

LITERATURE AND CULTURAL STUDIES

War Games / *Puro Vacilón*

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The idea of the serious game as a metaphor and as an actuality comes up in constantly in border surveillance. This article looks at two contrasting examples of interactive performances that we are asked (asked?) to take seriously (?): the US border-related reenactment pieces *Pulpo* and *Oracle* by Mexico City-based artist Yoshua Okón, and the “Caminata nocturna” created by the indigenous collaborators in the EcoAlberto tourism park. These case studies provide useful instances in which we can think about how technology and transculturation intervene in border spaces, and how those spaces are mediated by an uneasy flip between seriousness and *vacilón*, where gravity and levity are somewhat incongruously and overtly intertwined.

La idea del juego serio como metáfora y realidad surge constantemente en la vigilancia fronteriza. Este artículo explora dos ejemplos contrastantes de performances interactivos que piden tomarse en serio—o no. Se estudia dos obras de recreación histórica con temas relacionados a la frontera entre México y Estados Unidos por Yoshua Okón, artista basado en México DF, y la “Caminata nocturna” creado por colaboradores indígenas del parque de turismo EcoAlberto. Estos casos ofrecen instancias útiles para pensar la intervención de tecnología y transculturación en espacios fronterizos, y como estos espacios se mediatizan por un vaivén entre seriedad y *vacilón*, donde se entrelazan, de forma a veces incongruente y abierto, la ligereza y la gravedad.

Don't take the pinche play so seriously, Jesús! Es puro vacilón.
—El Pachuco, in Luis Valdez, *Zoot Suit* (78)

The Pachuco's exasperated exhortation to his alter ego, Henry Reyna, occurs precisely as the protagonist of Luis Valdez's play is suffering through the dark night of the soul, the abyss of self-doubt, while locked in solitary confinement in prison, and it signals a switch in the play from the dark prison cell to the brightly lit dance hall and the music of “Bugle Call Rag.”¹ We audience members have, presumably, been cathected with the characters and the documentary aspects of the history they represent. To be reminded that we are an audience to a play, an entertainment, is jarring. Of course, it is understood that viewers of the play do not leave the affect associated with seriousness behind when we are abruptly shifted to the dance hall and its apparent celebratory tone; instead, we teeter on an emotional uncertainty between the two extremes, and are made uncomfortable by it. This uneasy balancing act is marked at various points throughout the play by El Pachuco but never more so than here, where his insistent Spanglish, and the expression “puro vacilón,” point to a cultural context that is intentionally opaque to monolingual English speakers but highly reflective of the local realities indexed by the play.

It is important to note that the kind of balancing act defined by “vacilón” and provoked by an unexpected and abrupt shift between gravity to levity occurs not just in this particular play but is a common, if insufficiently recognized, feature undergirding many recent cultural critiques from Euro-America, often those focusing on unexpected tonalities coming from the South and marked by authorial discomfort. Accordingly, an inquiry into this teetering between two incommensurable forms of affect serves as the point of departure for the

¹ The “Bugle Call Rag” also calls the US military into action, and the dance rapidly transitions to the zoot suit riots, another shift between levity and gravity. However, the analysis of the historical backdrop is beyond the scope of this article, which focuses on the abruptness signaled by El Pachuco's line in Valdez's play.

discussion that follows. Indeed, it is the fundamental thesis of this article that the concept of “vacilón” adds an important theoretical construct to our cultural vocabulary in helping us to better understand a particular kind of critical and scholarly uneasiness with an important archive of Latino and Latin American material. Furthermore, I contend that the meta-analysis of this phenomenon cannot be easily subsumed in the familiar, linear form of scholarly argument so related to Western academic credentialing but rather needs to make a case for itself by the accrual, and close analysis, of primary materials that enact this performative concept in dialogue with presumed/imagined northern interlocutors and allow it to find its slippery, uneasy way.²

Thus, this article, after a definitional overview of the concept of “vacilón,” will delve more deeply into the issues raised by way of an analysis of a familiar, touchy metaphor—that of war games—through the analysis of cultural texts focused on the US-Mexico border that put the idea of gaming and the idea of war together in uncomfortable ways. It will explore examples such as, briefly, the development of games for military exercises or border patrol training, and, more in depth, the “Caminata nocturna” at EcoAlberto Park in Mexico, and three of Yoshua Okón’s projects. The goal of the article is to explore and performatively enact a theoretical concept—vacilón—grounded in concrete examples from a range of thinkers who use performance as their medium for expression, and who do so with an eye to both North and South, including game designers, indigenous cultural actors, and a highly recognized artist. In this way, the article demonstrates that the popular-culture figure of the vacilón has resonances with, and derives its theoretical efficacy from, a range of thinkers across a spectrum that ranges from outside to centrally located inside the academy. The point, finally, is not to add to the edifice of theory but rather to illustrate points—in this case limited to the nexus of border war game—where Latino and Latin American practice unsettles that theoretical edifice, forcing an uncomfortable recognition.

To begin with, it is axiomatic that high seriousness is an important performative mode for the writing of ethically driven culture scholars. Thus, for instance, Diana Taylor (2009) and Tamara Underiner (2011) remind us in recent studies that performance is often deadly serious, that the geopolitical border is a stage in a more than metaphoric way, and that border games are rehearsals for weighty reality. Likewise, in *Border Games*, Peter Andreas (2000) focuses his analysis on how the mainstream US political system is also consciously playing a serious game. As he writes, in its current permanent-emergency War on Terror/Drugs, the United States needs to project a winning image, to be—so to speak—on top of its game. Furthermore, argues Andreas, in this invented contest, being able to project the image of winning is far more important than actually winning (2000, 111). In each case, there is an underlying adjuration that we need to be taking games seriously (where the assumption is that for their readers, games and performances are generally considered light entertainment), that the stakes in interactive performance have never been so high. We may well ask, in what sense?

“Puro vacilón” is most easily translated as “just a joke”: though the word *puro* could give us pause, as a slangy intensifier used in other colloquialisms like *puro pinche* or *puro pedo*. The word *vacilón* itself is more challenging to translate than it first seems. Covering various semantic fields, it can mean “teasing, joking, funny, entertaining” and in this sense refer to a “party” or a “clown” (compilation from various online dictionaries). More darkly, it can mean “mocking” or refer to a poser, a conceited, vain show-off; it can (according to the *Diccionario de la Real Academia*) reference the verbal diarrhea of a drunk or drugged person (Pedro Infante captures this sense in his song, “El vacilón” from 1950, as well as in many of the tracks in his 1958 album, *Rico vacilón*).

Since the character of El Pachuco in Luis Valdez’s play is all of these things—alter ego, untrustworthy confidant, trickster figure, role model, drug addict—the field in which the author plays is equally large and unsteady.³ The play itself centers on the travesty of justice in the Sleepy Lagoon murder trial in 1943 California, a very serious topic; thus to ask the protagonist, and the audience, “not take the pinche play” seriously is in some sense to confront weighty scholarship and liberal pieties about this historical period with a poisonous glimpse into how censorship, self-censorship, and the heritage of inequality function in the making of the historical record. In this context, the Pachuco’s startling demand presents itself as a powerful discursive strategy, a “treta del débil” (tactics of the weak) (Ludmer 1984) or strategy of the

² While the larger context for this work would certainly make allusion to European thinkers like Guy Debord and Jean Baudrillard on simulacrum, or the long tradition of rhetorical analyses of irony and satire, I find it ideologically important to argue here from the primacy of Latino- and Latin American-based thought, which is rich, profound, and more than sufficient to make my points.

³ The Mexican-born border performance artist/provocateur Guillermo Gómez Peña is very much in this tradition. See his “La Pocha Nostra” (n.d.) for an overview his many projects that bring together aggression, humor, often insulting the audience, among other features.

underdog to interrupt conventional narrative, to appropriate it from below. It also serves as a reminder that the play we are seeing is, in fact, a theatrical piece, a performance rather than a re-creation—a serious concern, raised in a light fashion. It also reminds us that serious audience members should feel obligated by this entertainment to immerse themselves in the historical record and educate themselves about the cultural circumstances surrounding this case.⁴

More generally, we serious academics can benefit from a glimpse into the structure and the strategy of the vacilón, from looking at how cultural critiques from the other side of border can supplement or deconstruct grave scholarship. Thus, the focus of this discussion is on the discursive underpinnings of scholarly discourse with respect to assumptions about gravity/levity, weight/lightness, especially in northern readings of certain southern performances. Latin American and Latin Americanist scholars, in work that is a foundational background for this study, have helpfully explored, for instance, the heavy/light heritage of the Spanish *esperpento*, or the social and political implications of Cuban *choteo* (Mañach [1928] 1969) and *bufo* (Lane 2005), or Puerto Rican *revolico*, *gufeo*, or *relajo* (Meléndez 2006) in the cultural processes of those countries. Diana Taylor and Roselyn Costantino (2003) compile and analyze crucial examples of women's performative writing and texts, their often ferocious humor, in *Holy Terrors*. Likewise Mexico is famous for the often mordantly satirical and profoundly reflective work of thinkers/writers like Sabina Berman, Jorge Ibarguengoitia (1990), Carlos Monsiváis (2012), and Juan Villoro (2006) in their plays, novels, and chronicles.

Before writing his controversial essay about his version of *pachuquismo* in *El laberinto de la soledad* ([1950] 1980), a young Octavio Paz wrote a series of essays on emblematic figures in Mexican popular culture—*el agachado*, *el mordelón*, *el coyote*, *el lambiscón*—and among them was an essay called “El vacilón” first published in *Novedades* in 1943. He begins this brief article by recurring to the dictionary, backing into his analysis by looking first at the verb rather than the noun:

... el verbo vacilar posee dos significados: “moverse indeterminadamente una cosa”, “estar poco firme en su estado o tener riesgo de caer o arruinarse,” “tibubear, estar uno perplejo o irresoluto”.... ¿En cuál de todos ellos lo usamos los melancólicos, caviladores mexicanos? A todos nos gusta vacilar y nos vacilamos los unos a los otros. Nuestra tierra, erizada de volcanes, perpetuamente vacila, y los edificios, las casas, los pueblos enteros oscilan con ese “vacilón”, esto es, están a punto de caer y arruinarse. ([1943] 1988, 307)

For Paz, then, the verb form helps him to think about the balancing act implied by *vacilar* as a national quality imposed on Mexicans by the very nature of the landscape, so prone to seismic activity; it is, in this sense, a proactive self-defense against ruination. A bit later in the essay he adds, contrasting the Mexican concept to perhaps the most famous example of indecisiveness in English-language literature: “nos gustan las vacilaciones por razones distintas a Hamlet.... Su duda brotaba de la reflexión, pero no el mexicano, que apenas conoce la reflexión y que, más que dudar, desconfía” (307–308). Paz's conclusion is typically harsh on his fellow Mexicans, along lines that will become familiar in later discussions of, for instance, *el chingón* or *el ninguneo*, in *Laberinto de la soledad*. While we may strongly disagree with Paz's understanding of the absence of reflection, it is useful to point out his tone, as well as his marking of a position of *desconfianza* that derives from occupying an uncertain ground, reminding us of a relation to history quite different from the early imperial verities (and lack of earthquakes) in Shakespeare's world.

Accordingly, if we follow Paz's argument, the reflexive—if not reflective—action of the vacilón is to take down pretentiousness, those real or imagined poses of superiority in his fellow citizens: “El ‘vacilón’ es una especie de pequeño pinchazo que desinfla a muchos globos públicos y privados” (The “vacilón” is a kind of little prick that deflates many public and private balloons) (308). In Paz's article, the vacilón contrasts Hamlet's tragic high seriousness with the light-sounding action of popping a balloon. This action, to follow his telluric metaphor, is also a way of attaining a more stable ground; it is, finally, a cultural position that frames a theoretical stance with respect to knowledge production.

There is another historical context to take into account in this discussion. Indeed, Steven Connor notes that “the difference between a scientific and magical physics was often projected in the late nineteenth century in terms of the struggle between gravity and levity” (2009, 412). Friedrich Kittler's classic discussion

⁴ Historians and other scholars of contemporary culture in a series of studies since the 1970s have observed the power of the visual and performative image in creating our sense of the past. Thus, films that are based on historical events are remembered as if they were history, such that even when we learn about the inaccuracies and errors, we tend to still recall the film version instead of the facts (Ghose 2013).

of materialities of communication takes us from the solidity of the book to insubstantial and ephemeral electronic images; “Media determine our situation,” he writes (1999, xxxix). To give one instance of this determining quality, in a memorable 1998 talk, Kittler argues: “Only art history still knows that the famed geniuses of the Renaissance did not just create paintings and buildings, but calculated fortresses and constructed war machines,” implicitly an argument from things taken lightly to those taken with great seriousness (Kittler 1998).

In a parallel argument, Peter Sloterdijk argues that nineteenth-century scientific discovery weighed down philosophical thought at the same time as technological advances involved other kinds of gravity: digging down into the earth for coal and oil. He says: “We may advance the thesis that all narratives of the metamorphoses of the *conditio humana* are narratives of the changing exploitation of energy sources—or descriptions of metabolic regimes” (Sloterdijk 2007, 342); thus, the weightier shapes of fossil fuels defined the Industrial Revolution and twentieth-century liberal capitalism, while the newer horizons of wind and solar energy have begun to shape the twenty-first. Lightness, for Sloterdijk, is a weighty matter. Connor adds, “It is not really that we have become light instead of heavy; it is that we have become light as well as heavy, foamy as well as dense, our everyday avoirdupois riddled with lightness,” and he furthermore attaches the concept of lightness to what he calls our “contemporary addiction to effervescence” (2009, 423, 422).

The scholars adduced so far have seen gravity and levity in a kind of teleological relation, following the march of Western industry from coal-fired factories to the invention of Coca-Cola. Even Octavio Paz, in his brief article, locates seriousness (Hamlet) and vacilón in a hierarchical relationship that marches along a path defined by national character, local geography, and the history of European expansion. And yet, there is something more to ponder in the intersection of seriousness and vacilón. For instance, the archetypal carbonated beverage, Coca-Cola, is not just an innocuous bubbly drink, or at worst the very concrete sign of our addiction to effervescence. It is associated with obesity and diabetes, an increasingly pressing global problem and one that has a particular resonance in Mexico, the world’s largest consumer of this effervescent drink. It is a heavy product.⁵ Thus, the form of the vacilón that interests me here is deeply grounded in Latin American cultural understandings, while it addresses serious, unequal bicultural, binational exchanges with the global North, through performative acts that often have an element of aggressivity directed against its implicit audience and marked (or masked) by leavening elements of dark humor or gaming. It is, in this sense, quite different from other forms of parody.

The following pages begin with an exploration of the background context of serious/ludic border/war games that serves as a frame for the discussion by setting up an important context for thinking about stereotypes/profiling by way of video-game avatars. The latter two sections focus on contrasting examples of interactive performances that we are asked (asked?) to take seriously (?), both of which speak from the uneasy, broken exchanges between metropolitan theory and Mexican-based implicit or explicit questioning of the underpinning in these theoretical presuppositions. These performance-based interpretations interpolate the history of encounters in the US-Mexican border area in a way that is not amenable to weighty northern constructs, which often focus on the undeniably grave issues of violence, discrimination, social justice, and human tragedy in prose that is equally grave.

It is important to signal that the two examples I will be looking at come from very two differently classed and ethnically charged instances, and both make use of vacilón as a key contestational tactic: the “Caminata nocturna” created by the indigenous collaborators in the EcoAlberto tourism park, and the US border-related reenactment pieces *Pulpo* and *Oracle* by Mexico City–based artist Yoshua Okón. They are far from the first to address weighty topics by way of entertainments, whether serious or frivolous, but they provide useful instances for my purposes in which we can think about how technology and transculturation⁶ intervene in border spaces, and how those spaces are mediated by an uneasy flip of the vacilón, where gravity and levity are somewhat incongruously and overtly intertwined.

While the Mexican creators of these works each appropriate US mainstream culture differently, they also engage in a kind of exoticizing performance of the immigrant self that may surprise, shock, or anger us or make us laugh uncomfortably. This humor is deflected from the weighty subject at hand—the difficult lives of Central Americans and indigenous Mexicans in the United States—into an unexpected direction: asking

⁵ A specific example of this heaviness, registered in the *Guardian*, is a withdrawn Coca-Cola advertisement set in Oaxaca that features white people happily handing out Coke to indigenous folks as part of a Christmas service project (*Guardian* 2015). I thank the anonymous reviewer of the first version of this article who brought this ad to my attention.

⁶ “Transculturation” is a term coined by Fernando Ortiz in his famous 1940 study of the tobacco and sugar plantations in Cuba (Ortiz [1940] 1987).

mainstream US consumers to see ourselves through their eyes. Our colonizer past makes us uneasy, we laugh (and/or are moved to tears) presumably because of a sense of a shared liberal bias that makes gravity our default mode and encourages us to imagine that we are immune from the charges of exploitation and cultural appropriation so skillfully alluded to, and skirted, in productions like *Zoot Suit*, or the Mexican works I look at more closely here.

In fact, the creators of these works rely on this bias for both aesthetic and commercial reasons. In each case mainstream US consumers are asked to laugh and at the same time to be the butt of the joke, to take the pinche play seriously and not. Thus, the target audiences for these performance pieces are by definition other than the performers. The performers, in their turn, know their audience better than the audience knows them, and they play off a context where “otherness” is typically articulated from the perspective of the mainstream. They know that a certain stereotypical otherness (the undocumented immigrant, for instance) is the property most associated with the performer and presumed to encompass the relevant aspects of the performer’s identity. These projects perform the opposite: othering the other, so to speak, taking the white liberal American and showing us that face through a southern perspective. We may find ourselves looking around, laughing nervously, only to realize we are the ones being laughed at.

Gaming the Border

The application of the idea of the serious game as a metaphor and as an actuality comes up almost obsessively in contemporary discussions of the field, as is the case with Andreas’s book. This is as true for the metaphor of war games when applied to real world conflict as it is for video games that use conflict as a narrative device, whether for “serious” or “ludic” purposes. And here we immediately see the stumble, the hesitation, the figure of the *vacilón*, who tells us to take it seriously and remember it is fiction, to know that real lives are involved and that it is only play.

Phillip Penix-Tadsen is as attentive as any scholar I know to the hazards and potential slippages in his field of research, the mediation of seriousness and levity that is the *vacilón*. In his important book *Cultural Code*, he has explored, for example, how stereotyped Latin American cultural contexts of the sort appearing in the immensely popular console game *Call of Duty: Black Ops*⁷ have long been appropriated for commercial game development aimed at the global north markets. Many of these games have become popular staples in the Latin American market among young gamers, thus creating opportunities for a generation of gamers to confront ideological issues through a different media lens, and to turn from seemingly frivolous game play to controversial political statements. Unsurprisingly, Latin American gamers are not content to be passive consumers of negative portrayals of Latin American contexts; they are increasingly pushing the commercial companies to greater complexity as Latin Americans participate in design and production of new games (Penix-Tadsen 2016, 2). At the same time, as Penix-Tadsen notes, there is a highly visible use of games for political purposes; “ludic” games like *Call of Duty* can easily be converted into political currency when they become the target of denunciations from local politicians or media, while newly developed “serious” games are intended to provoke discussion (2016, 27). There are other even more serious, and deadly, uses of games as well: we might recall the multiple games and simulations that are used by narcos to rally their forces or to instill fear, to “game” their opponents.

From the US side of the industry, the “serious” game is crucial to border surveillance rhetoric by way of the use of purposely developed games for military exercises (variations on what in gaming circles would be called “rpgs,” role-playing games, or “larping,” live action role playing), as well in the training for border patrol agents. Some of these games involve console-based simulations, others feature live action with contracted actors playing scripted roles as recognizable opponents. For instance, SIMmersion, a Columbia, Maryland-based company using patented technology developed by Dale Olsen, enjoys (according to its website) “contracts with the FBI, as well as the U.S. Army, Navy, Air Force, the Office of the Secretary of Defense, Joint Forces Command, the intelligence community.” On the home page of its website, the organization touts their training game, explicitly “intended to train Border Patrol, Customs, DEA, and TSA agents ... to strengthen the preparation of all personnel assigned to protect our borders.” The company assures us that “after using these training systems, users will have mastered detecting deception, recognizing markers of truth, and judging whether or not to pass someone onto a secondary screening.” Tellingly, who is chosen as avatars for the simulated screening follows familiar ethnic profiling practices. There are two “persons of

⁷ Penix-Tadsen cites this game as the most successful internationally released game in history, with more than thirty million copies sold worldwide. Game play includes the assassination of Fidel Castro, and a stereotyped Cuban culture is richly represented (2016, 73–77). A key section of his study, including the analysis of *Call of Duty*, appeared in his article “Latin American Ludology” (2013).

interest” described on the website’s home page: Maria Rodriguez, a potential drug smuggler from Mexico City, and Mohammed Shariff, a potential terrorist (**Figure 1**).

Avatars are, of course, widely used in console-based video game play, and the coding limitations of the avatars, like those of game parameters themselves, suggest a mathematical reduction of the chaos and complexity of reality to familiar ritualized images. Likewise, in “larps,” by definition, the role needs to be clearly defined so as to allow the player to recognizably inhabit it for the purpose of the game. In practice, in training games, these avatars are often violently stereotypical ones that can be manipulated for laughs (as they are in many commercial video games), or pointed to with horror by sharp-eyed individuals who decry racial profiling. In government-sponsored games, or ones contracted to US government agencies, the ratio of seriousness to fun, like the degree of stereotyping, is masked by the language of the sites. Yet the provenance of the game does not shift the basic parameters of game play, including stimulating the player to want to continue to play with intriguing puzzles and intermittent rewards.

Likewise, in addition to the games that the Border Patrol contracted from developers, it has also commissioned its own projects, including a multi-million-dollar game from Sandia Labs that features giant touch screens used to train agents and to simulate the capture of undocumented migrants. From what I can tell, this Sandia Labs game also features similarly stereotypical characters for the role play (see Johnson 2011). There is clearly a high degree of gravity to this use of technology for interactive performances, whether in video-game format or by way of government-sponsored or enforced rpgs or larps in which humans become avatar-like projections of the game. These simulation games used to train soldiers or border agents, created for military or military-like use in strategic planning and strategizing, have both a serious purpose and a serious cost; for example, “Borders High Level Model” was developed in Sandia Labs at a reported cost of \$10 million (Before It’s News 2011). Other video games with very serious objectives have been developed, for instance, by US military psychologists to help soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan to overcome trauma.

Examples of the serious use of games can easily be multiplied. If the US government has long since learned the effectiveness of games for training purposes, other organizations are equally invested in them. Reality TV shows like National Geographic’s long-running “Border Wars” has a game simulation as a component of its website (Underiner 2011, 15). On the other side of the political spectrum, video games like the single

The screenshot shows the SIMmersion website interface. At the top left is the SIMmersion logo with the tagline 'Immersive Simulations'. To the right is a 'Training Center' logo and a navigation menu with links for 'Downloads', 'Tech Support', 'Blog', and 'Contact'. Below this is a 'Featured in The New York Times' badge. A secondary navigation menu includes 'Solutions', 'Technology', 'Purchasing', 'Publications', and 'About'. The main content area is titled 'Customs & Border Protection Training System' and includes a breadcrumb trail: 'Solutions / Military / Customs & Border Protection'. A 'Scenario' section describes a training exercise involving a flight from Mexico and a character named Maria Rodriguez. A 'More Information' section provides details about the system's purpose for training Border Patrol, Customs, DEA, and TSA agents, and mentions another character, Mohammed Shariff. Two circular images of avatars, a man and a woman, are positioned to the right of the scenario text.

Figure 1: SIMmersion website, screen shot.

player “Migrant Trail” allows play as either a migrant or a border patrol agent; this particular one was developed by the progressive “games for change” project, so its agenda is profoundly pedagogical, with a liberal twist. Likewise, Rich Ufford, with “Immigration Simulation” (his context is the American Friends Service Committee), offers another serious, didactic rpg, intended to provoke discussion among players about US immigration policy and its effects.

As we move from the more clearly serious to the more evidently ludic, the game interface helpfully changes to alert us. “Papers, Please” promises the player the experience of thirty-one days of a border agent’s life, and “Turista fronterizo” offers a simple, Monopoly-style board-game-like play with four border-crossing avatars. In “Turista fronterizo,” created as a political/artistic project by Coco Fusco in collaboration with Ricardo Domínguez, the choice of players determines the number of points one starts with and how the dice are loaded. As Penix-Tadsen writes, “‘Turista fronterizo’ rewards players who wish to find out how the other half lives, so to speak, by doing a bit of border tourism themselves” (2016, 89). Notably, whatever the outcome of their actions, all of the players—El Junior, La Todologa, La Gringa Activista, and El Gringo Poderoso—are potential tourists: privileged avatars of legal border crossers rather than undocumented migrants.

At the end of his book, Penix-Tadsen makes an appeal to the balancing qualities of the *vacilón*, and his challenge is a difficult one: “Being too serious can lead to taking games’ messages at face value.... In other words, to truly understand the way meaning is made in many video games, we must not lose our sense of humor” (2016, 234).

Interactive Gaming at EcoAlberto Park

The most popular offering at the indigenous-run ecotourism park, EcoAlberto in rural Mexico, is a larp, the “Caminata nocturna,” where visitors participate in an immersive virtual border crossing that involves strenuous activity, by night, in unknown territory. Like other larps, the players have assigned roles/avatars and the community members shape the experience for their client performers. In this respect, Scott Magelssen writes that the experience is that of an adaptive video game: “while the performers’ activity and decision making ... is driven by *ludic*, singular experience..., the storyline or narrative is imposed by strategic framing ... in the same manner that an adaptive video game frames the *ludic* play of the gamer” (2011, 188–189; my emphases). Thus, Magelssen points to the playful elements that make this trek similar to any other interactive game; yet this article, and all the other articles and reviews of the experience, emphasize that this is a game with an uncomfortably serious underpinning. In other words, it participates in the performative turn of the *vacilón*.

The people who participate in this experience are, we are told, overwhelmingly looking for some kind of relationship that cannot be found in traditional tourism. In studies of this kind of adventure tourism—EcoAlberto as well as others like it—the tourist frequently seeks out a remote site in an exoticized location in the global South, and the desired goal is often described as “authenticity” (see, e.g., Freire-Medeiros 2007, 62). One shape this “authenticity” takes in the discussions of the EcoAlberto trek is a familiar one: every article on it feels compelled to reference, only to decry, the internet trolls who call the experience a “training ground” for undocumented immigrants.

The members of the Hñähñú community live in the midst of hot springs and a gorgeous deep canyon. What they do not have is much arable land, and up until very recently as many as 90 percent of them report having worked as migrant laborers in the United States for some period of time. With support from the Mexican national government program for Alternative Tourism in Indigenous Zones (Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas, Programa Turismo Alternativo en Zonas Indígenas) they created an ecotourism park as a source of alternative income (Coronado 2014). The novel project, and their most (in)famous offering, is the “Caminata nocturna,” something that looks like an innocuous, if perhaps slightly arduous trek, if one were to go only by the website (**Figure 2**).

In essence, these well-traveled indigenous return migrants have created in their territory a border-crossing experience, which some people would call an instance of “dark tourism,” reliving trauma for economic gain, others have decried as a training exercise for would-be migrants, and drunken college students enjoy as a delightfully different way to spend a Saturday night. On any given night, seventy to eighty locals take on various roles associated with their own difficult experiences of crossing the border into the United States and bring twenty to two hundred tourist-migrants across four or five hours of very rough land in an extremely sparsely lit (by only a few flashlights, only on occasion) adventure. One of the locals plays the unreliable guide; others represent US border patrol agents or vigilantes, yelling at each other and the tourists in English, and frequently shooting what one hopes are blanks from their guns; some are planted in

Caminata Nocturna
Atrévete a vivir la experiencia...!!!

10^{mo} ANIVERSARIO

Programa

Gran Cañón		Balneario	
<i>Sábado 26 de julio</i>		<i>Sábado 26 de julio</i>	
10:00 hrs	Inauguración del Evento	14:00 hrs	Carrera de Caballos
10:30 hrs	Eventos Socioculturales	18:00 hrs	Jarripeno
18:00 hrs	Evento y Recorrido Cultural	20:00 hrs	Caminata Nocturna
24:00 hrs	Espectáculo de Antorchas	21:00 hrs	Baile:
24:30 hrs	Fuegos Pirotécnicos		• La Ley de Tierra Caliente
			• Star Boys
			• Estudio 54
<i>Domingo 27 de julio</i>			
11:00 hrs	Tuning Car		

26 y 27 de julio del 2014

 **EcoAlberto** PARQUE



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 TEL: 01 759 72 77016
 CEL. 771 79 544 56 y 771 24 157 39



Figure 2: Caminata Nocturna, Parque EcoAlberto, screen shot.

the trekking group to be singled out for simulated mistreatment along the path; another, a scary landholder, stops the travelers on the path with a violent peroration in Hñähñú telling them to go home.

Thus, the locals reenact their own personal experiences and represent roles they have lived or seen, including mistreating “migrants” in harsh English or reminding them that this is not their country in Hñähñú. Participants in this “adventure” are most often middle-class Mexicans, but the trek has become increasingly well known internationally, such that many US and European tourists also travel to the park to participate in this touristic experience that measures together hospitality and aggression. The Hñähñú

leaders insist that the project is educational in purpose; it is certainly a novel way for indigenous people to take part in a wider trend of ecotouristic development projects. Like more familiar versions of ecotourism, whether in ayahuasca ceremonies, favela tours, or Zapatista international schools, the feature on offer is often an exoticizing projection of marginalized peoples who engage in selling their identities—and in this case their histories of traumatic border crossings—to tourists by performing as themselves.⁸ In EcoAlberto, however, they are not selling a nostalgic pseudo-initiation into ancient rites, accompanied by folkloric dance and music and sales of local handicrafts, but rather the much more recent knowledge garnered from the harsh experience of migration to the United States. Uncomfortably for mainstream audiences, these people are in fact reminding us that this is the shape that culture is taking for transnational, trilingual, tricultural Indians of the present and the future, whose abilities as culture brokers often vastly outpace those of the more economically privileged classes who participate in these adventures.⁹

At the same time, of course, this is a larp, and if some participants play at border crossing seriously (to borrow from Underiner's title), others are certainly there for the giggles and laughs. If one point of adventure tourism is a test of endurance, this question too is calibrated in the nighttime trek: the EcoAlberto hosts have created versions for less-abled participants, for families with children, for the elderly (Underiner 2011, 18). Underiner's review of participant reports finds that while some people express outrage, and a few take the stated intent seriously, "many, many others—and this includes most newspaper, magazine, and blogging headline writers—cannot resist the Caminata's apparent invitation to irony.... One account included a cartoon that showed a mother and child being pursued by border police—while the father is running backwards so he can videotape the whole thing" (2011, 15). She adds, "Percolating within all these views is a certain unease that the enterprise is bound to be ... an exercise of either bad faith or bad taste, or both" (2011, 16). The uncertainty about bad faith or bad taste, about seriousness or levity with respect to Caminata nocturna, is a familiar (and perhaps desired) outcome of dark tourism in general.¹⁰ Some people consider this kind of immersive experience to be sensationalizing; others see it as a way to perform a kind of micro-witnessing, an embodied way of knowing about the oppression of others (see Magelssen 2011, 175). As Laurie Beth Clark asks, "Why do certain uses of space seem wrong? And when they seem wrong, does that mean they violate our sense of propriety [bad taste] or our sense of ethics [bad faith]?" (2014, 11). Is "wrongness" one of the draws of the experience, that it skirts the question of ethics by displacing it as someone else's bad faith? Paula Rabinowitz, already a generation ago, offered a sobering analysis that answers Clark's question from an unexpected vantage: "the body of the tourist is steeped in violence; its entry into a foreign place a secondary result of imperialism" (Rabinowitz 1994, 178). Whether the response is heavy or light, in either case it is overwritten by a history of privilege.

One of the attractions for the participants, who see themselves as more adventurous than the stereotypical tourist, is precisely the Caminata's appeal to jaded appetites of young people who grew up watching media coverage of border violence, alongside playing video games and rpgs on similar subjects, blurring the boundaries between information and entertainment. Underiner, for instance, talks about the option of electing to be "caught" as a way to drop out of the trek midway, but it is one thing to drop out and another to be caught (by children's grabby hands; seriousness meets levity once again). She also points out

⁸ Other communities that engage in these kinds of interactive projects likewise argue for the benefits of these negotiated experiences. Says one leader from a Brazilian favela: "A presença dos turistas não incomoda de forma alguma. Pode fotografar, filmar, fazer aquilo que deseja. A gente quer saber é quem tem o direito autoral, quem ganha com isso." (The presence of tourists doesn't bother us at all. They can take pictures, do whatever they want. People want to know who has the rights, who profits from this.) Freire-Medeiros (2007) comments: "É impossível negar a relação de iniquidade estabelecida, mas é importante perceber que os favelados não são elementos passivos nesse processo. Muitas vezes, a vitrine se inverte e os moradores lançam seu olhar investigativo aos turistas, fazendo comentários jocosos a seu respeito, criticando o que percebem como posturas intrusivas" (69). (One can't deny the relation with established iniquity, but it is more important to recognize that the favela dwellers are not passive elements in this process. Many times, the tables turn and the dwellers conduct their own research on the tourists, making jokes about them, criticizing what they see as intrusive positions).

⁹ One might argue that the Hñähñú in the "Caminata nocturna" could be seen as instantiating a practical, grassroots project that might well have been lauded by Brazilian modernist Oswald de Andrade, or equally, may have horrified him. Andrade's 1928 "Manifesto antropófago"/"Cannibalist Manifesto" ([1928] 1991) includes a very famous line alluding to a Brazilian indigenous culture: "*Tupi or not Tupi*: that is the question." Yet while Andrade and his fellow anthropophagites defined a new relation of appropriation of Western knowledge for Latin American purposes, and did so using American indigeneity as a conceptual lever, they were themselves from elite backgrounds, highly educated and well read.

¹⁰ See for example Hasian, Maldonado, and Ono (2015), who specifically call EcoAlberto an instance of dark tourism, Freire-Medeiros 2007, and Magelssen 2011. Other tourist adventures of this sort include favela tourism, immersion in fugitive slave scenarios, spending a night in a simulated jail, and so on. Hasian, Maldonado, and Ono's argument, in contrast with Magelssen, is that dark tourism undermines the witnessing project it claims to offer.

the important gender distinctions, marking her own discomfort when she is involuntarily pulled aside on one of the treks for what she can only imagine is a simulated rape, an all-too-common assault suffered by 80 percent of women attempting to cross the border into the United States:¹¹ “A woman was taken off the path and into the bush by one of the guides. On my first trip, I was the woman. Was it my imagination, or did my guide ‘protect’ me a little too amorously? We hid in a narrow space under the branches of a bush, he on top of me, his face close to mine, breathing heavily and whispering in my ear, ‘We must hide, we’re safe here.’ ‘Yes,’ I tried to articulate in my stressed-out Spanish” (Underiner 2011, 27). Underiner might as well be echoing Clifford Geertz’s memorable formulation, “One of the psychological fringe benefits of anthropological research—at least I think it’s a benefit—is that it teaches you how it feels to be thought of as a fool and used as an object, and how to endure it” (Geertz 2000, 30).

Notably, whether that experience comes from first-person shooters or politically correct rpgs like “Immigration Simulation,” the inflexible structures of the game avatars are remarkably similar. The simulated border-crossing trek, to satisfy its customers, must include a set of now clichéd and immediately recognizable referents, a performative trajectory created in the real or imagined negotiations between tourist expectations and indigenous knowledge. The EcoAlberto hosts are thus performing a perfectly legible set of roles, deeply inscribed in these mainstream histories, albeit re-creating/re-enacting these roles from their own bodily experiences rather than the mediated ones that define the backgrounds of their guests.

One form of levity in *Caminata nocturna* is certainly located in the wisecracks Underiner mentions, by the young men who make no pretense of entering fully into the game (2011, 23). I have no basis for judging the affect or intentions of either these young tourists, nor that of their hosts in the trek. Nor do I propose that the Hñähñú have consciously elaborated a theoretical underpinning to their practice (although they may have). From it, however, we can adduce a theoretical affiliation with the *vacilón* and think more broadly about how their practice helps to articulate a discussion of the topic in a way that recognizes the applied theoretical aspects of their work.

I also find it interesting that dark touristic adventures like the *Caminata nocturna* seem to generate conflicting experiences, often flipping between levity and gravity, and distilled in the kind of uneasiness of online reports that are likewise uncertain whether to settle on one side or the other. This uneasiness may be projected back onto the organizers—their bad faith or bad taste—but also refracted in the recognition of “an invitation to irony,” a shared emotion. And, of course, this interactive performance, this larp, necessarily includes the realization that despite the fact that we have paid for this experience, someone else is laughing at us.

Yoshua Okón’s Reenactments

Yoshua Okón’s reenactment dramas *Pulpo* (2011) and *Oracle* (2015) are related thematically with their focus on Guatemalan migration to the United States as a direct result of US military action through the CIA at the instances of the United Fruit Company. These are very grave issues of tremendous current relevance, yet the videos themselves make many viewers uneasy, to go by online reports, because of performative markers that seem to signal levity. *Pulpo* focuses on scripted and choreographed reenactments of Guatemalan civil war violence, filmed in a Los Angeles Home Depot parking lot, where the participants are immigrant day laborers from that country, some of whom Okón admittedly had hired in the past for one of his construction projects and who testified to him about their experience in the civil war. The only voices in the piece come from the Guatemalans themselves and are spoken in Quiché, with the exception of the repeated words “Casa Blanca” (White House) in Spanish. The sequel, *Oracle*, was inspired by the July 2014 demonstrations in Oracle, Arizona, against that summer’s massive influx of undocumented minors attempting to immigrate from Central America. For this film, local Arizonans reenacted their protest, again scripted by Okón and taking on an air of something between documentary and fiction. Much more overtly than in *Pulpo*, in this later film the voices of the protestors, in English, accompanied by gunshots, make clear their violent opposition to these young people, while nine young would-be immigrants sing, in Spanish, a version of the Marine Hymn, “From the Halls of Montezuma,” naming the United Fruit Company and the CIA as the parties responsible for the violence that afflicts Guatemala.

¹¹ See Goldberg 2014, referencing a PEW study. For a different take on the real violence against women experienced in the US-Mexico border crossing, one could also reference the performance art piece by Xandra Ibarra (La Chica Boom), in which she plays a border crosser who is forced to submit to the sexual advances of a border guard (played by Chippewa performer Sheu Sheu leHaure) before being allowed, provisionally, to cross the threshold into the United States. See Rodríguez 2014 for a superb reading of this burlesque performance.

From my perspective, these two pieces are complemented by Okón's earlier *Coyotería* (2003), a reenactment of Joseph Beuys's "I Like America and America Likes Me" installation, in which Beuys, on his first visit to the United States, went directly to the performance site from the airport in order to spend three days swathed in pieces of felt in a gallery room accompanied by a wild coyote, as a protest against the Vietnam War and a way to contact the deep, shamanic spirit of the continent. Beuys's only interaction with anything American in the visit was with the coyote, and after the sparsely attended show he was whisked back to the airport for an immediate departure. Okón's version plays off the native American trickster image of the coyote as well as the Mexican term for someone who facilitates border crossers on their path to the United States, not always benignly, by replacing the coyote in the original performance with a man playing a coyote.¹² The thematic link among the three pieces is, of course, the question of immigration.

In all three cases, the form of these videos/performances speaks to the interaction of the performer and the artist in developing this project, the role of improvisation and chance, as well as the centrality of scripted material drawing from testimony to serve as a basis for formal reenactment. In each case, the insistence on reenactment (rather than, say, hiring actors to play the scripted roles) anchors the work to a kind of reality, a strategically invented authenticity or "truthiness"—to use Stephen Colbert's famous neologism—that highlights the tension between fiction and documentary material. The audience has a stake in this interactive project as well. In a 2010 book about Okón, among the authors of the short essays accompanying Okón's background material on his work, two apparently contradictory positions chase each other in text: "Nosotros, los espectadores, somos protagonistas" says Juan Carlos Reyna, while Luis Muñoz Oliveira writes that we are "hipnotizados frente a la verdad." (We spectators are all protagonists ... we are hypnotized by truth.)

These are, of course, serious issues. Yet audience members, whether considered as protagonists of the installation or stupefied onlookers, are, it seems, expected to laugh. In his short essay on the Hammer Museum page for *Pulpo*, John C. Welchman (2008) states that "Okón has maneuvered his remake into a signifying space that is at once more ironic, more humorous, and more absurd, though not for all this any less telling." Okón adds, speaking about the same piece: "Once you kind of find yourself laughing at something that's uncomfortable, automatically it implicates you. It does not leave you a way out anymore. You are already part of what you are watching." Through humor, these stylized reenactments must be taken seriously and refuse seriousness. The elegant choreography, sharp cutting, and crisp editing of the videos propel these materials into a poetic frame (what Welchman calls the ironic/absurd signifying space) that poses a challenge to traditional forms of transmitting history, while also ironizing historical narrative as a cultural project.

In what follows, I do not want to talk about the grave issues Okón addresses (something that has been more fully and powerfully addressed by other scholars¹³), but rather this question of the uncomfortable and abrupt switch from gravity to levity that marks the vacilón. Who is the "you" implicated in the performance that Okón refers to when he says "you kind of find yourself laughing"? Who is included in the laughter and how do we know this "you" is laughing at something rather than being laughed at?

Each of these pieces has a concrete, if somewhat obscure, historical referent, a visual intersectionality evident in Okón's published background materials on his work and evident in his storyboards, but perhaps less likely to be immediately identified in the performance itself. These citational images point to the imagined viewer of these works, defining a specific national and cultural identity as the target of the material and the butt of the joke, the audience who is also implicated as the "you" who laughs. In *Pulpo*, the referent is the painting, familiar to US schoolchildren in mainstream educational programs but perhaps not to other populations, *Washington Crossing the Delaware*. **Figure 3** shows the storyboard image, as reproduced in Okón's book/catalogue on that project.

The original image (**Figure 4**) was not contemporaneous with George Washington but in fact comes trailing a history of its own of reproduction and reenactment. German-American immigrant Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze was living in Düsseldorf at the time and used American tourists and art students in that city as models for the painting, which he completed in 1850. The original was destroyed in a British air raid during World War II, but Leutze had providently made two other versions, both of which are currently

¹² One curator, in a brief note, says that Okón hired a man who had worked as a coyote to play this role (Arozqueta 2007), something that would be consistent with his practice in other projects. However, the coyote is both anonymous and his background unmentioned in other descriptions of the project, including Okón's website. The man in the blanket playing the Beuys role is Okón himself.

¹³ For example, in essays in the Okón books, interviews on numerous websites, and academic articles by Samuel Steinberg (2013) and Christopher Goodson (2013).

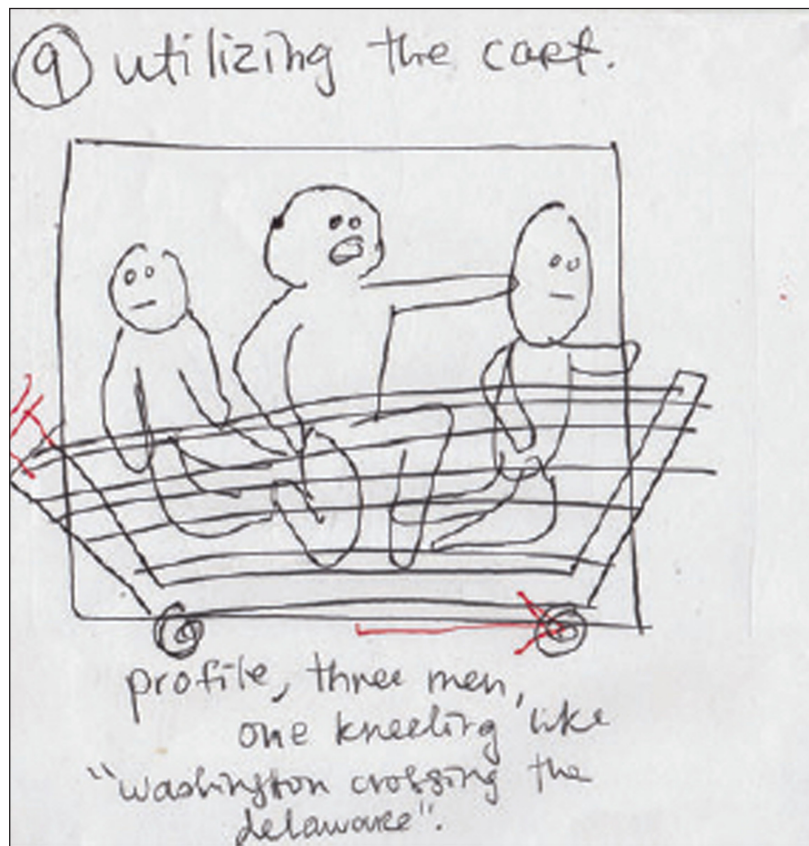


Figure 3: Yoshua Okón, *Pulpo/Octopus* (2011), storyboard.



Figure 4: Emanuel Leutze, *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (1851), referencing December 25–26, 1776.

located in the United States. Thus the famous painting was staged in another country as a reenactment, and the version we see is not the original. While the painting is iconic and greatly admired, every schoolchild knows two things about it: (1) you should never stand up in a rowboat, much less in bad weather, and (2) the flag proudly flying behind Washington did not exist in 1776. **Figure 5** shows the closest approximation, as nearly as I can tell, to Okón's storyboarded image in the online version of the four-channel video.

Unlike the mostly silent *Pulpo*, where the voices of the participants come in only at two brief points in the film, and are in untranslated Quiché, in *Oracle* people talk far too much, too violently. For the most part, in the online video excerpts of the project, we are afflicted with the voices of virulent anti-immigrant white men, counterposed with the ironic Spanish version of the "Marine Hymn," where English surtitles are

provided to make sure we get the message. The young immigrants sing: “De los palacios de Moctezuma, a las junglas de Ixcan, invaden a países destruyen el tejido social. La United Fruit Company y la CIA invadieron a Guatemala y por eso estamos aquí.” (From the halls of Moctezuma to the jungle of Ixcan, they invade countries, destroying the social fabric. The United Fruit Company and the CIA invaded Guatemala and that’s why we are here.)

One of the longer silent sequences in this film clip is a 1 minute, 17 second sequence with only ambient noise, in which three men climb a rocky outcrop and plant a US flag, ending with them standing to salute it. It is inevitable that a US mainstream citizen would immediately recognize the reference to the famous photograph “Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima,” and indeed, even more than the reenactment in the film, Okón’s storyboard (**Figure 6**) points to what is probably the best-known patriotic photograph in US history.

There were two flag raisings on Mount Suribachi in Iwo Jima in February 1945. After the first, smaller flag was deemed insufficient, Colonel Chandler Johnson ordered a soldier to replace it with a larger flag, and that was the image captured in Joe Rosenthal’s famous photograph. Thus, the most famous flag-raising image was not the original but the second flag, although in the course of history, the first flag raising has come to seem a belated curiosity of secondary interest. The pathos of this difficult battle is part of the folk history, as is the bravery of the soldiers under fire. Yet, although the battle was eventually fatal for three of the six men pictured, at the actual time of the second flag raising they were not fired on even once. Additionally, for many years controversy swirled around the iconic image, based on rumors that it was a staged event, reenacted for the camera. While these rumors were dispelled by official government film footage of the battle and the flag raisings, the story remains as part of the lore around the photograph.¹⁴



Figure 5: Yoshua Okón, *Pulpo/Octopus* (2011), Washington screen shot.



Figure 6: Yoshua Okón, *Oracle* (2015), storyboard.

¹⁴ See, for example, “Joe Rosenthal and the Flag-Raising on Iwo Jima,” The Pulitzer Prizes, <http://www.pulitzer.org/article/joe-rosenthal-and-flag-raising-iwo-jima>.

Pima County, Arizona, where Okón filmed his project, is also a battlefield. The online excerpts from the video begin with gunshots; guns and shell casings are central images for the video. The immigrant boys sing a version of a US military hymn, and they are fleeing the ongoing violence that is the sequela of US-sponsored civil war in their country. Furthermore, according to Matthew Grumbach (2015), the Arizona desert itself is a kind of silent military asset: “The unforgiving southern Arizona terrain is where migrants often succumb to ‘silent deaths’ crossing the border, due to dehydration and exposure to the desert heat. Oracle is located about 40 miles northeast of the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner in Tucson, which oversees one of the largest repositories of undocumented border crosser remains in the U.S., receiving over 2,330 recovered remains since 2001.” **Figure 7** shows a screen shot of the Arizona flag raising by members of the Arizona Border Protectors, taken from the online video of *Oracle*.

Interestingly enough, for each of these linked projects, Okón chooses one of the most iconic patriotic images in the US military history repertoire as an anchoring subtext, both featuring the flag, and both trailing their own production histories of reenactment, restaging, reproduction, and reinvention. If the irony is apparent at one level—that is, in the performances of hypermasculinity familiar from militaristic patriotism, whether in Guatemala or the United States—on the other hand, the absurdity highlighted in the scripting and choreography tell us that this is *puro vacilón*, and on the third hand (Why not three? Or five?), mainstream US viewers are implicated as the explicit butt of the jokes they are uncomfortably laughing at, by which others with whom we may find very little fellow feeling are interpolated into our most “sacred” spaces. This is even more true for the typical/stereotypical consumer of contemporary art like Okón’s, who we can expect belongs to the snobby elite of people who find consumption of such materials intellectually or otherwise satisfying, and who often have snide things to say about the US mainstream and about jingoistic appreciations of military might, even though we belong to it.

Finally, the earlier performance project, *Coyotería*, is documented in photographs on Okón’s website as well as a two-minute video on his Vimeo channel (the full loop is seventeen minutes long) and represents an earlier meditation on the issue of immigration to the United States. In the video clip, a growling, howling man in a suit wanders around the performance space on all fours, eventually (reenacting Beuys’s coyote), urinating on a pile of TV guides, to muted sounds of surprise/disgust by unseen audience members (**Figure 8**). The source text is a three-day performance by German artist Joseph Beuys in New York in 1974 (see **Figure 9**). To this day Beuys is generally loved or hated; reviewers seldom fall between the extremes of seeing his work either as a brilliant expression of faith in the therapeutic value of art in this soulless contemporary time when life is stripped of value, or alternatively, as a ridiculous spectacle, a complete sham.

Okón takes this controversial figure and, in the reenactment, shifts the questioning of a contemporary value register up a notch. If Beuys can be read as mysterious and shamanic (albeit potentially guilty of animal abuse in some viewers’ eyes), *Coyotería* reads as more evidently absurd, with its TV guides and synthetic blanket, its playacting man in a suit, replacing the *Wall Street Journal* issues, baffling felt wrappings, and a wild coyote brought into the gallery to wander for three days, innocently performing the natural functions of any animal. Here, even more straightforwardly than in the other two films, Okón directly confronts the



Figure 7: Yoshua Okón, *Oracle* (2015), Iwo Jima screen shot.



Figure 8: Yoshua Okón, *Coyotería* (2003), still image.



Figure 9: Joseph Beuys, *I Like America and America Likes Me* (May 1974).

US reception of artists like him, who come from outside the United States, and purport to tell us something about ourselves. In this sense, Beuys's goal, as stated in the title, is less ambitious than Okón's: a reciprocal exchange of good feeling—the banality of “I like America and America likes me.” While it is evident that Beuys's title hid a more serious program concerning the value of art and the role of the artist in political protest, as filtered through the interaction with a native American figure of spirituality, Okón's reenactment had to do with very unspiritual modern version of the coyote, the “man who is hired to ‘get things done’ at a price” (Okón website).¹⁵ Love him or hate him, Beuys was serious about his work. In contrast, the trickster Yoshua Okón constantly skirts/flirts with the “potentially silly, trivializing and embarrassing,” as Steinberg notes (2013, 614). I see it as a self-evident *rascuache* camouflage, in the sense that soldiers wear camouflage to infiltrate enemy positions.

If Okón is flipping the expectations about performative perspective and its others (privileging Guatemalan men of indigenous extraction in *Pulpo*, showing us the faces of white, male Oracle protestors and the backs

¹⁵ <http://www.yoshuaokon.com>.

of teenage Guatemalan boys in the later film), it is clear in both cases that the principal target (of attack) in these films is a mainstream audience that will in fact never see the videos,¹⁶ an audience that also includes Okón himself, in complicated ways. Not only is Okón a representative of the privileged mainstream by way of cultural capital like excellent English and international credentials along with his access to technology, he is also in contrast, inevitably, drawn into the US and Latin American political/social discourses that line him up with the invisibilized and abjected immigrant. In the perceptive realization of Sandra Cisneros's main character in "Never Marry a Mexican" (1991), the unlikeable protagonist who has been privileging relationships with white men over her macho male counterparts, only to find herself, once again, betrayed by them, she is the Mexican that mainstream men have been avoiding marrying. In a like manner, Okón, who ideologically positions himself as the implicit ally of the Guatemalans in these films, is also other to them, the butt of their jokes, while at the same time he is in *Oracle* the target of racist comments like those expressed by the Oracle anti-immigration protestors against people from his home country of Mexico.

One of the questions people frequently ask about Joshua Oppenheimer's astounding 2012 documentary on the Indonesian death squads of 1965–1966, *The Act of Killing*, is how he can take such a serious issue so lightly by allowing murderers to reenact their mass killings, and moreover to do so in tacky Hollywood rip-offs. While the stakes are different, similar questions arise in the two different kinds of interactive projects surveyed here, projects that also include violence, a high death toll, and reenactment. While the Hñähñú community inhabit a world with social and political capital vastly different from that of a recognized international artist like Joshua Okón, both help us think about the shift between levity and gravity in different performance spheres. While there is much more to say about them, I find all of them immensely challenging in the way they interact with/engage/insult their target audiences in ways that cross borders from South to North and question northern aesthetic practices and ethical presumptions. Northern theory doesn't grapple very well with the need to meet southern knowledge or the fact that the South knows more about us (our border patrol practices, our patriotic hymns, our iconic images) than we know about them. Where we in the North think we are most serious and grave, suddenly we recognize our theory has holes. This brings us, finally, to anthropologist Quetzil Castañeda (1996) and his theoretical vacilón. Castañeda asks his readers to imagine "the invention of Culture whether locally or globally as if it were Coca-cola," what he calls "the Coke theory of culture," that is as "a heterogeneous entity constituted in and through the contested crisscrossings of borrowings across boundaries forged by such transcultural traffic" (1996, 37). Castañeda pairs his Coke theory of culture with what he calls the "ethics of the doughnut hole"—surely a perfect nutritional complement (26). It is equally unhealthy, both fatty and sweet, and the combination of Coke and doughnuts is provocatively transnational, balanced between absence and presence, gravity and levity. Puro vacilón, ese. I'll take mine with rainbow sprinkles.

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¹⁶ There would be a completely different argument to be made about another set of spectators to these performance pieces, the variety of bystanders for *Pulpo* ranging from other day laborers, to customers wandering through the parking lot on their way to do their shopping at the Home Depot, to the vendors selling tacos and tamales that surely accompany all sites where day laborers congregate. Unfortunately, that analysis is far beyond the scope of this inquiry. Okón does comment in the materials on *Pulpo* that other men asked to join the project but that he limited it to Guatemalans.

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