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‘Subversive identities: Ethno-techno and Gómez-Peña’s cross-cultural performance’

Introduction: Alien vs. (Mex)-Terminator

When understood as technique, the body and the bodily event are bound by a logocentric conviction that physical life is the pursuit of a correct and truthful way of moving. Thus technique can parcel the body in a theology of choreographic canons, subjugating it to a discipline which, as Foucault suggested, serves as weapons, relays, and communication routes of power.¹ And not only is the “docile body” trapped in its technique; it is also trapped in its culture. Thus Edward Said is correct in pointing out that culture is but a protective enclosure.² The control of corporeality as a trademark of modernity begs the question: how has culture reacted in the face of its pigeonholed body? How has the body itself responded? As Western culture pulls away from its theological past, the present emerges as a trans-national and secular archipelago of cultures, cybermigras, and spectacle-craved microcosms. The question worth exploring is how this new geography is affecting the body and how it informs practices based on a non-technique, or an unpower, as Artaud would call it. This limbic stage is where I would situate Mexican performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña, whose work I will discuss in the following pages.

By framing the body as a discursive ballet we are capable of validating it as a disciplined social and cultural phenomenon. However, for this same reason we are incapable of seeing it as anything other than the coercion of an established, dominant culture. The body is puppeteered by its given environment, but can it break loose? Our culture legitimizes the body provided it is enhanced by technique and doctrine; thus the actor, the soldier, the politician, and the Christian Right or Islamist fundamentalist are all examples of a performative mould. But is this legitimization of the body anything other than Said’s

protective enclosure, a defence mechanism against what lies on the other side of the cultural border? The problem, as I see it, is that even when the body subverts the rule of mainstream it acts as a vindicator of self-defensive culture. The subverting body always returns to culture and becomes an expression of it. But if the body cannot escape the cultural world, can the world escape the body? Here is where Gómez-Peña's work informs a new perception of cultural reality, with all its problematic convolutions and escapisms. The question that is central to this article is how this Mex-termination of established culture replaces technique with technology, and to what extent the body is freed from theory in the undisciplined bricolage of performance activism. Amongst the many extreme identities created by Gómez-Peña and his collaborators it is worth noting the character of an Alien and Mexterminator, products of the world of spectacle that are symptomatic of current cultural developments. To some extent a new dialectic is drawn here between the alienation of contemporary statelessness and the violent and hysterical extermination of the alien. The violence of mutilated bodies, bleeding wounds, dissected abdomens and missing limbs that recur in Gómez-Peña's physical laboratories no longer point towards the beautiful natural body with its cultural specificities and ideological implications, but to corporeality silenced by the violence of post-modernity.

To the extent that a reality without State or religion is de facto a reality without disciplines peering over the body, the rise of marginalia has animated performance with a whole new set of preoccupations and subversive acts. It is a new world (dis)order where the old schools of bodily discipline are being invaded by unschooled immigrants and other barbarian bodies, the fear and desire of which is at the heart of Gómez-Peña's alter egos. This new physis does not chisel itself out of the marble of classical discipline but emerges from a second-hand blender of ephemeral and kaleidoscopic realities, part Hollywood B movie, part Chicano. Inevitably, this re-cycled body feels alienated by its own lack of oneness. This

prompts a realization of what Gómez-Peña calls his soledad, or “Mexican loneliness,”³ triggered not by some metaphysical orphanhood but by the very physical crises of modern, urban living. This said, where does all this leave the bodily event? Let us throw these questions up in order to see, further on, where Gómez-Peña makes them land.⁴

Guillermo Gómez-Peña’s performance lab

In his book *Ethno-techno: Writings on performance, activism and pedagogy* (2005), Gómez-Peña presents his views on performance and the world at large through layers of short excerpts or “tracks” which represent snapshots of the artist’s life and work. The book contains a series of interviews, letters, e-mails and poems about Gómez-Peña’s solo performances and his work with *La Pocha Nostra*, a trans-disciplinary troupe based in San Francisco, and founded by the artist and his collaborators in 1993.

In every respect, Gómez-Peña’s work is an act of de-colonization. It is a contestation of established codes of gender, race, and America’s “closed country” policies, which is why Spanglish, the lingua franca of the Chicano, seems so appropriate. As a “performance provocateur” of contemporary culture Gómez-Peña is bent on devising “laboratory” work that theatricalizes immigrant concerns, technology, and globalization. These issues not only prod the colonial body and its normalization in mainstream culture, but also emphasize the ambivalence that arises from the power contest between colonizing and colonized worlds.

The laboratory of Gómez-Peña and his associates is a tightly knit network of artists who in an Al-Qaeda-fashion have surreptitiously spread around the globe, infiltrating mainstream cultures with acts that challenge, ridicule and problematize cultural colonialism and globalization. The formation of cell-cultures (or cultures that are within and without the conventional nation-state) promote a migration from the local to the global, from high art to kitsch. These migrating cells of artists are calling for a voice or web-space that represents

identities-in-flux and thus foreground culture as a mainstream enclosure. This demand for cross-cultural representation has become particularly poignant since 9/11, as performance activists have become according to Gómez-Peña an “endangered species” in the U.S.⁵ Accordingly, and despite becoming increasingly isolated by the current American administration, Gómez-Peña advocates for a culture that is disclosed. Culture must fight its global political closure and come to terms with its ever-changing currents of hybridization. The body has become chimeric despite a resistance to the contrary. It is a sexual hybrid; genetically modified and technologically enhanced. So when *La Pocha Nostra* describes itself as Performance Art for the 21st century it immediately recognises that the characteristic of the age is precisely the absence of homogenous bodies. This is why Gómez-Peña’s work is often presented in the form of pastiches, collages and eclectic vignettes. As such, Gómez-Peña’s work could be read as a de-localization of culture and a representation of the breakdown of its protective barriers. De-territorialized and de-mineralized, the body becomes nothing other than a sum of its genetic parts; a hyperlink that takes us further and further away from the centre of ‘high’ culture and its assumptions on race, gender, or politics. In short, *La Pocha Nostra*’s laboratory insists upon settling on unexplored territories outside the mainstream, in an area that Gómez-Peña would call “the mainstream bizarre”.

Sexuality, technology and ethnicity intertwine in this new topography so as to make up a single bodily pastiche: a “trans-identity”. But while Gómez-Peña’s so-called embodied theory achieves this emancipation of the body from an established culture, in the end it situates itself in equally limited cultural spaces. The artist depends on the citation of mainstream culture to formulate his artistic vision. But this leap still lands within the sphere of cultural hegemony, albeit as a parody of it. From this perspective, embodied theory is a solipsistic dictum that encapsulates the mixed-up nature of globalized post-citizenship. Gómez-Peña’s performance activism can become a tautological impasse, being thus an

example of the very limitations it has set out to criticize. The artist embodies a backdrop of consumerist, spectacle-craved and mass media culture in an ironic and self-demeaning way. Yet, the effect is the fetishization of the artist as an extra-daily body that is looked upon by spectators and voyeurs in a way that is not dissimilar to the celebrity world it contests, if only in a subversive and parodical manner.

The subversive body

I will now discuss the tactical search for trans-identity by means of cross-cultural transgression and “techno-aesthetics”, and the way in which these intervene in Gómez-Peña’s use of the body. Gómez-Peña claims: “Through sui generis combinations of artistic languages, media, and spontaneous performative formats, we explore the interface of globalization, migration, hybrid identities and technology”.⁶ As such, *La Pocha Nostra* emerges as an ever-changing community that endlessly reinvents itself to keep up with cultural change and censorship. As a means to create “ephemeral communities of like-minded rebels”,⁷ Gómez-Peña’s collaborations appear in the interstices of ethnic, racial and sexual minorities settling in mainstream communities and gaining access to representational spaces, funds and new technologies. Gómez-Peña’s networking project *Ex-centris* bypasses hegemonic culture by bringing together these groups of subaltern citizens in artistic and anarchic ways. Gómez-Peña: “We foreground the theoretical and methodological possibilities of performance to address [...] the changing role of the artist in society”.⁸ Richard Schechner has made an interesting point about Gómez-Peña’s biculturalism by comparing it to mainstream intercultural performance.

Peter Brook’s *Mahabharata* was intercultural but not avant-garde, while Gómez-Peña’s solo performances [...] definitely are. The difference is that Brook wants to elide difference; he is looking for what unites [...] makes the same.⁹

According to Schechner, the reason why this does not apply to Gómez-Peña is not least because the artist uses the arena of interculturalism to highlight difference. Gómez-Peña uses an iconoclasm of violence, martyrdom and pariahhood to defend that which divides and differentiates peoples, as opposed to Brook's unifying archetype (largely advocated under a Eurocentric banner). Gómez-Peña represents a neo-mestizo identity that encapsulates his mixed Mexican and American backgrounds. But this hybridism is more complex than what appears at first sight. The artist is a sexual crossbreed, a linguistic mongrel, a refined academic, and post-modern "savage". He is a fragmented body where all these different and almost mutually exclusive personas co-exist and are highlighted by internal opposition. As such, his complex idiosyncrasy is a cultivation of the schizoid nature of post-modernity.

Conventional culture, on the other hand, relies on a relation of exclusion. It feeds on its paranoia of what lies beyond culture and the fabrication of an homogeneous unity this side of the border. Gómez-Peña creates "extreme identities" precisely on the basis of a "dangerous border-crossing". In other words, it builds personas that are liminal and in-between cultures in order to contest the use of culture as a defence mechanism. Cultures fenced-out by hegemonic enclosures are thus validated not as nostalgia of a marginal past, however, but as an inherent composite of the mixed-in, cross-cultural nature of modern life. This is why Gómez-Peña's shamans are in fact techno-shamans: part modern, part traditional.



Figure 1. Fenced-out cultures: a market in the ancestral town of Cholula, Mexico. (Photo by N. Salazar)

In this process of re-identification the body that is at the same time work of art and theory (alien and local), is in need of a graphic re-politicalization. To illustrate an undisciplined physis the performer uses tattoos, piercing, prosthetics, body painting and adornments, achieving a striking cultural ambivalence. Consequently, live performance becomes the process via which the new morphology of interculturalism is revealed, propelling the heteroglossy of a new type of post-modern savage whose repressed desires and neuroses are unleashed upon the spectator. This spectacle of altered bodies generates interest in the intersection of performance activism with ethnography, estheticized porn, role-playing or show biz. As such, much of the iconography of “extreme identity performance” derives from a polyculturalism that includes pop, gay, cult, erotica, ethnic and other such subcultures all merged together in one performative chimera. The dramatis personae of Gómez-Peña’s dioramas and tableaux-vivants abound with cross-sexed, nude and armed characters that hint at Hollywood action films, erotic fetishes and nondescript pop-icons. There is a juxtaposition at work here that obsessively highlights fractured sexuality and the violent confrontation of sexual paradigms, inevitably focusing the work of the artist on a broken physicality. Equally,

Gómez-Peña often compares his artistic process to the ritual practice of traditional shamans, which suggests that the fetishization and ethnic trinketization of his identity is as much a purification act as an escape mechanism from the reality of marginalization.



Figure 2. Aztec ritual for tourists: techno-shamans in Oaxaca, Mexico. May 2006 (Photo by J.F. Salazar)

There is one final aspect of Gómez-Peña’s re-mapping of the body that I would like to explore in this article, and that is the use of technology in performance. Of particular interest to Gómez-Peña is the use of gadgetry to parody ethnic and national paradigms. Cyborgization is here understood as the duplicitous use of technology to question the value-laden politics of technocracy and the hidden powers behind technological development. As such, ethnocyborgs are described as “artificial savages” that encapsulate the “First World’s desire/fear of its surrounding subcultures”.¹⁰ Displayed mainly on platforms of varying heights, ethnocyborgs are supported by a design of live or pre-recorded music, multiple video and projections/slides.¹¹ In addition, technology is employed to affect actor/spectator interaction in more profound ways, as the characters are based on a selection of “Internet-confessionals”. For instance, during the rehearsal process of the Mexterminator Project, U.S. net-users were asked to express their innermost fears about Chicano subculture. Unlike a

more conventional character-building process the idea was “to cede [the performer’s] will to the internautas in determining the nature and content of living dioramas, including how we should dress, what music we must listen to, and most importantly, what ritual actions we should engage in”.¹² The political point made by the artist is that technology is used as an act of expropriation, as less than 3% of the population in Latin America and less than 10% of Chicano population in the U.S. are wired.

“Cyberspace reproduces almost identically the geopolitical cartography of nonvirtual reality. There are borders and there are people south of the divide...Latinos. That’s why I often describe myself as a “Webback”, illegally crossing the digital borderline and facing the cybermigra”.¹³

In short, Gómez-Peña’s new morphology transforms the body into a secular altar. As this neo-ritual is celebrated through and in the body, identities are transformed, and embodied theory is somehow apprehended. A literal example of the way in which body and theory collide is provided by Gómez-Peña’s collaborator Juan Ybarra, who became the centrepiece in a human altar created collectively at the Instituto Hemisférico in Lima, Peru. In the performer’s arms and legs were written the words of the piece, mainly supplications and thoughts produced by the audience. So where have we landed, finally? What realizations have the subversion of the docile, methodological and theorized body achieved? Personally, I believe performance activism cannot antedate or overcome culture as such, but it can percolate into its most obscure and marginal forms. This percolation activates a more genuine relationship between the one that looks, the one whose body is being offered in communion, and the space of interaction. As such, performance activism revitalizes the act of performance itself. In the last instance, and despite being a re-cycled performance, a collage of endless topical references, performance activism liberates the body from the stagnation of self-defensive, border-closing techniques, and dubious cultural homogeneity.

NOTES

¹ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 28.

² Said, *Culture and Imperialism* xiv.

³ Gómez-Peña, 'A Binational performance pilgrimage' 25.

⁴ This question I have borrowed from Derrida, who uses it at the beginning of his essay on Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty. See *Writing and difference*, 213.

⁵ For more information on Gómez-Peña's views on censorship, or the cyber-placazo, see the artist's blog at: <http://www.pochanostra.com/dialogues/2005/12/02/cyber-placazo-gomez-pena-on-censorship-in-the-us/>

⁶ Gómez- Peña, *Ethno-techno* 78-81.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 78-9

⁸ *Ibid.*, 79

⁹ Schechner, *Future of Ritual* 14-15.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 81. Gómez-Peña describes ethnocyborgs as "one quarter stereotype, one-quarter audience projection, one quarter esthetic artefact, and one quarter unpredictable personal/social monster (81).

¹² See Gómez-Peña, *Dangerous Border Crossers* 55. Some of the cyborgs featuring in the famous Mexterminator Project (1995), a critique of US immigration rules and bicultural relationships include: "La Morra Diabólica", a deranged teenage schoolgirl who tortures blonde dolls and pisses on stage; "El Paramilitary Samurai", a Super Nintendo mercenary who practices cross-dressing and Aztec karate; and "El True Illegal Alien", a naked green extra-terrestrial who incarnates Anglo-American fears of invasion.

¹³ Gómez-Peña, *Dangerous Border Crossers* 113.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 113.

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