

Un futuro sin pasado: Colonial Oppression and Centering Abiyala as Resistance in *Sleep Dealer*

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Abstract: Alex Rivera's 2009 film *Sleep Dealer* is a work of near-future dystopian science fiction that gives humanity a glimpse of what unchecked capitalism and colonialism could look like and how it will disproportionately affect Indigenous peoples. Building off of Galeano's understanding of Latin America as a region of "open veins", this article examines how settler-colonial systems of oppression, extractive capitalism and imperialism are expressed through the suppression of Indigenous subjectivity by processes of mestizaje and hybridization in *Sleep Dealer*. Furthermore, it proposes that the acts of material resistance in the film against Western and Anglo-centric geopolitical hegemony—planting *milpa* and using a drone to attack a reservoir dam—exemplify Emil Keme's conceptualization of Abiyala as a "political project and locus of enunciation" for and by Indigenous peoples as a rejection of an imposed colonial identity.

Key Words: *Sleep Dealer*, Mexican film, dystopic science fiction, Abiyala, anti-colonialism

In the frequently quoted words of the Uruguayan philosopher and cultural critic Eduardo Galeano,

Latin America is the region of open veins. Everything from the discovery until our times, has always been transmuted into European – or later United States – capital [...] *Our defeat was always implicit in the victory of others; our wealth has always generated our poverty by nourishing the prosperity of others.* (emphasis in the original, 2).

Put simply, capitalism and imperialism are the cause of riches and wealth for some but death for others, namely Indigenous peoples. Drawing on Galeano's insight, in this article I will look at Alex Rivera's film *Sleep Dealer* (2009) to examine how settler-colonial systems of oppression, extractive capitalism, and imperialism are expressed through the suppression of Indigenous subjectivity in the processes of mestizaje and hybridization that helped shape Mexico. Additionally, I propose to understand the Americas as a quintessential capitalist project, following the ideas developed by Aníbal Quijano. I contend that *Sleep Dealer* follows Mark Fisher's proposal of capitalist realism dystopias as an anticipation of how these colonial era systems might function in a near, post-neoliberal future. Lastly, I argue that the acts of material resistance in the film against Western Euro and Anglo-centric geopolitical hegemony exemplify Emil Keme's conceptualization of Abiyala as a "political project and locus of enunciation" for and by Indigenous peoples as a rejection of an imposed colonial identity (Emil Keme and Adam Coon 56)

Suppression of Indigenous subjectivity

Sleep Dealer tells the story of Memo Cruz, a young man with a fascination for technology, who upon losing his father in a drone attack he is responsible for, decides to live in Tijuana to work and send money back to his mother. Set in a "near future", Memo finds a job as an operator of a remote machine, which he operates with the help of a virtual reality device connected to his central nervous system. Eventually, he meets Luz and ex-drone pilot Rudy, two compatriots with whom he plans to use the same drone technology that killed Miguel Cruz to avenge his death.

Academics have approached *Sleep Dealer* largely from the perspective of borderland studies or from the point of view of cyberpunk and dystopic science fiction.¹ These frameworks have allowed them to analyze the hybrid nature of immigrant, chicanx, latinx, or other identities in the context of colonial and neocolonial material conditions post-NAFTA. For instance, in "Neoliberalism and Dystopia in U.S.–Mexico Borderlands Fiction" Lysa Rivera discusses how, when confronted with the film, spectators often pose the question "*What have we as a society done to get here? What in our collective history and our current historical moment has caused this strange, troubling, and uncannily familiar future to take shape?*" (294, emphasis in original). She posits that the near futures can be better apprehended by understanding "how histories of [...] colonial and neo-colonial relations of power have provided and continue to provide the material conditions of this future" (294). In the film, the Mexican-U.S. border ecosystem is presented as a palimpsest of centuries of colonialism and imperialism, and to understand it in the present of the film one must understand the traces left from the past. As Rivera further clarifies in "Future Histories and Cyborg Labor: Reading Borderlands Science Fiction after NAFTA",

borderlands sf writers defamiliarize borderlands topographies, both social and political, to provoke a prolonged and deeper consideration of the devastating human and environmental tolls of neoliberal economic hegemony, the communications technologies that accelerate it, and the impoverished bordercommunities that are forced to live under its so-called invisible hands. (417)

1. See: Carolina Rueda's "The everlasting *Sleep Dealer*: Alex Rivera's visionary mind and fantasy nightmares in present times."; Paula Straile-Costa's "Hacking the Border: Undocumented Migration and Technologies of Resistance in Alex Rivera's *Sleep Dealer* and Digital Media."; Alejandro González Garza, and Diego Zavala Scherer's "Mundos utópicos y distópicos: el progreso y la ciencia como síntomas modernos en el cine mexicano de ciencias ficción".

In other words, the setting we see is born out of the existing material conditions created by neoliberalism (and capitalism as a whole).

Rivera's observations regarding borderlands science fiction illuminate several aspects that are vital to the film's narrative. A border wall cuts off the U.S. from Mexico, as if the "Build the Wall" campaign promise platformed by many right-wing politicians in the United States in the 2010s had been fulfilled. The continued polarization between the upper and lower economic classes and disappearance of the Mexican middle has worsened, and NAFTA and USMCA-esque policies are still in effect, forcing many to migrate north to work in maquiladoras at the border. U.S. companies continue to privatize natural resources—such as water—not unlike the way Bechtel tried to privatize SEMAPA in Cochabamba, Bolivia in the late 90s. In this way, *Del Rio* stands as a sort of symbolic extension of the U.S. as both nation and as a villain in this film. We also see this portrayed through television shows about drones flown via virtual reality from the U.S. blowing up "aquaterrorists" in which Rudy himself features as a heroic protagonist protecting America's water source.

These elements help classify *Sleep Dealer* as dystopic science fiction. These "new" worlds aren't new at all—as we have seen, they are merely extrapolations of our existing world. This future setting, or *novum*, is the "central imaginary novelty of any sf text, the source of the most important distinctions between the world of the tale and the world of the reader" (47), writes Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. in *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction*. It serves as the "'narrative kernel' from which the sf artist constructs a detailed imaginary alternative reality" (50). The creation of a *novum* (literally translated New Thing) is a "refreshment, not a rupture" of the world we live in—it's how the author (artist, as Csicsery-Ronay Jr. puts it) or creator arrives at that *novum* that differs. There are two key components that remain the same in any *novum*: physical-material novelty (change of material conditions of existence) and an ethical novelty (shifted ethics and morals) (56) born out of some innovation or discovery (60). This is what we attempt to focus on in *Sleep Dealer*: borrowing from Gonzalez Garza and Zavala Scherer, we emphasize also that "nuestro interés es analizar las películas cuyo corazón narrativo y temático sea la ciencia y su relación con la sociedad en la que surge y a la que modifica o determina" (101). In our case, the emerging science fiction aspect (as Luz puts it, that your D.N.A. is your password) is what defines the society in which Memo lives.

Although the abovementioned academic readings classify *Sleep Dealer* in terms of genre and illuminate important aspects of the dystopic reality of the film, I opt to employ David Fisher's approach, outlined in the 2009 book *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* I believe that this approach is pertinent for two main purposes. First, Fisher's analysis is specific to our sociocultural moment of advanced and intensified neoliberalism and thus applicable to a reading of *Sleep Dealer*. Next, Fisher's understanding of how dystopic fiction in a capitalist realism is distinct from more traditional dystopic sf fits with the dystopias we encounter. Fisher's treatment of these dystopias can be tied into already existing post- or decolonial thought from Latin America to enable a more nuanced interpretation of their underlying material conditions and structures of feeling in the post-neoliberal landscape.

Fisher writes that regular dystopic narratives are often based on "familiar totalitarian scenario," (2) or are "exercises in [...] acts of imagination" that invoked natural disasters and major emergencies as pretexts for the extreme conditions. The dystopic narratives produced from Capitalist realisms, like *Sleep Dealer*, display a dystopic narrative "that [...] is specific to late capitalism" (1), and "[seem] more like an extrapolation or exacerbation of ours than an alternative to it" (Fisher 2). We don't have to reach to imagine the fictional worlds because they are dystopias "specific to late capitalism" (1).

If the future presented in *Sleep Dealer* is supposed to be extrapolated from our own (specific to late capitalism) and the material conditions created at the border are based on the past and will repeat into the future (as Rivera asks), what does the present look like? And what was the end goal of this oppression? To answer these questions, we will examine material examples of oppression and resistance from the film, specifically in regard to Indigenous peoples, cultural practices and artifacts. I analyze the texts' portrayal of the capitalist, imperial, settler colonial West trying to kill Abiyala, and the ways in which the actions of various characters fit Keme's call to recenter Abiyala as a "political project and locus of enunciation" (56) against colonizing hegemonic powers so that the Americas die. As foreign investors and capital privatize Indigenous land and resources, they displace Indigenous peoples who are then forced to migrate to border cities and work in factories where the same investors exploit them for their labor and kill Abiyala to make room for the Americas.

To understand how the Americas are a colonial project that depends on exploitable wage labor and turned the entire hemisphere into a region of open veins, we turn to Aníbal Quijano. In "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Social Classification" he argues that the "model of power that is globally hegemonic [capitalism] today presupposes an element of coloniality" (181). According to him, the first step in this process was to build a system of racial classification to ensure that the colonized could be separated from the colonizers, both as a way to mark social differences but also to delegate divisions of labor (181, 184). In simple terms, Quijano states that these forms of labor control were built around "wage-labor relation" and were "constitutively colonial" (187); the unpaid labor was assigned to colonial races while salaried labor was delegated to colonizing whites.

This division of labor resembles the organization we find in *Sleep Dealer* where brown people are assigned the manual labor (cybermaquilas) and the colonizing class is in charge of supervising their work. Rudy, for example, is part of the colonizing class (as a drone pilot) and is of Mexican descent (read: brown), meaning that his job could be considered manual labor inside the colonizing class to some degree, indicating that these divisions between class and race are somewhat vague in practice. Quijano writes that these divisions of labor along racial lines as a "new technology of domination/exploitation" (185) was so well articulated that these elements (race and labor) "appeared naturally connected" and that this has led to its exceptional success (185).

This is the Eurocentric basis on which colonization (and thus modernity) functions. In their best interest, the colonizers maintain that they are the exclusive "producer and protagonist of modernity" (192) (read: societal advancement) and it was the first model of global power to cover "the entire population of the planet" (193). In the Americas, the Eurocentric hegemony took a while to coalesce practices like slavery and serfdom into Capitalism as we are aware of it, or, as Quijano puts it, the "commodification of the labor force" (198).

Even more significant is that, as Quijano continues,

Only with America could capital consolidate and obtain global predominance [...] configuring a new pattern of global control of labor, its resources, and products: world capitalism. Therefore capitalism as a system of relations of productions, that is, the heterogeneous linking of all forms of control of labor and its products under the dominance of capital, was constituted in history only with the emergence of America. *Beginning with that historical moment*, capital has always existed, and continues to exist to this day, as the central axis of capitalism. (199, my emphasis)

The Americas, as a whole, was built on extractivist capitalism, colonialism, and imperialism; not only that, but it was the “industry standard” for how to most successfully and completely exploit its workers.

The most glaring example of the capitalist, extractivist imperialism lays in resource being depleted by the colonizers in *Sleep Dealer*: people themselves. In his explication of the labor and valorization process, Marx lists three elements of the labor process: “1) work itself, 2) the object on which that work is performed, and 3) the instruments of that work” (284). The latter two can be categorized as “raw material” and “instrument of labour (sic)” (284–85) –the commodity being extracted or produced, and the thing or person producing it. Paying workers an hourly wage instead of by the commodity they produce generates a surplus value. In this way, the capitalist earns a profit whilst underpaying his laborers, exploiting them for their labor.

On a basic level, much of Latin America’s colonial development is predicated on this simple system. Whether the raw material was a mineral ore or cash crop, as was the often the case during the early colonial period of the Americas, and Indigenous peoples were (and are) exploited as instruments of labor to turn the raw material into a commodity. This was not exclusive to Spanish colonies, nor was it limited to Indigenous laborers. Forced labor by enslaved and indentured peoples was common at the time as well. In whatever form it existed, with whichever raw material being sought, humans were the main instruments of labor. This resulted in massive Indigenous genocide and literal extermination of entire peoples, with consequences ranging from poor living and working conditions to transmitted diseases and outright murder. When Spanish colonization ended, this was picked up and intensified under the banner of the U.S. and the West at large. And, although conditions were supposed to have been improved through human rights campaigns, organizing efforts of labor unions, and intermediation on behalf of Indigenous and enslaved peoples, the system largely remained the same, except instead of iron chains, the chains were foreign investments through the IMF and heavy handed, U.S. influenced interventions from the Organization of American States.

In *Sleep Dealer*, this Marxist system is altered. No longer are people only instruments of labor, but they are now both instruments and raw materials. In the case of Memo, the robot avatars used to work on the U.S. side of the border directly consume the life force of those controlling them. The term sleep dealer comes directly from this fact, and it signals to the risk of ending up in a coma if you stay connected for too long. Other dangerous consequences can also include the maiming or death of employees, who in exchange of a higher pay put themselves at risk. So, although it is unclear if the life force powers the robot avatars, it is obvious that the work drains it from the workers, making their lives a raw material, while they (and their avatars) are instruments of labor (Donahue 62). In other words, alienation –the idea that a worker is not a person who cannot express themselves but through their labor, reducing them to a thing or an object– is an oft-discussed topic in relation to *Sleep Dealer*.

Technological alienation, as Donahue writes, is the key component of this narrative that binds the borderlands with the cybergothic (50). Borrowing the gothic imagery that Marx imbues into his writing (vampires, ghosts, and the like), Donahue writes that Rivera updates these metaphors, “substituting an array of energy draining wires for the classic blood-sucking fangs” (50). The alienation in the film doesn’t just “separate [the laboring] subject from object [produced by their labor]: it transforms the laboring subject into a monstrous appendage of global capitalism” (50). Prashc elaborates further, categorizing five ways that technoalienation is portrayed in the film.

First, and most critically, that vision of the exploitation of Mexican labor without having to deal with the actual Mexicans who contribute it [...] Second [...] the film projects the comprehensive (and presumably successful) completion of the sealing off of the Mexican border [...] Third, the film hypothesizes the metropolitan exploitation of Mexico's water resources [...] Fourth [...] the use of drone attack craft as the principal method of military intervention [...] Fifth and finally, *Sleep Dealer* conjectures the marketing of human memories, culled from the brain of the supplier by computer technologies and made into marketable commodities. (58)

To properly contextualize these five characterizations in the film, Prasch's uses the word "hypothesize," which indicates that this future is based on a current reality. That reality is the result of, and can be better comprehended by, an analysis of *mestizidad* and the creation of a *mestizo* identity in post-revolutionary Mexico. We will return to Prasch's analysis of the future hypothesized in the film.

The term *mestizo* began as a racializing term in Spain's slave markets but took on new meaning in colonial Mexico to describe anyone who was of Peninsular and Indigenous descent. *Mestizo* was, in effect, a category of hybridity of different races and ethnicities extant in the same body. Going back to the early 20th century, what would become the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) consolidated power after the Mexican Revolution and set about to create a new sense of Mexican national identity. They needed to undo the elitist and hierarchical social strata left by the government of Porfirio Díaz and reinvent what "Mexican" meant and make it more inclusive. This traditional Mexican identity found its basis in a *mestizo*, hybrid heritage and placed agricultural production at the forefront of the economy.

This hybridity extended to everything in Mexico, especially as they sought a place on the global market. The new government wanted to inject traditional agricultural production with new technologies, create factory jobs, immunize their citizens, and ideally speak Spanish; they had to be modern to achieve modernity (Dalton 4–5). This modern utopia is especially evident in the murals of Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros, who "strove to produce a culturally hybrid aesthetic that would promote mestizaje by fusing the latest styles of European art [...] with techniques and colors used in pre-Columbian murals" (Dalton 61). This was in order to exalt "statist ideals of racial hybridity and modernity" (61).

The mural *Industrial Mexico*, painted by Roberto Cueva del Rio, exemplifies this vision of a hybrid and *mestizo* Mexico. It shows a road lined on both sides with farmers in a military-like formation hoisting corn stalks and rakes surrounded by farmed land, and it extends off into the distance where it eventually runs into a city, with chimneys billowing smoke. Tractors that look like tanks are driving into the city and planes are flying overhead. This mural, and others like it, demonstrate how the agriculture and technology together would serve

as a powerful force that would lead humankind to a better future and would advance the goals of socialism by producing a kinder society where all men and women [...] would livetogether in harmony and peace, united by the common goal of building a better world. (Gallo 6–7).

The agricultural system depicted is most likely a *milpa*, which functions as system of agriculture common in meso-America, extending from the southern United States southward throughout Central America. While it varied in its many iterations, in Mexico it tended to consist of maize, beans, squash, and sometimes chili peppers grown on the same plot of

land. These plots were left fallow for long stretches before being farmed for short periods of time, maintaining thus a healthy and productive soil while producing the basis of the Mayan and Aztec diet. Combined with technological advancement, this tie to Indigenous heritage was another component of the PRI's vision of *mestizaje*: it also embodied the economic vision for the country as conceived during the revolution and the reconstruction thereafter, emphasizing agricultural production – especially of corn – as a primary source of work and subsistence.

The three main crops of the *milpa* were key due to their symbiotic relationships in cultivation and are often referred to as the “Three sisters” or “Santísima Trinidad.” Corn provided room for the beans to climb, who in turn deposit nitrogen in the soil which helps gourd plants, which at their turn provide shade and protection to the other seeds on the ground. The three of them together make each other's success and cultivation possible. At the gastronomical level, corn and beans in any combination are complementary in their nutritional value –together, they offer a complete plant-based protein (Hurt 5-7), important in societies where it was crucial to maximize caloric input and reduce caloric output in cultivating, or otherwise obtaining food and where meat was not always available.

Sadly, hybridity was not used as a purely positive manner. Soon, it became synonymous with “suppress” or “efface” in its material consequences. Keme notes that “the idea of citizenship endorsed by the state through narratives of *mestizaje* or ‘blood quantum’ only aimed to erase our [Indigenous peoples] millenarian origins” (53). With the signing of NAFTA, for example, and the ending of the *ejido* programs, the neoliberalization of Mexico took what was once key to Mexican identity –Indigenous peoples and customs as part of the mestizo vision– and commodified it, killing the *milpa*. In this way, capitalism puts an end to the notion of hybridity and *mestizaje* by erasing its most exploitable element: the Indigenous. We see two symbolic representations of *milpa* in the film: at the Cybracero maquila, and second in the relationship between Rudy, Luz, and Memo.

The first example is the Cybracero maquila and those that work there. The *mise en scene* of the cybermaquila shows a dark underground space. There is no natural light, and a series of wires dangle from mechanical arms. A series of workers are plugged in, miming the actions of their machine counterparts. Here we can see the literal physical alienation of the subjects from the object of their labor. Given the setting, these dark rooms with hanging wires look like roots underneath a *milpa*. *Milpa* draws energy from the ground, air, and sunlight to produce plants for human consumption of those who grew it and their communities. At Cybracero, Memo is the life force being used to create the product (his labor) for consumption by people across a sealed border. And, just like with past attempts of hybridization in post-revolutionary Mexico, any particular trait or characteristic that could not be hybridized was suppressed, erased, or consumed. Memo and his father become stand-ins for the “traditional” way of doing things (*milpa* farming) and a turn towards a new, hybrid/*mestizo* modern future. His father dresses in campesino clothing and farms as his family has always done; Memo dresses in more “modern” fashion and is interested in electronics, having built a HAM-style radio from scratch. In fact, their *milpa* is one of the first images of the film, where we see Memo assisting his father Miguel in watering the crop of maize. Memo asks Miguel why they still live in Santa Ana and why they haven't left like others. His father responds with a question: “¿Crees que nuestro futuro pertenezca al pasado?” (00:05.30). When Memo laughs, Miguel continues by proclaiming, as he points at the earth, “Tuvimos un futuro; estás parado en él. Cuando obstruyeron el río, cortaron nuestro futuro” (00:05.48). By cutting off the water, Del Rio has both literally and symbolically killed off crops and people. Memo makes this

connection himself, stating "Me estaba derramando la energía y mandándola lejos. Lo que pasó al río me estaba pasando a mí." (00:52.50). He recognized that, like the river – symbolic of life force – he was being consumed by capitalism.

This brings us back to the Gothic visualizations that Marx used in *Capital* and that Donahue updates in his article on Borderlands Gothic SF. Donahue writes that "[b]orderlands gothic sf updates for the digital age. Marx and Engel's figure of the sorcerer 'who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells'" (51). These spells, written in computer code rather than blood "transform human bodies and human labor into yet more monstrously alienated forms than Marx or Engels, whose works describe the 'demonic power' of a nineteenth-century 'mechanical monster,' could have foreseen" (51).

Similarly, the underground setting of the Cybracero maquila – which Donahue describes as marionette strings, a common trope in gothic SF, and the space as a galley where the machines are parasitic vampires (61) – brings these roots to life and bastardizes the "Santísima Trinidad" by creating a vicious loop that continues bringing the workers back, thus pushing them to a self-caused demise. While the crops work together symbiotically and for the to benefit each element, the maquila preys on the need for material survival of the workers, forcing these latter into a condition of subjugation. Donahue's analysis of this problem in *Llegar a la orilla* (another Gothic Borderlands SF they study) can be applied here, for *Sleep Dealer* also "cuts against transnational corporations all too happy to exploit the literal and figurative dependencies of their workers" (52) for their own profit. And, by doing so, these companies pull life force from the subject of the labor – Memo – to the object, alienating them from the fruits of their labor.

On a physical level, they are also alienated from their labor by a geopolitical border that seals off the U.S. from Mexico. This is, precisely, the second form of technoalienation signaled by Prash. It is established in the film that both labor power and capital flow north. In discussing *A Day without a Mexican*, Prash connects Rivera's film and the documentary, because he observes that both show how "Labor demand in the United States [...] is at the root of Mexican immigration across the border" (58) Goodwin discusses how Memo is both a migrant and non-migrant: he has migrated within Mexico, but has not physically migrated across the U.S./Mexico Border because of the wall. However, he does have a presence in the U.S. through the avatar he controls, and his connection with this avatar deepens as he uses it (173). Goodwin is quick to clarify that Memo is not a "virtual" migrant as he and his avatar have an actual physical presence across the border. Thus, he should more accurately be classified as a "'frontier migrant worker', or someone that has a border crossing card, crosses the border to work in the United States, and then returns to Mexico at night" (174). We can draw fairly direct comparisons to the Bracero Program (and the migratory labor practices that preceded it) here. The labor is still flowing north (as Memo mentions) but migration has stopped, which is, as his foreman puts it, "lo que siempre han querido [los Estados Unidos]: todo el trabajo sin los trabajadores". Workers are not only alienated by technology, but that technology further alienates them by placing them across sealed geopolitical borders.

Before he embarked on making *Sleep Dealer*, Rivera worked on an artistic project called "Cybracero Systems". It was a fake high-tech corporation that had testimonials, pictures, mission statements, etc., which "claimed to have pioneered a new technology in order to allow employers to extract all the labor without having to deal with the presence and the problems of workers from the south" (Martín-Cabrera 590). It drew requests from real companies in the U.S. asking for workers, and a newspaper even wrote a report contemplating the

viability of the business (590). Luis Martin Cabrera writes that these sort of responses

suggest that the capitalist unconscious is driven [...] by white supremacist fantasies built around the possibility of extracting a maximum of labor from workers of color without having to deal with the materiality of their bodies, their rights, their culture, and above all, their presence. (590)

Not only does this business keep immigrants out of the United States, but it also keeps the consequences out of sight of the U.S. public. They don't see the maimed, blinded former workers that populate the shanty town around Tijuana. In an effort to become modern, to "plug into the global economy", as Memo put it, Mexico sold its Indigenous soul. As resources are sapped and die out, more freedom will be granted to commodities while labor forces will become more and more immobilized to maintain existing systems of (re)production.

This ties into Prash's third form of technoalienation in *Sleep Dealer*: the privatization of Mexican water for U.S. use. Not only is this another way that commodities are pulled north, as we've discussed, but it depends wholly on the backbone of military intervention and protection via drone strikes. The drone attacks are turned into a television program called *DRONES!* broadcasted across the U.S. and Mexico. While using his homemade receiver one day, Memo accidentally tunes into a channel where Rudy, a drone pilot, and his colleagues are communicating. Upon detecting the hack, the defense company tags the foreign signal as belonging to the Ejército Maya de Liberación de Agua (EMLA) satellite network and dispatches evidence of aqua-terrorists and sends drones to attack Memo's house. Sadly, Memo's family is watching the program, and he recognizes that it is their house that is being targeted. He makes it out, but watches his father die as the house is destroyed.

Memo's family is not necessarily Indigenous, but his family's use of *milpa* is surely a carryover from the hybridization of traditional Indigenous agricultural practices with Mexican State directives post-revolution. It is important to understand the implications of the privatization of Mexico's water in the context of *Sleep Dealer* as a prognosis for our current climate and environmental states, as well as an indictment of how neoliberal capitalism preys on resources that belong to Indigenous groups. Indigenous peoples make up about 5% of the world population, they have claim to over 20% of the land and resources on the globe (Gedicks).

Further compounding this absurd practice is the manner by which business assumes the roles of polis in the areas where they operate. Peter Larsen in "Oil territorialities, social life, and legitimacy in the Peruvian Amazon" argues that oil companies move into spaces granted them by the governments and take on para-governmental roles that extend beyond being an oil drilling company (51). These trends indicate a shift towards a "'postfrontier' approach" (51) to state and business relations, and Del Rio presents as a cementing of these practices in the future – they operate in all the ways a polis operates, complete with repressive and ideological state apparatuses (DRONES, both the machines and programs) to control their mestizo or Indigenous "citizens". As corporations take their land, their resources, their money, or their lives, they continue killing Abiyala to create space for America.

The connection between the alleged water terrorists and subsequent drone strike lead us into Prash's fourth form of technoalienation: drone strikes themselves. More specifically, the alienation of the drone pilots (like Rudy) and gamification of drone strikes in general. Although he works for the security company, Rudy still belongs to a working class. Born of immigrant parents, he is a second-generation

Mexican-American whose father ostensibly served in the military. Like Memo, he goes to work and plugs into his nodes every day, but unlike Memo, he is north of the border. His labor, again contrary to Memo, flows south and is comprised of violence. This lopsided trade—water or labor for violence—is one that the U.S. is quite familiar with, as it aligns with Jameson’s analysis of postmodern culture; that is,

the internal and superstructural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world: in this sense, as throughout class history, the underside of culture is blood, torture, death, and terror. (5)

Of the myriad examples of U.S. aggression, drone strikes are of the most recent and controversial ways the U.S. has shed blood on foreign soil.

Since 2004 in the Middle East, it is estimated that some 14,000 strikes have resulted in an estimated 8 million deaths; of those, around 2,000 civilians (give or take 450 of them children) have been murdered by the U.S. Using drones to protect U.S. assets and natural resources that we demand access to is nothing new and could certainly continue well into the future as portrayed in *Sleep Dealer*. These numbers vary source by source, and the discrepancies in the tracking of these numbers have raised various questions about the ethics of drone strikes (“Drone Warfare”). Prash touches on these ethical dilemmas in the “gamification” of drone warfare, and the way that drone pilots (both in our world and in *Sleep Dealer*) function as if they are playing video games, creating (to quote Steven Lee) “a moral quandary for just war theory, undermining its very logic.” The U.S. is unable to justify their reasoning for their use of violence, are using excessive force, and have no endgame in sight, meaning extreme violence will last for time indeterminate.

Last is the sale of human memories. Luz, as she learns about Memo’s past, sells his memories and experiences on TruNode, the node network that most interface with. She can take his memories to categorize, organize, and narrativize them. In that sense, Memo becomes alienated from his own memories. His memories are no longer just his memories. His memories have become as alien and separate from him as the avatar he controls at his job.

To summarize, what we see portrayed in *Sleep Dealer* and through Memo’s character is how hybridization and *mestizaje*, together with the technological *novum*, allow for the extraction of Memo’s (and other mestizo or Indigenous peoples) life force. If we return to Galeano’s argument of Latin America as a region of open veins and Quijano’s analysis of the inherent eurocentrism and colonialism in the Americas, it becomes clear that this pattern of extractivist capitalism, colonialism, and Empire has not changed to date; then from Fisher, Rivera, and others that it only shifts and changes forms to become as efficient as possible.

Centering Abiyala as a Methodology of Material Resistance

To understand how to center Abiyala, we have to comprehend what Abiyala is. Emil Keme’s article “For Abiyala to Live, the America’s Must Die”, puts forth Abiyala as a conceptualization of the western hemisphere as a primarily Indigenous space that has been subjected to the imperial colonization project referred to as the “Americas”. He borrows the name from the Guna peoples in what we know as Panama, who use it to refer to their land. Keme’s use of the term is in an effort to create a “transhemispheric Indigenous bridge” that is a “first step towards epistemic decolonization and the establishment of Indigenous peoples’ autonomy and self-determination” (43). At this point, the

For the purposes of this section, I will first provide my definition for resistance as an abstract concept. Then, I will examine how to quantify it materially, in concrete terms, taking my cues from Keme's article. His central thesis of establishing Abiyala as a central locus of Indigenous political project is an abstract concept. Like the Marxist call to "seize the means of production", it serves as motto and rallying cry but does not provide steps that guide us towards that goal. To this end, Keme offers material ways to recenter Abiyala, like the recovery of ancestral names and territories (like the use of Abiyala itself, or the renaming of Mt. McKinley in what is now Alaska as Denali, the Koyukon name for the peak (49)). He further discusses the need for international forums, both academic and political, to continue the "exchanges of ideas and knowledge" (52) that allow the potential of this imagined community's existence and highlight the need to "champion permanent criticisms of all those positions that threaten [...] efforts to recover and defend [...] ancestral territories and to dignify and restore [...] Indigenous life" (52). These movements and efforts to resist colonial America stand as examples of opposition to the perpetual "conditions of subalternity" that Indigenous people have endured for centuries. Continuing these movements and specific ways in which Abiyala can be recentered give this analysis the basis to look for similar processes in *Sleep Dealer*.

"For Abiyala to live, the Americas Must Die" is, at its core, anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, and Anti-American, but it is not necessarily violent. It can be espoused by some groups that use violence in some aspect but is not inherently violent. Abiyala, as a region of open veins, is consumed by capitalism which "vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour (sic), and lives the more, the more labour it sucks" (Marx 342). Empire lives at the direct expense of its victims, as we see in Rivera's film. Contrary to capitalism, Keme is not calling for Abiyala to kill the Americas –rather, he is calling for Abiyala to be for Abiyala and put Abiyala first. By centering and strengthening Indigenous nations, the Americas lose their victim from which they draw sustenance. Unlike the Americas, Abiyala doesn't enact violence on anyone. It starves the Americas by depriving them of resources, commodities, and exploitable labor forces. That is not to say that keeping Abiyala alive doesn't require violence and should be purely pacifist, but that the rejection of the Americas will keep them from consuming Abiyala.

Rivera's narrative demonstrates how Abiyala is centered through both violent and non-violent processes. On one hand, we see a pacifist and non-violent centering of Abiyala in maintenance of Indigenous identity and customs through Memo's turn away from engaging in the world economy by selling his labor and his cultivating *milpa* in Tijuana. On the other hand, Memo, Luz, and Rudy orchestrate the drone attack on Del Rio's dam to make the water available to Memo's hometown shows us how violent acts of resistance might also fit into the centering of Abiyala.

Rejection of hybridity and a return to *milpa* are one way by which Memo centers Abiyala. After his attack on the dam, he recognizes that he can never work in a sleep dealer ever again. He and his companions will be fugitives for the rest of their lives unless they don't ever plug their DNA back into the system. At this moment, we are reminded of Memo's interaction with his father at the beginning of the film, when Memo asks Miguel why they still live in Santa Ana and why they haven't left like. As his father's response makes evident, Abiyala had been colonized and privatized. Now that he has seen and experienced the dangers of the sleep dealer and hybridity, his narration echoes his father's words when proclaims that he is going to "is going to create 'un futuro con un pasado, si reconecto y lucho.'" (01:23.28). His future is rooted in his past, and to connect with it he decides to cultivate his *milpa* in direct opposition to the push to hybridize and sell oneself and one's labor to colonial capitalism.

This is not a return to post-revolution efforts to modernize Mexico by using *milpa* and cash crops to create an export economy by hybridizing the Mexican people and their existing practices. It is probable that any sort of commodity exchange, like buying food and other goods necessary to survive requires the use of technology that would expose his presence to those who are likely hunting him. Furthermore, its location in the industrialized mechanopolis (to borrow from Unamuno) of Tijuana, a city that is built around exporting human labor, is a “step in the creation of a global Indigenous [...] movement against predatory neoliberalism” and “recover and [...] restore [their] Indigenous life” (Emil Keme and Adam Coon 50, 52). Barrera writes that the

symbiotic relationship [*milpa*] 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”). (38)

Memo’s expression of *milpa* is part of his “cultural inheritance” (38). In a sense, he is returning to his roots in Santa Ana even if he has to stay in Tijuana. There is no hybridity in his refusal to play into the capitalist system that would consume him; instead he strives to relearn old knowledge and tradition to further emancipate himself from the Americas and make Abiyala his focus through *milpa*.

There is also second a symbolic representation of *milpa* in Rudy, Memo, and Luz’s cooperation in their attack on the dam that we can connect through Barrera’s idea of *milpa* as a communal expression of identity. The extraction of Memo’s memories, Luz’s compilation of them, and Rudy’s consumption of the memories is only made possible via the nodes and wires that each plug into, identical to the drone piloting or the maquiladora. However, this serves to bring them closer to each other than to alienate them from themselves and others. In the *milpa*, corn stalks are intertwined with bean plants and gourd tendrils; Rudy, Luz, and Memo connect in much the same way. Their symbiotic intertwining is a human embodiment of *milpa* that shows us the need for connection and allyship to establish Abiyala in the midst of America, something that Keme mentions as well in his expression of need for and recognition of non-Indigenous allies that work alongside Indigenous people (Emil Keme and Adam Coon 52–53).

Memo’s experiences in Oaxaca and the Cybracero maquiladora catalyzed him into acting for change but acting alone he would have had little chance for success. It is likely that he would have kept working on the *milpa* or at least never left Cybracero Solutions without Luz’s connecting him to Rudy. Luz sold Rudy Memo’s memories that showed Rudy’s first kill, Miguel Rodriguez – if not for Luz, Rudy doesn’t shift and change his perspective. These memories pushed Rudy to see the damage that his work as a drone pilot was doing to people like him, being Mexican himself (raised in the U.S. by immigrant parents). But for Luz’s connecting the two of them the plan could never have emerged. By turning the technology against itself –using it to plan a bombing– we see a glimmer of hope for how “Latin Americans and Latinos” can “[turn] imperial technology against its invisible marionettes” (Hamner 167) and create a space for Abiyala wherever they may be.

In *Sleep Dealer*, Rudy, with the support of Memo and Luz, pilots his drone and blows a hole in the dam near Santa Ana and water is returned to the public sphere and is free to access. Opposed to Memo’s *milpa* in Tijuana, there is a simplicity here that is encapsulated in the words of Memo’s father –without the land, they have no history and no future, and when they dammed the river, they put an end to their dreams. By destroying the dam and returning the water, those who depend on the land have a future. Without the ability to profit off the

privatized water, Del Rio will see their earnings dry up and their hold on the community lessened. They may not have controlled the land, but by controlling the water they indirectly controlled the land and those that lived there.

There are larger material implications that surface with the return of the water. Paul Gelles, in his study of water rights in the Andes, found that Indigenous Andean communities often had their own systems of resource management in places that were built around cultural and ritual frameworks. These traditional methods frequently were found at odds with local and state government regulations, which “increasingly work hand in hand with neoliberalism and privatization” of resources as they try to extend state control over peoples they find inferior to the “urban criollo [*mestizo*] society” (Gelles 138). What is lost in the simple exchange sought after by Westernized governments is that water in the region “is not just an economic good, but also a cultural resource”, and that “Longstanding and culturally elaborate beliefs and rituals are intimately linked to water management by local communities” (139). These same people are asked, in the push for “modernity” through hybridization, to allow for state regulation of the water for privatization as they strive to maintain traditional practices, practices that are antithetical at best and impossible at worst.

Santa Ana del Rio finds itself in a similar situation, but in an advanced stage. There is no room for their cultural and traditional understanding of water management, given that Del Rio has complete control of the resource. As such, it is unlikely that the Mexican federal government exerts any measure of control over Del Rio or the water, meaning that when the water is returned to the people, it is returned directly to the people without any colonizing hands muddying the stream. This is certainly not a permanent solution, as Memo’s mother reminds him, but for the time being they can once again dream about their future. Centering Abiyala, in this case, means returning natural resources to the Indigenous stewards that they were stolen from.

Concluding Remarks

What we learn from *Sleep Dealer* is that colonialism never ends because capitalism never ends. Its desire to consume is unyielding. Regardless of the shape it may take, it remains a monster. From Quijano and Galeano, we see how over the course of our shared history in the Americas, capitalism has morphed to whatever form grants it the most advantage. To do this, Abiyala must die at the hands of colonialism and imperialist oppression. This has been done by the constant depletion of natural resources as raw material, but what *Sleep Dealer* presents us with is a future where people –specifically Indigenous peoples– are the raw material, not the instruments of labor. In the case of Mexico, the push for modernization under the guise of hybridity and *mestizaje* is the vehicle through which Indigenous subjectivity is suppressed and then erased, subsequently erasing Indigenous groups with it. To push back against this, we can see ways in which Keme’s thesis of centering Abiyala can serve as a methodology for resistance. However, where the America’s seek to kill Abiyala, we see how the call for the America’s to die does not mean an attack on the Americas. Instead, centering Abiyala can be done as an expression of Indigenous identity through cultural practices, like Memo’s *milpa*, or through depriving capitalist powers the ability to suck the life force out of Indigenous peoples, as is done through the attack on the dam. Any way it happens, establishing Abiyala as a central locus for Indigenous enunciation is something that will benefit all of us, Indigenous or not.

Not just in environmental and human rights causes, but to provide us with a model and guidepost to resisting colonialism, imperialism, and capitalist realisms.

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