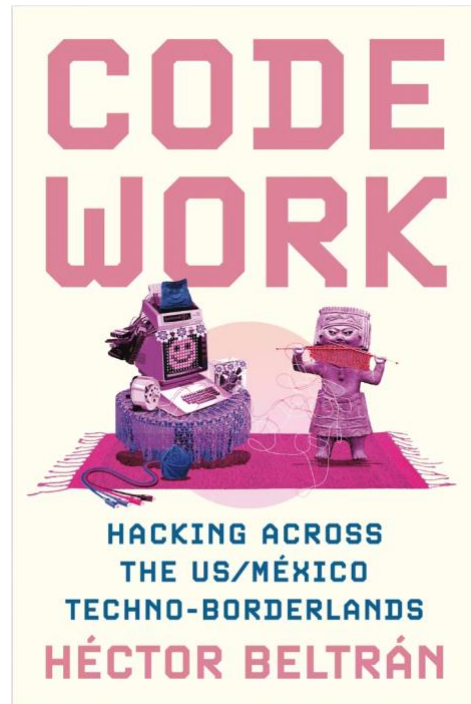


Héctor Beltrán, **Code Work: Hacking Across the US/México Techno-Borderlands**, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023, 240 pp., \$99.95 (hardcover).

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Author Héctor Beltrán's book ***Code Work: Hacking Across the US/México Techno-Borderlands*** makes a significant contribution to Latinx and technology studies by reflecting on the lived experiences of Mexican/Latinx hackers' techno-entrepreneurial aspirations and their lives across the US/México border. Situating his analysis across the US/México techno-borderland, Beltrán raises epistemological concerns about the contemporary Silicon Valley discourse of inclusion and empowerment, arguing that programmers from the Global South are incorporated into the global tech industry as contingent labor, revealing the exclusionary structure underlying the industry's inclusive rhetoric. Beltrán examines the formation of neoliberal subjectivity as hackers negotiate their identities, interests, ambitions, and vulnerabilities in pursuit of their Silicon Valley dream. The book offers a rich ethnographic exploration of the day-to-day life of Mexican hacker-entrepreneurs, their material reality, and the sociopolitical significance of their interventions.



Beltrán's *Code Work* employs an ethnographic approach that deepens understanding of aspiring hackers-entrepreneurs from Mexico, revealing how coding serves as a means to envision the future, materiality, and self-identity. His subjects transcend linguistic, economic, and ethno-racial boundaries while struggling to reach beyond the geopolitical border that separates the United States and Mexico. They join hackathons, the periodically organized events across the border that help cultivate hacker ethics, foster a strong sense of agency, and empower young programmers to negotiate their sociopolitical realities through hacking. The author finds hackathons a "juxtaposition of sociotechnical imaginaries" (p. 4) as they exercise diversity, for example, of generation, gender, and ethnicity while pursuing the same neoliberal dream of upward social mobility. Despite the differences, they come together to work on the hacking projects, aiming to build intergenerational solidarity. On one hand, these events cultivate inclusivity in digital making, empowerment, community formation, entrepreneurial subject-making, and neoliberal nation-making. On the other hand, their organizers, the industries they aspire to work for, and the meritocracy of the Silicon Valley tech industry separate them across the geopolitical border. These hackathons offer self-guided discovery and learning with a heightened sense of agency, but for many, the dream has never been realized. The author considers hackathons to observe the hacker neoliberal subject entangled within the cyberlibertarian ethos of disruption and quick fixing of world issues through tech interventions, rather than addressing underlying social problems.

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Beltrán introduces a conceptual framework of ethno-stack to analyze how computational infrastructure is intertwined with social, cultural, and political layers. This can be best understood as an intervention within “the stack” outlined by Benjamin Bratton (2016) in his book, *The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty*. Bratton describes “the stack” as a planetary-scale architecture with several interconnected layers of productive and social elements, including hardware, cloud infrastructure, users, and governance (Bratton, 2016). Within this expanded framework, Beltrán positions the ethno-stack as a lived, embodied, and racialized aspect of computation. In doing so, he explores the sociohistorical development of Silicon Valley’s tech industry, shaped by power, identity, and unequal inclusion. His notion of ethno-stack comprises “interleaved personal, interpersonal, sociopolitical, and sociotechnical elements” in which actors leverage computation to benefit people (ethnos) and communities, particularly those identified as Mexican and Latinx (p. 6). Presenting ethno-stack within Bratton’s broader framework specifically highlights how hackers’ experiences can help readers understand the lived experience of marginalized programmers from the Global South. This emphasis on identity and representation concerns fosters a sense of belonging and validation for Mexican and Latinx communities, illustrating their vital role in the sociopolitical landscape of technology.

The book further explores hackers’ sense of agency as it emerges through both subverting the prevailing system and asserting hacking as a form of specialized expertise. In this context, hackers repurpose coding logic as a conceptual toolkit for engaging political, social, and economic dynamics, thereby repositioning themselves within the system that extracts value from their labor. This perspective becomes especially relevant in the context of Silicon Valley’s declining diversity discourse, which is often obscured by the persistent ideology of meritocracy. Beltrán’s ethnography uncovers how multiple identities, such as Mexican, Latinx, and US-Mexican, and misunderstandings of those, complicate the systemic issue of representation in this industry. The efforts of marginalized programmers to reconfigure and claim their positions—adding a transnational dimension to becoming *Chingon*, and expressing technical masculinity—are evident in code camps and the ways these are challenged in programmers’ real-life experiences.

Beltrán reframes hacking as a contested domain: often positioned against passive consumption but constructing an empowered prosumer, yet more accurately understood as a site of struggle where users operate within, rather than outside, the system. The hackers’ sociopolitical consciousness primarily centers on career orientation and entrepreneurial drive; however, they engage in community work to resolve local issues, such as fighting corruption. Beltrán examines how the personal struggles of young people aspiring to become successful programmers/entrepreneurs lead them to do whatever it takes to sustain themselves. The hackers’ subjectivity is positioned as neither here nor there, thereby manifesting their in-betweenness of becoming the local and the global. Subjects of this study are living at the threshold as contingent workers rendered by the neoliberal economy, thereby becoming threshold persons. In their pursuit of becoming global, programmers adopt some of the hacking techniques from the domain of coding into their own lives, such as “code switching” and “loose coupling.” These software design principles signify the techniques to make oneself fit into the context as required. The author finds programmers turning these metaphors back on themselves, as hackers think critically about the political economy in which they are embedded, analyze it, navigate social and political systems, and adapt strategically.

Hacker-entrepreneurs navigate their sociopolitical and economic realities, shifting among multiple spaces and identities. The author borrows the concept of pivoting, a Silicon Valley buzzword that implies a

technique for rapidly adapting a product to align with the market, in the context of hacker-entrepreneurs to discuss how their subjectivities swing across the techno-borderland. The hackers exercise pivoting their sociopolitical and economic realities and their identities, such as the language they speak and their presentation of self, across all layers of the ethno-stack. For example, their performance of Mexican hackerness and deployment of Mexican identity in Silicon Valley pivot between the “Mexican *hacker-entrepreneur*” and the “*Mexican* hacker-entrepreneur” (p. 141, emphasis in original). The narrative of meritocracy and contributions to programming and innovation does not essentially transcend their Latinx identity as Local; to become global, Mexican hacker-entrepreneurs game the system to fit themselves into the tech hegemony in the Global North. The author’s observation highlights that identities are shaped not only by the political border but also by the socioeconomic realities of the First and Third Worlds. Consequently, the language of coding becomes a way to cross and intersect the boundaries of nationality, race, ethnicity, and class. The idea of borders crosses disciplinary lines, linking perspectives, theories, and interventions from different fields that are often kept separate. The author’s use of “border” here is both literal and figurative, highlighting divisions between humans and machines, workers and citizens, the U.S. and Mexico, and, more broadly, the Global North and the Global South.

The notion of hacking mostly orients toward quick technological fixes; the author demands attention toward the solution to fix systemic issues. Through *Code Work*, Héctor Beltrán opens an epistemic discourse on hacking amid the digital divide across the techno-borderland, especially hacking from the South. While the entrepreneurial hacker is a valuable subject in the Mexican political-economic landscape and techno-politics, the global tech industries are optimizing the ambitions of youth and capitalizing on them. The hacking asserts the market logic of competitiveness, agility, autonomy, and risk, while also offering perspectives on more critical, anticapitalist, and decolonial approaches, revealing the complex relationship among technology-driven capitalism, entrepreneurship, and hacking outside the Global North. Hacker-entrepreneurs struggle to align their interests and themselves with big tech corporations’ values and ethics, which are often critical, and contends the coders’ own interests, identities, and values. Through these close observations, Beltrán opens a new conversation on national and international issues facing aspiring tech workers from the Global South, including migration, mobility, and brain drain in third-world countries.

The chapter formatting and use of graphics in *Code Work: Hacking Across the US/México Techno-Borderlands* offer a vivid sense of the tech world and the discipline of computer programming. Beltrán’s ethnography zooms in on the day-to-day life of programmers, filled with rich humor, reflections on the masculinity and sexuality of his subjects at the workspace, and a sincere portrayal of how they game the system. While zooming out, the author delves into concerns about brain circulation and brain drain, conflicts of priorities, and identity, which is not only Mexican and Latinx but also of the Global South. The author uses remarkable concepts and ideas from Mexican culture that are very informative for outsiders; however, when translated from the Mexican vernacular, they may be challenging to grasp fully. This book’s in-depth exploration of young Mexican programming enthusiasts aspiring to integrate themselves into Silicon Valley tech industries is a significant contribution to technology studies, Latinx and Latin American studies, tech labor in neoliberal globalization, and Cultural Studies under techno-capitalism.

Reference

Bratton, B. H. (2016). *The stack: On software and sovereignty*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.