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Preface

The images on the front and back covers of this special issue of *American Quarterly*, “Nation and Migration: Past and Future,” are from Alex Rivera’s *The Sleep Dealer* (2008), a near-future science fiction film set in Mexico that reflects on the political economy of migration through the eyes of a would-be migrant worker. We are grateful to Alex and to Maya Entertainment, his distributor, for permission to reproduce them. As the director explains, the film

basically uses the genre of science fiction to flash forward five minutes or five years to look at the politics between the United States (and Mexico) if they keep going the way they’re going today. I guess science fiction is always looking at political and economic realities shot into the future, but this is from a perspective we haven’t seen before: the U.S. from the outside . . . [I]n this future, the border is closed. Instead of physically coming to the United States, workers go to cities in Mexico and work in giant factories or sweatshops where they connect their bodies to high-speed, network-controlled robots that do their labor. So their pure labor crosses the border, but their bodies stay in Mexico. It’s kind of a sick and twisted spin on the American dream.¹

The Sleep Dealer develops a scenario Rivera first presented in *Why Cybraceros?* (1997), a short film in which a fictional corporation promises to use new computer technology to solve the “immigration problem.” A satiric response to the “Internet utopianism” of the late 1990s, it incorporated footage from the 1959 agribusiness-made short called *Why Braceros?*, which attempted to dispel nativist opposition and promote the Bracero guest worker program by framing it as a temporary measure that would be unnecessary in the future, when agriculture would be largely automated.² Such agribusiness self-representations have long been haunted by science fiction fantasies of replacing migrant workers with machines. Though largely based in contemporary concerns, *The Sleep Dealer*’s vision of the near future resonates with a longer history.

Ernesto Galarza’s important study *Farm Workers and Agri-Business in California, 1947–1960* presents a history of mechanization and migrant farm labor that in some ways anticipates Rivera’s near-future dystopia. Published in 1977, Galarza’s work tells the story of how corporate agriculture effectively sought to discipline farmworkers and destroy their unions (including the local of the National Farm Workers Union that Galarza helped to organize after

World War II in California's San Joaquin Valley) by mechanizing production. During the late 1940s and early 1950s, according to Galarza, automatic machines "were taking over" in the orchards and fields, using electronic "brains" and "eyes" to plant, tend, harvest, and sort produce. Agribusiness machinery "became awesome, like the motorized cotton picker; graceful, like the spidery walnut pruner; delicate, like the electronic lemon sorter; or spectral, like the eighty-foot land leveler moving through clouds of its own dust." Particularly striking for Galarza was the automated cotton harvester that, along with its "mechanical partners" the cotton "planter-cultivator" and "the scrapper that salvaged un-harvested bolls . . . could move in formation sweeping through hundreds of acres of cotton fluff like a rumbling herd of trunkless elephants" or "an assembly out of science fiction."³

But while the dream of mechanization was "to eliminate people from production," that goal could never be completely realized.⁴ Rather than totally eliminate migrant workers, mechanization enabled agribusiness to reduce its labor force but also to restructure and discipline the remaining workers. The introduction of new automatic sorters, for instance, served to deskill certain jobs. "As packing operations moved from town sheds to movable assemblies on wheels they were reclassified as field work with lower rates of pay."⁵ At the same time women were substituted for men on the moving harvesting rigs and were paid less. More dramatically, mechanization in the fields was meshed with the Bracero Program. As part of an agreement between the United States and Mexico, between 1942 and 1964 the Bracero Program brought millions of Mexican contract workers to the United States. In *Farm Workers and Agribusiness*, Galarza noted that the program was molded by corporate lobbyists and reflected "the vertical integration of government with private interests" in California agriculture.⁶ In an earlier work called *Strangers in Our Fields* (1956), he analyzed the imperial dimensions of the Bracero Program's mass militarization of migrant labor. As part of his research for the book, Galarza visited and photographed a variety of institutional spaces where braceros were housed, including a massive cattle corral with open privies in Yuba City as well as a barbed-wired military base and a county fair cattle pavilion in Stockton. (I was reminded of these images recently when it was revealed that the migrant workers from Mexico and Guatemala arrested at an Iowa meatpacking plant as part of the largest single-site federal immigration raid in U.S. history were detained at the livestock pavilion of a local fairground.)⁷ Galarza thus analyzed a situation in which agribusiness technology was fetishized in ways that partly obscured or distracted attention from the industry's ongoing dependence on migrant farm labor.

These different historical visions of the future of migration suggest that migration is not a marginal, episodic, or temporary feature of life in the United States, but rather a central and permanent part of it—and hence a topic of ongoing interest for scholars in and around American studies. The juxtaposition of these very different moments further reveals continuities in their ideologies and fantasies about migration that simultaneously undermine linear narratives of progress while potentially bringing into even sharper relief the relative distinctiveness of each moment. A similar yet much more expansive perspective on such continuities among differences is well represented by individual essays and this special issue as a whole. Indeed, the volume is complexly comparative in terms of different histories, diasporas, and national and regional contexts. Contributors engage the topic from a variety of disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives, including ethnic studies, history, sociology, anthropology, literary studies, and politics and international relations. And finally, recalling the migrant eye's view of Rivera's film, a number of authors critically and self-reflexively research and analyze the concrete experiences of migrants themselves.

Many people working together have made this issue possible, starting with its guest editors, David G. Gutiérrez and Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, whose keen and generous intellects shaped the project at every turn. I would also like to thank the members of the *American Quarterly* managing editorial board who read and commented on the final group of essays, including Grace Hong, Lisa Lowe, Laura Pulido, and Dylan Rodríguez. Orlando Serrano and Jeb Middlebrook, *American Quarterly's* excellent outgoing and incoming managing editors, have contributed greatly to the issue, as have editorial assistants Kristen Fuhs, Karen Alonzo, and Jaclyn Mahoney. Stacey Lynn copyedited the volume with great care and skill, and Bill Longhauser designed the striking cover.

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Curtis Marez
Editor

Notes

1. Interview with Alex Rivera, *The Reeler*, January 23, 2008 http://www.thereeler.com/sundance_features/alex_rivera_sleep_dealer.php (accessed June 19, 2008).
2. Both films can be viewed online. For *Why Cybracos?* see the director's Web site, <http://www.invisibleamerica.com/movies.html> (accessed June 19, 2008). For *Why Braceros?* see the Internet Archive, <http://www.archive.org/details/WhyBrace1959> (accessed June 19, 2008).
3. All quotations in this paragraph are from Ernesto Galarza, *Farm Workers and Agri-Business in California, 1947–1960* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), 66–69.
4. *Ibid.*, 71.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*, 86.
7. *Des Moines Register*, May 12, 2008. <http://www.desmoinesregister.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20080512/NEWS/80512012/1001> (accessed on June 16, 2008).