurate at the same time with respect to the underlying message of the legitimate sites. Rivera's site notes: "with workers available 24/7 for up to 12hr shifts, you can get your work done on time and way under budget."

Similar parallels obtain for the other pages on the website; thus, for example, Rivera's page has links to specific fake jobs, ranging from flooring installer to hair stylist. Figure 7 shows a sample listing for a job from Cybracero, this one for a crane operator, describing a Seattle company located in Kyoto: "experience operating a 60-ton hydraulic crane preferred. . . . In addition to fair pay, we offer 15-minute breaks for every 6 hours worked! Hungarian and Latin American candidates preferred", a clear spoof of US-owned companies like Penske, with its outsourcing of truck leasing in the USA to India and Mexico. A typical celebratory article on that Pennsylvania-based company begins:

When Penske Truck Leasing adds to its fleet of trucks, office staffers in Hyderabad, India, log on to Penske's computer system and begin to arrange for titles and registrations available through U.S. state government Web sites. From that point on, Indian and Mexican workers, employed by business-process outsourcing company Genpact, will be remotely involved in practically everything regarding that vehicle. . . . When a truck is leased for an interstate trip, Genpact's Indian staff check the customer's credit status and arrange for all of the necessary permits. If the truck gets stuck at a weigh station because it lacks a required fuel permit, the driver calls an 800 number, and Indian workers have the necessary document transmitted to the weigh station to get the vehicle back on the road within a half-hour. When a ride is finished, the entire driver's log is shipped to a Genpact facility in Juarez, Mexico, where mileage, tax, toll, and fuel data are punched into Penske computers and then processed in India. When Penske sells the truck, staff in Mexico record the transaction.

Thus, Penske can celebrate its all-American efficiency, while unproblematically detailing the role of international workers, their use of U.S. government websites to facilitate their labor, and their near-instantaneous communications across thousands of miles and three different countries. This is a modern solution, made possible by Genpact, a leading "technology management" corporation. Genpact's own website cycles through images, including this one of handsome young Indian professionals in Western garb and a Westernized setting, ready to solve our business problems in unproblematically neo-colonial fashion (in both senses of the word "fashion"). The polish of the industrial website, thus, necessarily hides the classed and raced face of

labor, something that Rivera's slightly-off rasquache version will critique. Cybraceros's banner, in the accompanying screen shot, uses echoing visuals, and features an attractive young man who looks more like a male model than a crane operator:



Figure 7: Spoof Cybraceros job listing

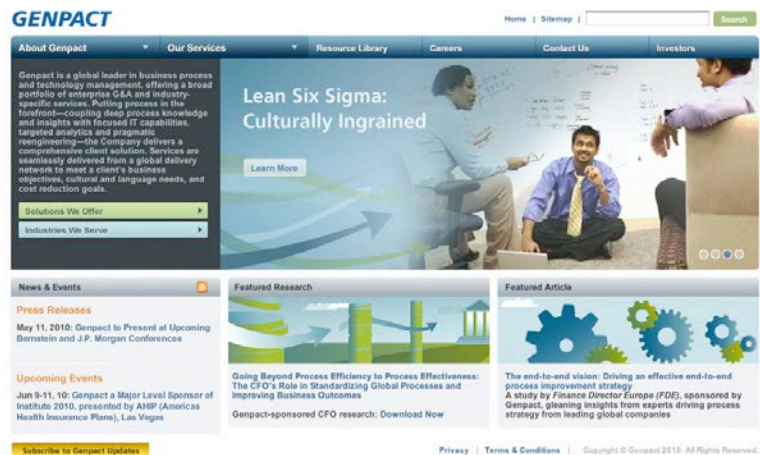


Figure 8: Genpact homepage

Uncanny (or intended) similarities aside, there is another, less obvious aspect to this neo-colonial burnished image of young professionals. Like the video, with its clips of Mexican workers ably handling robotic devices, Rivera's website hints at an unexpected context for thinking about technology use. As Rivera says in an interview, "I think immigrants, whether it's at the border in terms of confronting the militarization or it's once you cross over using phone cards, using money wiring services, sending home videos back and forth, immigrants are users of technology in a way that other families are not" ("Alex Rivera discusses). The references to outsourcing in his website and video take this use of technology into another realm, by reminding his viewers that not

only do brown people around the world use “our” technology, having been exposed to it in the context of their lives in the late capitalist west, but that the demands of the southern virtual maquiladoras mean that they are often far more sophisticated in their understanding of technology than the oblivious first world consumer, sophisticated enough to adapt it in ways first world consumers never imagine—certainly an awkward underlying message of the celebratory Penske article, where Mexicans and Indians show themselves as more able workers than their US counterparts.

Thus, Rivera’s video is not just a story about racism in the US but also about how technology obscures our theorizing while it defines our aesthetics and limits our range of narrative possibilities, whether about ourselves or about our relationships to the web of transnational corporate interests that increasingly defines our late capitalist model of work. The direct address to “you, the American consumer” in the video downplays potential concerns, at the same time as the backstory suggests a technological competence exceeding our own. “We” are kept comfortably distanced from “them,” who continue to contribute to our well being by performing what we are assured are nothing more than 21<sup>st</sup> century varieties of stoop labor, beneath our consideration. Or, alternatively, to the degree that outsourced labor replaces American workers and may cause us to worry about our cultural dominance, we can be assured that these workers too ascribe to our superior western values; in their physical attractiveness, in their choice of clothing, and in their surrounding modern urban workplaces.

Thus, the reified language of the “brave new world” technological fix, with its concept of distributed hierarchies, hides human agency and deflects questions about ideological effects. In this way, outsourcing has become a convincing, coherent story about digital solidarity in flat world economics, and at the same time a panacea for racists with its deflection of discourse about inequality into an aesthetic fetishization of a few, exotically attractive game-world-like worker-avatars. Here, Rivera directly addresses myths about the inevitability and the desirability of solving labor and social issues through technology, where words like “transformational” and “productivity” have been deployed as increasingly meaningless buzz words. His implicit commentary includes reference to the difficulty of locating globalized companies in specific geographical sites, but more importantly reminds us that our technology, from the soldering of microchips to the voice on the help line and the eye reading our medical records, is imbued through and through with the touch of brown bodies and the grain of their voices.

At the same time, the patent absurdity of the cybracero job postings (“Work with the trendiest Barbershop on earth, all from the comfort of your own country!”) makes its point through humor, while increasingly this irony seems perilously close to actual task possibilities from legitimate outsourcing sites, including, in the following example, the offer to read a bedtime story to someone else’s child (one of the categories on the domystuff task exchange website; see Figure 9):

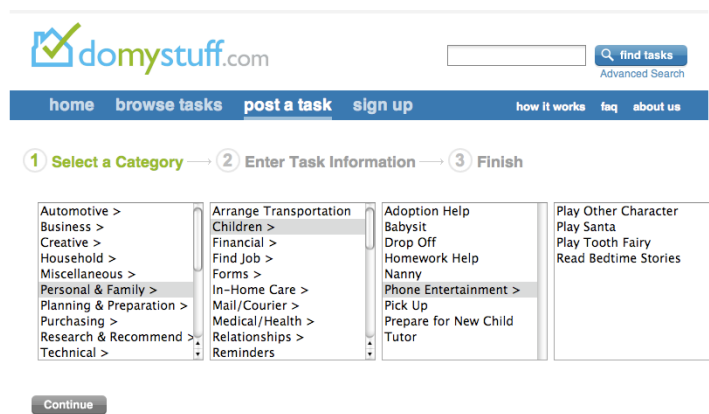


Figure 9: Legitimate US outsourcing jobsite

The bottom line is that in each case, the website instructs us on how we should interact, when and how we are permitted to do so and via which technology. One of Rivera's key points would seem to be that far from liberating the computer user, the internet repeats dominant ideologies even as the overt rhetoric tells us that they are "placed" far outside such geographically-limiting systems.

Coco Fusco, Guillermo Gómez Peña, Caren Kaplan, Lisa Nakamura, and Donna Haraway, among others, have helped us to think about crucial issues relating race and cyberspace, bodies and labor. Who works? Who profits? Who tells the story? From my perspective, the most crucial difference between the two versions of Rivera's video, and one that shapes the final reading of the mockumentary, is the form given to the robotic worker in the USA. Here Rivera offers us two robots, with two very different implications, in his two variant videos. These robots continue to frame our reading of all the films—the two mockumentaries, as well as the feature-length fiction film. Figure 9 is currently used as the thumbnail for the 1997 version of the video, available for viewing and download on the Invisible cinema website; Figure 10, formerly used as a thumbnail on the homepage of 2003 version of the Cybraceros website and the mockumentary link, is now the thumbnail on Invisible Cinema (in reversed orientation) for the *Sleep Dealer* fiction film:



Figure 9: Robot, 1997



Figure 10: Robot, 2003.

The earlier mockumentary short makes use of the friendly, bright and colorful cartoon figure in the sequence beginning at minute 3.30, when the narrator offers her explanation of the cybracero technology; in the later, abridged video, these cartoon robots are replaced at minute 2.30 by the vaguely ominous praying mantis-looking robots Rivera had constructed for an early, aborted attempt to make the feature film on a minuscule budget.<sup>8</sup> The 1997 robot winks at us as he cheerfully picks his cartoon oranges against a blown-out white sky; we too are invited to celebrate this delightful evocation familiar from so many video games. In contrast, the industrial 2003 robot is seen only in silhouette, turned away from the viewer, looking more like an invading insectoid pest than a helpful laborer, projected against a brooding blue-filtered background. In the first instance, the cheerful improbability of the happy cartoon makes us laugh; in the second, we are more uncertain—dystopia is much closer to the surface. Concisely, clearly, we are introduced to video game and cyberpunk: two of the more crucial borrowed elements in Rivera's rasquache arsenal.

Guillermo Gómez Peña, who admittedly exerted an important influence on Rivera, also began exploring his first version of cyberethnicity about the same time as Rivera in the early 90s. In an interview from 1991, he theorizes his use of a similar rasquache aesthetic of borrowing, repurposing, and reinterpreting material in the construction of his cyberaztec persona, here responding as "Mad Mex" about the various elements of his cybernetically-inspired costume: "My robotic, cerbo-controlled [sic] hand looks chidísima [. . .] but to tell you the truth, it's totally useless. It's just for style. You know, Chicano culture is first and foremost about style. [. . .] Unlike Anglo high technology, which is hi-function, Chicano robotics are purposeless... but full of humor" (36). In his multiculti mashups Gómez Peña borrows from the enormously successful Australian movie franchise, *Mad Max*, along with the *Robocop* (Cyber Vato) and *Terminator* (El Mexterminator) imagery. Rivera's robots too are about style and humor, echoing the distinctive color of arcade games like the enormously successful 1983 *Mario Brothers* in the earlier case, and first person shooters like 1993's *Doom* in the latter; like Gómez Peña's protheses, the robots are cool-looking and completely useless. Yet, there is another way to read these robots as well. The 1997 robot looks a lot like Looney Tunes' Speedy Gonzales or the much reviled (and since retired) Frito Bandito (both voiced by Mel Blanc with an exaggerated accent), cartoon characters meant to be humorous, which catered to dominant culture stereotypes about Mexicans as lazy, except when stealing other people's food. And, to the degree that the more recent, 2003 robot looks insectoid, it also hints at an allusion to the well-documented backlash against immigrants as reproducing uncontrollably and using up "our" resources. Says Gómez Peña: "We are indestructible and . . . soon we will outnumber Anglos in the Southwest. In other words, we are mere blank screens for people to project their inner monsters" (37). Far more than Rivera, however, Gómez Peña forces his audiences to confront these monsters, mostly through live performances that make audience members take a stand, and be accountable for their responses.

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<sup>8</sup> Director's comments on feature film DVD.

Like Ricardo Domínguez and Guillermo Gómez Peña (who has also used the web as an online site for various of his performance projects; eg, see his Pocha Nostra website for archived materials), albeit in a far less aggressive form, Rivera puts pressure on familiar idea of online imagined communities. In his work, too, cyberutopianism meets dystopia in an ominous metaphor for techno-human merging. For Rivera, however, the focus is less on identity formation (like Gómez Peña) or specific internet activism (Domínguez), and more on the crucial meditation needed for understanding the very real body of the worker in our discussions of industrial labor, and recognizing the Latino/a brown body as the absent referent in globalized commerce and transnational politics. For Ken González Day, “Even in the wake of technological revolutions like the Human Genome Project, Latino/a bodies may pose the ultimate ‘ironic political myth.’ Assimilated, evase, unshakeably linked, we are Choloborg” (26). Rivera adds that this ironic political myth is not so far distant from the old platitude; the cybracero ultimately describes one realization of the American Dream, with a twist: “it is a process of becoming powerful in the context of being told to disappear” (Ulises 134).

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### Biographical Note

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### Summary

This paper studies Rivera's 12-year-old spoof outsourcing website, with particular attention to the 4.5 minute 1997 video that served as its original point of departure (he is now best known for his 2008 feature film, "Sleep Dealer."). Rivera's work in general involves a practice he calls a "rasquache aesthetic" of filmmaking. In a recent interview he defines this concept more precisely, commenting on how Latinos/as channel the creativity that responds to necessity, as people with limited resources turn to repurposing and recycling for their original work. In the hands of Latino/a artists associated with rasquachismo, like Guillermo Gómez Peña, Lalo Alcaraz and Coco Fusco, all of whom have influenced Rivera profoundly, this practice of collage becomes a conscious and conscientious cultural practice. In a parallel manner, in Rivera's work, the tearing apart



and rebuilding of cultural images adds texture and depth, and both his fiction and documentary films include stock footage, rough animation, public domain google map images, and a variety of other materials.

**Keywords:** website, mockumentary, border, Alex Rivera, aesthetic practice, film