

## Borderline Technologies: “Bear Life” and Cyborg Theatre in the Work of Alejandro Ricaño

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Alejandro Ricaño’s play *Timboctou* (2009) begins as a pair of twin brothers are ambushed while they sit in their car and discuss the complexities of global warming. This scene is especially poignant in the performance(s) that Martín Acosta directed with the CalArts center. Here the tech crew projects the pixelated image of a homeless polar bear on a screen at the back of the stage while an actor interprets his character’s death. In another play, *Más pequeños que el Guggenheim* (2007), a diabetic man’s blood sugar drops dangerously low. His friend runs to buy him something sweet, but he forgets what he is doing when he sees the vending machine’s electronic arm. These two scenes speak to the need to reconceptualize the place of humanity in the hyper-technological world of late capitalism. The scene from *Timboctou* draws implicit parallels between human life—particularly that of the so-called “Third World”—and animal life, while the one from *Guggenheim* places the human in tension with machines. As these plays blur the distinctions between humanity, animals, and machines, they invite us to conceive contemporary biopolitics through the lens of cyborg theory. Both plays discuss very different aspects of contemporary Mexico; nevertheless, each one engages and critiques an international order that favors the technologically advanced countries of the developed world over those of the developing world. Within these plays, the technological and economic practices of the Global North transform countries like Mexico into violent states of exception that strip people of their human rights. Resistance at a macro-level proves impossible; nevertheless, Ricaño shows that individuals can and do resist as they ignore those ideologies that relegate them to the periphery.

Each of the aforementioned scenes alludes to the idea that access to technology—or the lack thereof—defines a person’s privilege in the (inter)

national arena. As such, they allude to what David S. Dalton calls *robo sacer* subjectivity (“Robo Sacer” 16-17), a term that fuses Agambian biopolitics with cyborg theory. For Giorgio Agamben, contemporary biopolitical states divide society into two groups: *bios*, those people who enjoy fully human, “good” lives, and *zoê*, those people who lead “bare” lives. By signaling certain lives as less than human, the state makes it possible to code certain people as *homo sacer* subjects: human beings who, according to Agamben, “may be killed and yet not sacrificed” (*Homo Sacer* 12); the theorist distinguishes between killing (the act of taking any life) from murder (the act of taking *human* life). Because the state dehumanizes the *zoê*, *homo sacer* deaths do not register as human losses. The theorist further asserts that the state transforms the *zoê* into *homines sacri* (the plural of *homo sacer*) through institutionalized states of exception (or emergency), which he defines as the “no-man’s land between public law and political fact, and between the juridical order and social life” (*State of Exception* 1). Armín Gómez Barrios alludes to the fact that the physical borders between Mexico and the developed world function as key states of exception in Ricaño’s theatre when he calls them a “land of no one” where might—rather than morality or even the law—makes right (xxiv). His assertion fits within the thought of critics like Abraham Acosta, who asserts that the border “is neither inside nor outside the juridical order, neither inside or outside the sovereign claims of Mexico or the United States, but instead a doubly constituted state of exception existing between both” (227; see also Rosas 336-42). Rather than view the border as a line separating Mexico from the US, however, Ricaño posits it as the interconnections of Mexico with countries throughout the world. Thus the frontiers between Mexico and Guatemala, or even Spain or Norway can be just as problematic as that between Mexico and the US.

Of equal importance to the physical border(s) is the parallel technological state of exception that, while apparently omnipresent, favors those individuals living in the developed world. As such, Ricaño’s depiction fits within Dalton’s *robo sacer* paradigm, where the developed world views its technological monopoly “as an institutionalized, yet precarious, state of exception that must be defended at all costs” (“Robo Sacer” 16). Mexico’s supposed technological deficit to the West plays as much of a role in dehumanizing Ricaño’s characters as does their physical presence on—or origin from—the wrong side of a given border. That said, Ricaño’s work differs from Dalton’s *robo sacer* paradigm because, rather than turn to a subversive use of technology to undermine the political status quo, the playwright simply implores

his audience to ignore and delegitimize those discourses that relegate them to the periphery. Ricaño's solution may not portend any dramatic changes in the social and legal conditions that interpellate so many Mexican citizens into *zoê* and *homo sacer* status, but he does provide insights for how individuals can lead meaningful lives by overcoming the dehumanizing beliefs that pervade society.

Ricaño's focus on the technological divide between North and South places him in dialogue with Donna Haraway, Chela Sandoval, and other theorists who view cyborg subjectivity as a means for resistance. For Haraway, cyborg subjectivity depends on a paradigm shift in our understanding of how humanity views its interactions with the world at large. On the one hand, advances in biology have identified no essential characteristics that separate humans from animals (151); rather, they have largely served to signal *homo sapiens* as one of many animal species. On the other hand, advances in engineering and technoscience have highlighted the similarities between humans and machines to the point that terms like "body machine" now flood the popular vocabulary (152). The central tenet of posthuman and cyborg theory is the deconstruction of binaries like human/animal and human (or animal)/machine. While most cyborg theorists focus on the fusion of the body with technology, Sandoval uses the term as a metaphor for resistant hybridities of many sorts that create "joint kinship" and cross-class alliances that would be impossible under other circumstances (20). Cyborg identity becomes less of an invocation of techno-science and more of a "methodology" that oppressed individuals can employ to resist "the harsh cyberspace of computer and even social life under conditions of globalization" (176). This quote makes the posthuman discourse of Ricaño's *oeuvre* significantly more visible, especially given that one of the hallmarks of his theatre is a minimal set that lacks the resources to showcase elaborate fusions between flesh and metal. Similar to Sandoval's work, the focus of Ricaño's theatre is not technological advancement per se, but rather the ways that the oppressed can articulate a meaningful life in a world that shuns them. As Ricaño employs theatrical devices that deconstruct the divisions between human/animal/machine, he creates a ripe atmosphere for challenging the dehumanizing effects of globalization.

As he engages technology, Ricaño's work becomes a form of cyborg theatre, a term that emphasizes the combination of—and interplay between—bodies and technology on the stage (Parker-Starbuck 4-11). In her defense of her use of this term, Jennifer Parker-Starbuck states that "other terms—technological theatre, live media, digital performance, virtual theatre,

intermedial performance, and mixed-media performance—while useful catch-all phrases, do not as specifically address the interdependence between the live and the technological that the concept of cyborg does” (6). Her assertion applies especially well to Ricaño’s theatre, where the focus is precisely on how the convergence between the organic and the inorganic helps us understand oppressive constructs of power throughout the world. Similar to most theorists of posthumanism, Parker-Starbuck argues that cyborg subjectivity provides an excellent site for denaturalizing oppressive constructs of the body, particularly as they apply to gender (1-4). The critic’s contribution to both cyborg theory and theatre studies is undeniable; as she brings these two disciplines into conversation, she comes up with new ways to understand both cyborg subjectivity and multimedia performance. That said, because she focuses primarily on the US, she remains largely silent on how theatre from the developing world can use technological discourses to challenge globalized structures of power. One of my aims in writing this article is to build on Parker-Starbuck’s work while discussing how the concept of cyborg theatre evolves in Mexican and Latin American contexts.

J. Andrew Brown has argued convincingly that the Latin American cyborg body often differs from those technological hybrids articulated in Western Europe and North America; indeed, the region’s literary and cultural production tends to put “cybernetic bodies and technological identity at the sociopolitical intersection of military dictatorship and neoliberal policy” (2). Mexico has not endured a military dictatorship on par with that of the Southern Cone (the region to which this quote most directly applies), but its dirty war is the result of political actors who have responded violently to drug trafficking. As such, it should come as no surprise that Ricaño’s cyborg theatre would engage with this aspect of the Mexican experience. The playwright’s work provides an interesting venue from which to observe the convergences between the thought of Brown and Parker-Starbuck. Rather than simply view the technologized body as a site for resisting oppressive interpellations of the body, the playwright posits technological imbalances as oppressive states of exception in and of themselves. Both plays represent different forms of cyborg theatre: *Timboctou*, particularly the CalArts production (directed by Martín Acosta), is a traditional multimedia performance where live actors and digital projections play alongside one another, thus creating the explicit juxtaposition of bodies and technology so central to Parker-Starbuck’s understanding of the term. *Guggenheim*, however, employs minimal props, no projections, and only simple lighting. The relationship between individuals

and technology is even more important in this latter play because the playwright constantly places his characters' disabled bodies alongside (mostly imagined) machines. In both plays, the juxtaposition of digital/mechanical and physical bodies creates opportunities to criticize the negative effects of globalization. What is more, because the multimedia, cyborg elements of these performances generally break the fourth wall, they distance their audience from the performance and invite a more critical viewing/reading.

### ***Timboctou*: Multimedia Performance and the Deconstruction of the Human/Animal Binary**

Ricaño juxtaposes humans with animals (and machines) in *Timboctou*—a show that exposes conditions both within and outside of Mexico that have contributed to the so-called Drug War—in order to challenge constructs of *zoé* and expendable life. The playwright recognizes that, perhaps due to his treatment of such dark subject matter, he has received more negative press for this play than any other (Bixler and Morris 150), but he also defends his decision to write about subjects—particularly the drug trade—that have terrorized his home town of Xalapa for so many years (López García). The play employs a disjointed narrative structure that begins with the ambush of two twins, Dany and Chucho, as they deposit several corpses outside a Tijuana McDonalds. Chucho dies and Dany becomes delirious. Several seemingly unrelated flashbacks relate a series of events that ultimately connect very different characters through the murder that marks the beginning of the play. Upon first glance, *Timboctou* fits in a tradition of narco literature that has grown in popularity in recent years. Gómez Barrios notes several similarities between this play and popular narconarratives when he says, “el humor y el lenguaje soez [...] disuelven la perspectiva documental del teatro de frontera y convierten a *Timboctou* en una obra lúdica, *sui generis*, más próxima a la novela policiaca y a la farsa de humor negro que al teatro de denuncia” (xx-viii). Nevertheless, Ricaño’s creative juxtaposition of bodies with technology allows him to build on the popular genre while at the same time subverting the tendencies that have traditionally led it to favor commercialization over political commentary.<sup>1</sup> The performance thus creates distancing effects that shift the focus away from any one individual and encourages viewers to consider the systemic factors that have created the drug conflict.

As the curtain rises, an off-stage voice—either a prerecording or a live reading into a microphone—states, “*Tijuana. Cuarenta grados. Separados en bolsas de plástico, los gemelos llevan en la cajuela del auto los cuerpos*

*destazados de tres militares y un abogado*” (115). This opening sequence both emphasizes the multimedia nature of the performance and draws attention to Ricaño’s aesthetic interest in narratology, a trait that Rocio Galicia has noted among many contemporary Mexican playwrights (103-08). As Galicia explains, most of the new generation of Mexican playwrights has read Hans-Thies Lehmann, a German critic whose *Postdramatic Theatre* (1999) revolutionized how people assess the interplay between drama and narration on the contemporary stage. According to Lehmann, “while epic theatre changes the representation of the fictive events represented, distancing the spectators in order to turn them into assessors, experts and political judges, the post-epic forms of narration are about the foregrounding of the personal, not the demonstrating presence of the narrator, about the self-referential intensity of this contact: about the closeness within distance, not the distancing of that which is close” (110). Lehmann thus suggests that narration undermines the potential for a performance to become political in a Brechtian sense. Ricaño challenges such an assertion because his off-stage narrator reinforces the distancing potential already inherent to this multimedia performance. The narration forces the audience to contemplate the staged nature of the performance, and this further encourages political retrospection. This holds particularly true in the aforementioned scene, wherein the audience has to listen to the off-stage dialogue in order to understand the staged choreographies. The CalArts performances of *Timboctou* do not include dismembered bodies, for example; rather, the audience learns of Dany and Chucho’s cargo through the narrator. The spectators thus depend on a combination of narration and performance to understand the actions on stage, a fact that both emphasizes the staged nature of the play and serves to distance the viewers (thus inviting a critical read).

The invisibility of the dead bodies also undermines official discourses that frame narcotics violence as a moral—rather than economic—issue. As Oswaldo Zavala argues, most contemporary narco-literature depoliticizes drug violence by emphasizing the desecration of the bodies of cartel victims (45). Such a focus elides the economic forces that have created the conditions necessary for the illicit drug trade to exist by accentuating the supposed barbarity of drug traffickers. By removing the mutilated corpses from the audience’s view, Ricaño draws the focus away from the victims and instead directs our attention to his flawed narco protagonists who are themselves mere pawns in an exploitative transnational economy. The distancing techniques of the performance augment Ricaño’s critique. The narration at the beginning

indicates that they are in a car, for example. Nevertheless, due to the minimal props, no such vehicle appears on stage; instead, the twins simulate the act of driving by moving forward and backward and constantly crisscrossing each other. As part of the choreography, the actors frequently yell to a person who is standing behind (or in front of) them. Ruth Hellier-Tinoco notes that the confluence of narration and choreography invites a multiplicity of at-times contradictory readings (293). For example, the audience knows that Dany and Chucho are murderers because the off-stage narrator has made this point clear. Nevertheless, the twins' ridiculous choreographies elicit laughter more than fear, and the ensuing dialogue emphasizes how economic factors beyond their control have forced them into this life.<sup>2</sup>

Many critics have noted that narco literature propagandizes—and even legitimizes—narco culture in general (R. Acosta 83; Volpi 186-87). Ricaño avoids mythifying his narco protagonists by highlighting their incompetence. As Gómez Barrios notes, “no se trata de asesinos malvados, sino de tipos ingenuos cuyo diálogo adquiere humor involuntario” (xxii). This becomes especially clear when the two disagree on the correct spelling of the verb *saber* while writing an intimidating message to would-be government officials who dare oppose them. They call the head *capo*, who assures them that it is spelled with an *s* and a *v* (121). This scene exposes not only Chucho and Dany's illiteracy (Santamaría 40), but also that of their boss. Ricaño makes the audience sympathize with his protagonists by emphasizing their lack of intelligence and formal knowledge. As the brothers sit in their car in the forty-degree (Celsius) heat and complain about their misfortunes, Chucho says, “Es por el calentamiento global, Dany [...] A los osos polares se los está llevando la verga” (115). While clearly a *non sequitur*, Chucho's statement resonates within the posthuman context from which Ricaño denounces the dehumanizing effects of unfettered globalization. The physicality of the technologized state of exception rings clear as globalized economic interests code animal and (third-world) human lives as *zoê* when they appear on the wrong side of the proper border(s). Ricaño emphasizes the fraternity between polar bears and the twins after Chucho's murder when the off-stage narrator states that Dany “*pensaba en los osos polares. Se veía a sí mismo nadando en el polo norte hacia una superficie de hielo cada vez más lejana*” (121). The pixelated image of a computer-animated polar bear swimming across the screen at the back of the stage serves as an especially poignant assertion of the shared plight of bear and human lives.

On the one hand, the twins' juxtaposition with polar bears fits within Juan Villoro's observation that the narco is generally depicted as "el villano apocalíptico que carece de humanidad alguna" (39). On the other hand, the cyborg nature of the performance denaturalizes such an assertion and instead asserts an undeniable *bios* for the bears and the brothers. As Parker-Starbuck argues, "if lives [read: *bios*] can encompass non-humans, a space is open for bodies of animals, of hybrids, of intelligent machines" (10). By denaturalizing the supposed supremacy of the human within the hierarchy of living organisms, the performance invites the audience to find similarities between the narco twins and the polar bears that they discuss. Perhaps the most obvious similarity between them is that both are victims of a globalized society that ignores their struggles and suffering. The polar bear's plight is directly related to global warming, a classic example of what economists call the "Tragedy of the Commons" (E. Brown 391-408). Major polluters from the Global North generally fail to consider how their actions affect communities and countries—like Mexico—that lie beyond their borders.<sup>3</sup> Polar bear well-being receives very little attention during public policy debates because these animals' predicament exists outside the experience of the main consumers of petroleum. The twins' invocation of global warming highlights their helpless position in the drug war, which results primarily from Puritanical approaches to healthcare and criminality in the US (Volpi 129; Fernández Menéndez and Roquillo 191-202). The fact that Drug War discourse in the US almost never acknowledges the human toll in Latin America signals people like Chucho and Dany as *homines sacri* who lead expendable lives due to their geographic location and their distance from the global center. It would be a stretch to argue that US policy aims to proactively kill Mexicans (and Latin Americans), but, similar to the polar bears, these people's well-being figures very low when establishing national priorities.

This backdrop provides a greater context for Chucho's ruminations about the miserableness of bear (and bare) life. Moments before his death he says, "Lo vi en la televisión. Está jodida la vida de los osos polares. Cuando cogen con las osas, por ejemplo, se les rompe su salchicha. Siempre" (115). Chucho's words sound like the ramblings of someone who has watched (and misunderstood) too many nature shows. Global warming has indeed impacted polar bear reproduction negatively (Hunter et al. 2884), but this has been the result of reductions in sea ice, not deformed male genitalia. Chucho's misrepresentation of the facts is especially effective at a theatrical level because it is just right enough to establish a camaraderie between himself and the victims of the



arctic while at the same time provoking laughter from the audience. Indeed, the combination of morbid subject matter and comedy in this scene—and indeed, throughout the play—attests to Ricaño’s penchant for dark humor, a trait that numerous critics have signaled as a defining element of his work (Bixler and Morris 147-53; Santamaría 40-41). It is impossible to discuss his understanding of resistance to the technologized state of exception without considering the role of comedy in his work. Jacqueline E. Bixler argues that, for Ricaño, “la risa no es sólo un alivio momentáneo, sino un arma en una guerra que ha resistido la razón y la cordura” (xii). Ricaño’s use of humor often becomes a discursive tool that directly challenges the reigning (bio) politics. At the same time, his jokes often come across as offensive because they depend on suppositions that limit their resistant potential. Speaking on comedy in contemporary Mexican theatre, Stuart A. Day asserts “an indistinct line between humor as a tool for political change and humor as a means to release steam and thus to deflate any revolutionary tendencies a spectator might have” (*Staging* 33). Because Ricaño articulates his theatre precisely from this juncture, his plays represent a form of “resistance-lite” that toes the line between political and cathartic theatres.

### **Disabled Machines in *Más pequeños que el Guggenheim***

This is not to say that Ricaño never discusses strategies for coping—and thriving—in a world of rampant globalization. Indeed, his play *Más pequeños que el Guggenheim* questions how people from Mexico can resist dehumanizing discourses that relegate them to the international periphery. Loosely based on the lives of the author and the play’s original actors—all of whom struggled (at first) to make a career in the theatre (Serrano and Gutiérrez Ortiz Monasterio 2009; 2010)—the play documents a series of setbacks faced by an aspiring playwright, Gorka, and his actor friend, Sunday. Unlike the protagonists of *Guggenheim*, Ricaño has enjoyed a great deal of success and cemented his place in the Mexican theatre scene; indeed, *Guggenheim* is the most successful independent play in Mexico’s recent memory (Vázquez Touriño 113-14). Given the play’s “optimistic cynicism” (Day, *Outside Theater* 168), it should come as no surprise that the resistance it prescribes is relatively limited in scope. Rather than advocate a revolutionary order, Ricaño simply suggests that people live their lives as they see fit without paying attention to those oppressive constructs—both global and national—that would bring them down.

Similar to *Timboctou*, *Guggenheim* depicts the border (broadly defined) as a chafing state of exception that marginalizes people of Mexican descent to the periphery. Sunday and Gorka realize their insignificance while traveling in Spain, where they face hardships like extreme poverty and medical emergencies. Unlike their counterparts in *Timboctou*, the duo in this play can enter and leave Mexico with (relative) ease. Nevertheless, this increased mobility does not equate with acceptance in the global community. Throughout the play their status as third-world citizens marks them as Other. As Daniel Vázquez Touriño notes:

[E]l teatro de Ricaño [. . .] no refleja la opresión ya ‘clásica’ de un Estado-nación oligárquico sobre sus ciudadanos más desfavorecidos; más bien estamos ante un ejemplo brillante del fenómeno descrito por Zygmunt Bauman como la ‘actitud del cazador’, propia de la posmodernidad y de la incertidumbre que esta era conlleva. (116)

For Bauman, the hunter represents a new type of postmodern individualism in which, rather than staying put and (metaphorically) gardening, people go into the unknown and hunt (127-28). The failure of Sunday and Gorka’s “hunt” is especially obvious outside the Guggenheim Museum where, according to Sunday, “veías tu reflejo en esa madre y te acentuaba el tercer mundo” (31). For Sunday, the museum—and the First World knowledge that it represents—becomes a metaphor for a new potential he never had in Mexico. Gorka, however, sees it as proof of his own insignificance. The border between Mexico and the developed world may not be physically violent, but it still interpellates people like Sunday and Gorka into third-world status.

The play’s principal protagonists are thus “smaller than the Guggenheim” because they live in the shadow of the developed world. Timothy G. Compton notes that they are “losers, really, but colorful, interesting, loveable losers, and the play represent[s] their efforts to become otherwise” (170). Ricaño emphasizes his characters’ marginalization through physical and/or performative imperfections that he enunciates through a problematic discourse of disability. Gorka is diabetic, Sunday refers to his homosexuality as a sickness, Al is albino, and Jamblet is illiterate. I use the term disability here as it is commonly used in disability studies, which, according to Susan Antebi and Beth E. Jörgensen, “reads disability either as socially and politically constructed, or somewhere at the juncture or melding of the social and the corporeal” (11). Rather than focus on impairment, disability studies seeks to show how societal beliefs and structures limit the agency of disabled individuals. Indeed, nonmedical conditions such as race, gender, and sexuality can also become

disabling within certain contexts (such as that represented in *Guggenheim*).<sup>4</sup> The characters' respective ties to disability prove especially significant in light of Dalton's observation that, at least as far back as the postrevolutionary period, Mexican thinkers have imagined the fusion of disabled bodies with technology as a means to resignify how these operate in society (*Mestizo Modernity* 5).<sup>5</sup> Dalton focuses primarily on how statist thinkers employed "technological hybridity" in a problematic attempt to include disabled bodies in the national narrative by enabling them and assimilating them to the state (*Mestizo Modernity* 100-07). Ricaño's theatre also engages discourses of inclusion, but rather than use technology to "improve" disabled bodies, his juxtapositions of disabled bodies with technology undermine dehumanizing discourses toward people with disabilities.

Rather than accept a body politics in which only able-bodied people can lead full lives, the playwright employs numerous theatrical techniques that critique ableist and homophobic beliefs both within Mexico and in global society at large. Throughout the play, Ricaño emphasizes his characters' disabilities through narratological sequences that highlight the show's performed nature. This style distances its viewers and invites them to critically engage the way that society—and the playwright's own characters—marginalize those people whose bodies fail to conform to aesthetic and ableist notions of desirability.<sup>6</sup> Given this fact, it is especially interesting to view how he places his disabled bodies in conversation with cyborg discourse. Ricaño does not use technological hybridity in an attempt to erase disabilities; rather, he uses a narratological aesthetic to juxtapose disabled bodies with advanced technologies. This technique allows him to question and undermine the dehumanizing effects of ableist discourse in Mexico and throughout the world. The scene that best conjugates the themes of cyborg theatre, disability, and narratology occurs when Gorka's blood sugar drops to dangerously low levels while he sleeps outside a train station in Spain. Sunday runs to a vending machine to get him a soda, but the machine's high-tech arm leaves him dumbfounded. As Sunday narrates/performs:

SUNDAY: Corrí a la máquina por una coca cola, y no mames, había que ver qué máquina. Tenía un brazo electrónico y un escáner que ubicaba la lata para arrojarla a un contenedor con tal precisión. Una chingonería, de veras. Estuve casi diez minutos contemplando la madre esa, hasta que recordé que Gorka se estaba muriendo... (32)

The Spanish vending machine stands in stark contrast to its Mexican counterpart; in an earlier scene, Gorka tries to buy coffee in a Mexican hospital, but the machine eats his coins and gives him nothing. Viewed alongside each other, these devices show a clear division between the technologies of the developed and developing worlds. Not only do Spanish vending machines work, but they do so in a sexier way. Even more telling, the juxtaposition of a writhing Gorka—whose body is suffering a systemic, even mechanical, failure of its own—with a sleek, Spanish vending machine places both body-machines in tension as they compete for Sunday's attention.

These elements distance the viewers from the performance and help them to question the validity of an ideological system that ascribes more value to a vending machine than to a human's life. It may seem counterintuitive that Ricaño could use his narratological aesthetic—which he articulates from “a bare stage from which the actors directly address the audience” (Bixler, “Mexican ‘History’” 56)—to create a cyborg aesthetic. Nevertheless, the cyborg potential emerges on this bare stage precisely because of the narratological performance. Due to the lack of props, Sunday has to engage an imagined machine. The resulting scene is thus typical of Ricaño's *oeuvre* at large, which, according to Socorro Merlín, deconstructs the binary simple/complex (54). The stage remains bare, yet its very emptiness impregnates it with deeper discursive meaning. He looks directly toward the public as he narrates, thus suggesting that the vending machine sits among the viewers or perhaps even that his viewers are the machine. Sunday's over-the-top narration about how he forgot about his dying friend ultimately serves to accentuate Gorka's undeniable *bios*. The very act of performing third-world *zoé* thus serves to denaturalize its validity, at least in the discursive plane. The audience views Gorka with a greater degree of sympathy after this scene, but the effects of almost dying in a foreign country contribute to an inferiority complex that will haunt Gorka throughout his life. Indeed, when Sunday visits him years later and asks him to write a play for them to perform in Mexico, this near-death experience takes on an especially prominent role.

The (re)reenactment of this scene, where Jamblet metatheatrically interprets Gorka's role, goes especially poorly. Federico Cendejas Corzo argues that this play within a play represents Gorka and Sunday's existential need to lie to themselves following their failures in Spain (156). Interestingly, Ricaño turns once again to a cyborg stage to help his protagonists overcome their inferiority complexes. In an especially bizarre sequence, Al rides an actual motorbike (the only machine to physically appear in the play) across

the stage, and at one point the machine crosses all by itself. These actions strongly distance the audience from what it sees; because we have already seen the “true” version, Al’s nonsensical movement and interruptions ridicule the duo’s experience abroad. Far from impressing his explicit audience, Sunday’s desire to include a machine in his play simply turns his show into the laughingstock of Mexican theatre. That said, his implicit audience (us) obviously does not see the motorbike’s presence as a failed prop. This metatheatrical scene thus registers distinctively with its physical audience, especially when viewed alongside the invisible, though supposedly more “real” vending machine with an electric arm. The motorbike does not figure in Sunday’s original narration, but it is the most prominent feature in the metatheatrical (re)reenactment. Viewed together, both machines attest to the absurdity of those fetishizations with technology that lead to the dehumanization of disabled and marginalized individuals.

Al interrupts the performance precisely because Sunday has constantly told him that albinos are too weird to be on stage. Al’s metatheatrical presence on the cyborg stage serves to denaturalize Sunday’s assertions; indeed, the albino’s “poor” acting makes the scene especially entertaining. What is more, the sympathetic audience realizes that, if he were given an opportunity, Al could act as well as anyone else. Al has already gone to great lengths to show his worthiness to act. At one point, he decides to sunbathe and gets second-degree burns. His friends check his vitals and run him over to the hospital, where they narrate the following:

SUNDAY: Ya iba inconsciente cuando llegamos a emergencias. Y muy hecho mierda. Tenía la piel agrietada, roja como su puta madre, con ampollas reventadas por todos lados. Cuando nos preguntaron su nombre, lo registramos como Al.

JAM: ¿Alberto?, preguntó la enfermera.

SUNDAY: Albino, dijo Gorka muy dignamente. (24)

Beyond employing a narration to distance its viewers, the comical delivery of this scene subverts the suppositions that justify Al’s marginalization. Ricaño emphasizes this fact by having Sunday narrate this “dignifying” comment despite the fact that the original dialogue belonged to Gorka, who is standing right there.

While Sunday employs sexist, ableist, and homophobic language throughout the play, Ricaño makes it clear that the character's obtuse personality reflects the fact that he rejects his own homosexuality. When Gorka learns of his friend's sexual orientation, for example, Sunday problematically states, "Tú eres diabético, yo puto. Cada cual con su enfermedad" (19). That said, Sunday's exaggerated mustache and harsh *machista* performance belie a sentimental interior. The audience gets to see Sunday's internal turmoil as the play juxtaposes his offensive vocabulary with hopeless attempts to win Jamblet's affection.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Sunday comes to reflect what Judith Butler calls melancholia as he suppresses his sexuality (*Bodies* 178-85); he constantly tries to recuperate that part of himself that he forces to the margins. Perhaps the most poignant representation of bare life occurs when Sunday attempts suicide. Luckily, Gorka, Jamblet, and Al receive a call from a neighbor who sees blood coming from their friend's apartment. They find him lying unconscious in the bathroom with "a la vega" [sic] written in blood on the wall (57). After rushing his friend to the hospital, Gorka decides to fix the spelling error so that, if Sunday dies, at least his final message will be dignified (57-58). He cuts his finger and places an *r* between the *e* and the *g*. Al cuts his finger and underlines the phrase, and the formerly illiterate Jamblet follows suit, putting a period at the end of the word. These characters become metaphorical blood brothers as they mix their blood together to write this message. Returning to Sandoval, they assert their "joint kinship" by emphasizing how their differing disabilities contribute to their shared camaraderie. We should not read their words as a rejection of life but as a declaration against the conditions that bar them from privilege. At this moment, the play's protagonists recognize and challenge their supposed *zoê*. As they invalidate, and even ignore, dehumanizing discourses, they can go about their lives in a fulfilling way.

Many viewers will find the resistant element to *Guggenheim* underwhelming. Such a reaction may be legitimate, but it ignores the totality of Ricaño's *oeuvre*. The idea of macro-level resistance seems puerile against the backdrop of *Timboctou*, for example. This article has demonstrated that Ricaño's use of a cyborg stage allows him to highlight institutionalized states of exception, particularly the physical borders and relative access to technology that separate the Global North and South. *Timboctou* challenges notions of third-world *zoê* by juxtaposing narco protagonists with polar bears. The conjugation of dark humor and multimedia performance facilitates a biting critique, but the play provides no strategies for marginalized individuals to lead meaningful lives in an oppressive global society. *Guggenheim* may not

engage the border as explicitly as *Timboctou*, but its protagonists also live in the shadow of the developed world. As the cyborg performance highlights the conditions that relegate Gorka and Sunday to the periphery, it delegitimizes ideas that facilitate the continued marginalization of third-world individuals. Viewed within this framework, it makes sense that the protagonists of *Guggenheim* find meaning by focusing on friendship while they (try to) ignore oppressive discourses that lie beyond their control.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> According to Oswaldo Zavala (46), narco-narratives usually build on international genres like the detective novel—a fact that tends to dissociate them from the domestic political context—in order to publish stories that they can export to readers across the world.

<sup>2</sup> In a later scene they announce that they planned to be models but could not for economic reasons (134).

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of this how Global North countries pollute without considering the effects on other countries, see Greg Kahn (548-49).

<sup>4</sup> Antebi notes that state officials ascribed a disabling potential to indigenous peoples and bodies at the beginning of the twentieth century (“Prometheus Unbound” 171-72). It should come as no surprise that people who do not conform to heteronormative ideals could also be coded as disabled.

<sup>5</sup> Rebecca Janzen argues that midcentury Mexican literature tends to imagine disabled people as members of a *homo sacer* community that “counters the rhetoric of the cosmic race and gestures toward transformation” (11).

<sup>6</sup> Ricaño employs this style to reveal Sunday’s homosexuality (18), Jamblet’s illiteracy (9-10), Al’s albinism (24), and Gorka’s diabetes (32).

<sup>7</sup> According to Cendejas Corzo (158), Sunday’s words and behavior are an existentialist mask that he uses to hide his true identity from others and from himself.

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