

From Drones to Crop Dusters: Ricardo Dominguez's Flying Machines¹

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In the Winter of 1893, Victor Ochoa became the first Mexican American to launch a revolutionary movement from El Paso. . . . [He wrote] scientific articles about flight for a New York magazine and an unpublished science fiction novel set in the times of the Aztecs, *The Wise Man of the Land of Moctezuma*. Victor began his insurrectionary activities by printing recruitment flyers out of his newspaper offices for “La División del Norte del Ejército Revolucionario.” . . . In May 1909, the *New York Times* reported that Victor Ochoa entered his Orinthopter in an Arlington, New Jersey, aerial carnival. . . . Ochoa’s flying contraption had six aluminum wings folded back like a bird’s—they were mounted on two bicycle frames. It had a six-horsepower gasoline motor connected to large magnets that made its wings oscillate like a bumblebee.

David Dorado Romo, *Ringside Seat to a Revolution: An Underground History of El Paso and Juárez, 1893-1923*²

One idea I had was to develop the Palindrone which would chase Homeland Security drones on the border and sing to them. Like the words from Gloria Anzaldúa, and Nortec. Because we can imagine that the drone pilot sitting in Las Vegas might not know the culture, the voices and the history, and they might be bored; and so this might be one way. The Palindrone would be a singing drone that would exchange and share through multiple signals the life and experience,

culturally and experimentally, of the border and border culture.

[Theorist] Gloria Anzaldúa would be a core voice there.

Ricardo Dominguez, "Zapatismo in Cyberspace"³

Recently I was invited by the MultiCultural Center at the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB) to talk about *Farm Worker Futurism: Speculative Technologies of Resistance*, my forthcoming book about historic struggles between agribusiness and farm worker unions over technology, especially visual technology, as means for projecting antagonistic futures.⁴ My digital companion to the book entitled "Cesar Chavez's Video Collection" served as the basis for my presentation, which was a sort of performance of the piece in collaboration with the audience.⁵ Authored on a digital scholarship platform called Scalar, "Cesar Chavez's Video Collection" is an online archive of video, photos, art, and text documenting and analyzing farm worker appropriations of visual technology to project alternatives to the visions of the future promoted by the patriarchal white capitalism of agribusiness corporations. The collection is ordered in what the designers of Scalar call multiple thematic "paths," but I like to imagine them as crop rows, and my work there as a kind of digging. "Cesar Chavez's Video Collection" is organized into four central "crop rows" ("UFW VHS," "Agribusiness Futurism," "Farm Worker Futurism," and "Farm Worker Speculative Fictions"), each with multiple sub-rows. As part of the performance, I asked the audience to determine the direction of the talk, shouting out particular rows to click on and dig through.

This collaboration produced speculation about flight in the farm worker movement. In one row, we looked at Ester Hernandez's poster for Cherrie Moraga's play *Heroes and Saints*, which features the image of a skeleton remotely controlling a pesticide streaming crop duster. In another, we watched the opening of *La Bamba* (dir. Luis Valdez, US, 1987), in which Ritchie Valens awakes in an agricultural labor camp after a nightmare that seemingly foretells his death in a plane crash. Finally, in the last row we examined works by the art collective Royal Chicano Air Force (RCAF), an ally of the United Farm Workers of America (UFW), drawn from special collections at UCSB. What emerged was a complicated dialectic involving technologies of flight, whereby farm worker visual culture on the one hand brings into critical relief the top-down agribusiness domination of land and labor represented by the crop duster, and on the other appropriates the airplane as a vehicle of flight from a violent present into a utopian future beyond exploitation.

In both “Cesar Chavez’s Video Collection” and *Farm Worker Futurism*, I situate performance artist, theorist, and University of California, San Diego (UCSD) Professor of Visual Arts Ricardo Dominguez as an heir to traditions of farm worker futurism. I have identified this heritage in Dominguez’s performance of an important anti-war speech by Cesar Chavez that was broadcast on the Times Square JumboTron, as well as in his role in making the Transborder Immigrant Tool, an inexpensive cell phone designed for desert border crossers from Mexico that is GPS-capable and loaded with poetry by University of Michigan Professor Amy Sara Carroll, a fellow member of the artistic cyber-activism collective Electronic Disturbance Theater 2.0 (EDT 2.0). My collaboration with the UCSB audience newly prompted me to connect a number of Dominguez’s performances reflecting on contemporary border policing to lines of flight traced by farm worker futurism and its flying machines.

Dominguez is a brilliant theorist and practitioner of “electronic civil disobedience” (ECD). In his influential print and digital books and essays, as well as through his digitally based performances or what he calls “gestures,” Dominguez has effectively recast prior articulations of civil disobedience, including those by Cesar Chavez, for contemporary Internet-based projects for social justice.⁶ As the leading theorist and practitioner of ECD, Dominguez invented and deployed an innovative conception of the Internet not simply as a mode of communication about inequality and social injustice but as itself a site of struggles against oppression. His research, teaching, and performances have productively focused on how power changes with computer networks, compelling artists and activists to combine actions in physical spaces—such as traditional protests and marches—with related kinds of interventions in digital spaces, including “virtual sit-ins.” Virtual sit-ins refer to organized efforts to slow or in some cases briefly stop the workings of a website, just as more familiar forms of protest slow the city traffic surrounding them and sit-ins disrupt the regular flow of activity in buildings and other public places. Working with a group of activist artists and software designers who comprise Electronic Disturbance Theater, including Brett Stalbaum, Carmen Karasic, and Stefan Wray, Dominguez developed, and creatively used an Internet application called “FloodNet.” FloodNet enables hundreds and often thousands of users to request from large internet servers information that they do not hold, thus triggering the server to post repeated error messages that slow down its functioning (and in some cases cause a server to briefly stop, but without permanently damaging it).

This electronic slow-down lodges powerful symbolic protests in the heart of power.

One of Dominguez's most well known and creative applications of FloodNet was in 1998, in support of the Zapatista movement's efforts to draw attention to the dispossession and displacement of indigenous peoples in Chiapas, Mexico that resulted from the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). In one gesture orchestrated by Dominguez, FloodNet users were able to upload messages to the server logs of the Mexican government's website by purposely asking for a non-existent URL titled "justice" or "human rights," leading the server to repeatedly return messages like "justice_not found" or "human rights_not found." In another, users uploaded to the Mexican state server the names of indigenous people who had recently been massacred by the military.

Dominguez's work with the Zapatistas was a sort of virtual companion to the Zapatista Air Force. Recalling the Royal Chicano Air Force, the Zapatista Air Force was a form of political theater in which rebels bombarded Mexican military barracks with paper airplanes inscribed with messages such as "Soldiers, we know that poverty has made you sell your lives and souls. I also am poor, as are millions. But you are worse off, for defending our exploiter."⁷ Shortly thereafter, EDT released its software so that, in the words of Jill Lane, "activists could mount their own aerial attack on any web site." As Lane continues, such gestures ultimately reveal "the incommensurate force and aggression that underwrite the policies of the government and military; thousands of armed troops and real airplanes are dispatched to 'fight' communities armed with little more than paper" and code.⁸ In 2000, EDT commemorated the actions of the Zapatista Air Force by releasing the Zapatista Tribal Port Scan, software that users can download in order to search Mexican state servers for the forms of compassion and justice they lack.⁹

In 2001, Dominguez worked with other artists and activists to organize similar forms of ECD directed at Lufthansa Airlines for its work with the German state to deport immigrants. This resulted in the airline ending its collaboration with the state. In 2005, he collaborated with members of EDT and activists in San Diego and Tijuana to perform "Swarm The Minutemen," an e-action directed at a right wing private militia engaged in policing the border against migrants. According to Dominguez, the Minute Men "represent an intensification of the trend of violence towards migrant people

and people of color that has increased since 9/11.” In solidarity with a group called Swarm, EDT launched a virtual sit-in on the Minute Men web site, joining a wider series of actions including, Dominguez recalls, “a 24/7 telephone call campaign, a fax action, an e-mail action and sound pollution action on the border. Since the Minutemen say they love the silence of the desert—because they can hear the dirty rats (the people trying to cross the border) making noise—by creating lots of loud sounds it would keep the Minutemen from finding stopping and harassing these people.”¹⁰

In all of these gestures Dominguez builds on traditions of civil disobedience. FloodNet performances are non-violent—they do not materially damage networks—and transparent—performances are publically announced and participants identify themselves. And like so many of the great twentieth-century movements for social justice, Dominguez’s theory and practice of ECD dramatize inequality. But his movement is adapted for the digital age, drawing attention to the disparity between powerful institutions and the everyday and symbolic forms of resistance wielded by the relatively powerless.

Most recently, Dominguez’s interest in flying machines has led him to organize drone gestures. Along with UCSD colleagues Sheldon Brown and Jordan Crandall, in 2012 Dominguez curated “Drones at Home,” a project in three phases including an art exhibition, a conference, and a practicum in alternative drone making. The exhibit included “LowDrone,” an Internet-based project by Angel Neverez and Alex Rivera. LowDrone teaches about the history of the deployment of drones to police the US/Mexico border, while enabling users to simulate the flight of a small drone (designed to resemble a low rider car) over the border dividing San Diego and Tijuana to buzz Border Patrol agents. Rivera is also the director of the film *Sleep Dealer* (dir. Alex Rivera, US and Mexico, 2008) which is partly about a Chicano drone pilot from San Diego who commanders a US military drone in order to blow up a dam in Oaxaca that has privatized water and driven migrants north.

UCSD is a center of engineering research into the production drones used both to surveil the US/Mexico border and to perform the extrajudicial assassination of individuals and groups suspected of terrorism in Pakistan. As a result, Dominguez’s drone gestures call into question the complicity of the University in militarized violence directed against migrants and others. A 2012 gesture at UCSD disturbed business as usual there by prompting the administration to affirm that the University’s drone research proceeded

without critical reflection on its life and death consequences. In collaboration with Ian Alan Paul and Jane Stevens (also known as Katherine Chandler), Dominguez simulated a drone crash on campus over the course of a week by circulating press releases, photos, and other kinds of documentation that were published by a number of online news sources. Dominguez and his partners announced the establishment of “The UC Center for Drone Policy and Ethics,” an interdisciplinary think tank devoted to “exploring the emerging implications of drone research.” The project’s website posted a “Statement Regarding Campus Drone Incident” (12/04/2012), including a photo of a crashed drone in front of UCSD’s library (which itself resembles a space ship), and announced that the UC Center for Drone Policy and Ethics would host a public town hall meeting “to teach basic drone safety techniques that can be practiced on a daily basis to keep ourselves safe.”¹¹ The site further links to a statement from the UCSD Chancellor appointing Dominguez as the Center’s “Acting Lead Researcher.”¹²

“I’m sure some of [the students] probably did think it was real,” Dominguez told NBC San Diego, “but that’s one of the practices of new media art—what we call minor simulation. It creates an event that is difficult to understand as either real or not real.”¹³ On the one hand, the drone crash and its aftermath comprised a real event, in that the gesture provoked the University to deny publicly both the crash and the existence of a UCSD center devoted to the study of drone ethics. Like the denial of service attacks, the crash simulation prompted the University to respond by effectively stating that ethical considerations are not part of its drone research. On the other hand, the simulation was unreal, since in a utopian fashion it projected the existence of a center to study the ethics of drones that does not exist, thus drawing attention to the absence of such a center at the University.

In the wake of the drone simulation, Dominguez has continued to investigate utopian technologies of flight in the form of flight facilitators. As he explained to an interviewer,

Recently I had a flight facilitators’s gathering and an open borders conference in Munich where we looked at histories and valuation of flight facilitation which here on this border we call “coyote culture.” So individuals who did flight facilitation from the GDR to Berlin during the Cold War are seen as heroines yet at other times flight facilitation is seen as bad or illegal. In the crisis right now in Europe, everyday community members who put refugees in their cars to drive them

from Hungary to the German border have been looked at as illegal and traitorous to the sort of nature of the EU. So the question that clearly manifests itself is about the figuration of the immigrant; the refugee is not really bound to the qualities of legal precedent and consideration and honoring of flight facilitation, but somehow a refugee and an immigrant are seen as outside of the normative values of a Euro-centric space.¹⁴

In these ways Dominguez's flying machines generate a dialectic between dystopia and utopia, bringing to light state and capitalist violence *and* horizons of possibility beyond them.

In both *Farm Worker Futurism* and "Cesar Chavez's Video Collection," Dominguez's work has helped me to dig up a longer history of critical flight simulation in Chicana/o art and activism. Given how planes and helicopters enabled agribusiness owners to adopt a top-down aerial gaze that supported their domination of land and labor, the UFW sought to commandeer an aerial view for farm workers. The union's famous 1966 march from Delano to Sacramento, the California State Capital, was self-consciously organized as a spectacle that would be especially alluring to news media and filmmakers in their flying machines. In an early appropriation of such technological practices, the UFW effectively hijacked the flying news media, transforming them into drones for the union.

In the early 1970s, a Sacramento artists's collective called the RCAF began making a vast body of paintings, posters, and sculptures in support of the UFW and the Chicano civil rights movement. Many members of the RCAF had been farm workers or were the children of farm workers, and they employed airplanes as dialectical images that were at odds not only with the agribusiness's aerial gaze, but also with crop duster attacks on workers. As RCAF member Juanita P. Ontiveros recalls in the TV documentary *Pilots of Aztlán: Flights of the Royal Chicano Air Force*, "It was the local grower's sons that flew the crop dusters [...] They would dust and they dared each other on who would fly down the lowest until they ended up getting people to throw themselves on the cotton sacks. And of course you would feel all, it was like dew falling on your skin, you would feel all the pesticides." Agribusiness flying machines—like other agricultural technologies such as pesticides and the short-handled hoe shortened the life spans as farm workers who produced surpluses for the owners of the means of production.

In dialectical answer to agribusiness futurism, the RCAF produced futuristic images of Chicano technologies of flight. Anticipating the flight simulations of both Dominguez and the Zapatistas, the artists simulated a vast Air Force in the service of Chicana/o social justice and devoted to pleasure and fun, as in the many RCAF posters for union dances. The RCAF is seriously funny—an important quality given foreshortened farm worker life spans and the unequal distribution of pleasure and joy. They made images of retro biplanes and their pilots, including a biplane piñata, but decorated them with UFW colors and icons, especially the union's stylized black thunderbird. RCAF members further launched their flying machines into space as in Esteban Villa's watercolor of a woman astronaut, "Third World Astro Pilot of Aztlán" (ca. 1971–72), and Ricardo Favela's colored pencil drawing "UFW Cooperative Space Station #Uno" (ca. 1983–84). Similarly, like the UFW, which built its own clinic and cooperative gas station, the RCAF converted a space-age gas station in Sacramento into the "Aeronaves de Aztlan Automotive Co-op" (ca. 1978–79). The collective context of such representations and institutions further marks them as utopian alternatives to agribusiness futurism, with its idealization of technology in the service of labor exploitation and private property. Like Dominguez, RCAF flight simulations (not to mention Victor Ochoa!) create events that are hard to understand as either real or not real. They are based on the expectation of an unknown and uncertain future space of time and the reenactment of utopian futures in the present. Such capacities for imagining a future as such within the limits of the here and now ultimately raise creative speculative questions about how material and ideological conditions would have to be transformed in order to support widespread expectations of a future.

Notes

- 1 I am grateful for the comments and suggestions of Ricardo Dominguez and Shelley Streeby.
- 2 David Dorado Romo, *Ringside Seat to a Revolution: An Underground History of El Paso and Juárez, 1893-1923* (El Paso, TX: Cinco Puntos Press, 2005), 33–34, 45–47.
- 3 Ricardo Dominguez, quoted in Ash Eliza Smith, "Zapatismo in Cyberspace: An Interview with Ricardo Dominguez," *Rhizome*, 26 January 2016, rhizome.org/editorial/2016/jan/26/interview-with-ricardo-dominguez/.
- 4 Curtis Marez, *Farm Worker Futurism: Speculative Technologies of Resistance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).
- 5 Curtis Marez, "Cesar Chavez's Video Collection," *American Literature* 85, no. 4 (2013), americanliterature.dukejournals.org/content/85/4/811.abstract.

- 6 See, for example, *The Electronic Disturbance*, authored by Dominguez and other members of the Critical Art Ensemble (New York: Autonomedia, 1994).
- 7 Jill Lane, "Digital Zapatistas," *Drama Review* 47, no. 2 (2003): 130
- 8 Lane, "Digital Zapatistas," 130.
- 9 For a description of the project see <http://switch.sjsu.edu/v6n2/ztps/>.
- 10 Ricardo Dominguez, quoted in "A Transparent and Civil Act of Disobedience: An Interview with Ricardo Dominguez by Hans Peter Kartenbreg," *post.thing.net*, 12 June 2005, post.thing.net/node/304.
- 11 "Statement Regarding Campus Drone Incident," *UC Center for Drone Policy and Ethics*, 4 November 2012, uccenterfordrones.wordpress.com/regarding-recent-drone-malfunction/.
- 12 "Appointment of Principle Investigator," *UC Center for Drone Policy and Ethics*, 4 October 2012, uccenterfordrones.wordpress.com/ucsd-campus-notice/.
- 13 Lauren Steussy, "Source of Mystery Drone Crash Revealed," *NBC San Diego*, 6 December 2012, www.nbcsandiego.com/news/local/-Source-of-Mystery-Drone-Crash-Revealed-182407811.html#ixzz40knVfBLc.
- 14 Dominguez, quoted in Smith, "Zapatismo in Cyberspace."

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