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Guillermo Gómez-Peña: Dragging Representation

*Soy el otro fuera de mí
el otro dentro de tí
the other tras de tí.*

Guillermo Gómez-Peña

Guillermo Gómez-Peña, a Mexican performance artist living in the United States explores transculturation at the junctures of opposing societies, cultures and languages. His work combines multiple media including printed text, video, plastic arts and theater. Through performance art Gómez-Peña blends dramatic techniques from popular theater, "happenings" and political "art actions." When staging monologues and performances that focus on immigration, border politics and multiculturalism, Gómez-Peña¹ adorns himself in a colorful array of kitsch. A partial catalogue of his costume in "Border Brujo," a piece Gómez-Peña performed from 1988-90, reveals a hodgepodge of cultural stereotypes: A mariachi *sombrero*, a necklace of plastic bananas, wrestler masks, dark glasses, a plastic heart, a pachuco hat, skeleton earrings, feathers, punk spikes (on his hand and wrist), an American flag wrist watch, a collection of buttons (Batman, a punk skull [with a mohawk], "I accept tips," "Enjoy Coca Cola," "FDR" [Frente Democrático Revolucionario], "Illegal," an icon of the *Virgen de Guadalupe*), and a myriad

other odds and ends visually evoke the cultural mosaic of Gómez-Peña's performance persona. Plastering himself with a (con)fusion of "signs,"² Gómez-Peña creates a collage-like "text" with his body.³ The disorienting aesthetic of his text signifies on a number of different levels. His costume mirrors the disnarrative structure of the performance poem that he recites, which reiterates in turn the disjunctive experience of life on and around the U.S.-Mexico border.

This essay represents one part of a larger inquiry into the potential for radical political activism in contemporary art and literature. I am examining the manner in which Hispanic writers attempt to articulate political critiques of hegemonic systems to which they themselves pertain.⁴ How, in other words, is it possible to create a counter-hegemonic discourse (whether feminist, postcolonial or neoavant-garde) within hegemonic discourse without artificially fusing the needs of Others within a political mask of identity (albeit minority or alternative) politics? I am attempting to theorize a paradoxically unlocalizable position of critique that changes "places" according to the subject's shifting situation with(in) the signs of hegemonic discourses. Although unlocalizable, this position of critique, a locus I call the *postmodern position*, remains internally contained within a larger, uncontainable system.

In this essay I analyze the manner in which Gómez-Peña manipulates costume to create ethnic, gender and national stereotypes that subvert the notion of "pure" identity. My contention is that by (con)fusing cultural stereotypes and icons, Gómez-Peña positions himself *with(in)* the conventions of representation in order to contest the vulgar images with which dominant culture stigmatizes subaltern "Others." Through the embodiment of stereotypes, Gómez-Peña inhabits and de-naturalizes the images with which hegemonic culture contains and subordinates minority Others. In order to read the complete text of Gómez-Peña's performance it is necessary to first highlight the manner in which he layers his text within a continuum of embedded cultural signs.

Rasquachismo: Re-Presenting the Barrio

“Reading” Isaac Artenstein's video recording of Gómez-Peña's *Border Brujo* performance reveals the visual component of the text. In *Border Brujo*, Gómez-Peña creates a visual vertigo by performing on stage behind an unconventional altar (that was built by Chicano artist Felipe Almada). A bric-a-brac assembly of props—shampoo containers, televisions, megaphones, knives, doll heads, plastic hamburgers, tequila bottles, puppets and votive candles, to name a few—surrounds and grows out of the *Brujo's* body/costume/text. One might argue that the scope of this visual farrago impedes the articulation of a sustained message. How can we make sense out of this image? Like Jameson in the Bonaventura Hotel, the viewer experiences a (postmodern) visual overload "that can only be characterized as a milling confusion" (43). Careful reading of elements from this text can isolate parodic logic. His banana necklace, for example, references neo-colonial exploitation in Latin America and the discursive creation of "Banana Republics." The manner in which the fruit has been marketed (the Chiquita Banana, for example) underscores the collusion between neo-colonial economic practices and the advertising industry's manipulation of cultural images. The fact that the bananas are plastic, furthermore, simultaneously pokes fun at the superficial nature of a consumer culture that naively buys such contrived images. My point, however, is not to find the logic in discrete elements of his costume, but rather to examine the performance at large as an intentional (con)fusion of signs.

Interpreting the performance in the context of Southern California reveals a recognizable style, a poetics, that recurs throughout much Chicano art. Tomás Ybarra-Frausto describes the cluttered pastiche of home *altares* as an example of an aesthetic sensibility called *rasquachismo*: "The rasquache inclination piles pattern on pattern, filling all available space with bold display. . . . The composite organization has a sort of wild abandon yet is subtly controlled with precise repetitions, replications, and oppositional orders of colors, patterns, and designs" (157). Gómez-

Peña's use of the *rasquache* effect underscores the convergence of political and aesthetic issues.

As Ybarra-Frausto points out, the home *altar* aesthetic reiterates the milieu of the *barrios*:

The visual distinctiveness of the barrio unites the improvisational attitude of making do with what's at hand to a traditional and highly evolved decorative sense. . . . In yards and porches, for example, traditional items like religious shrines (capillas) and pottery mingle with objects from mass culture, such as pink plastic flamingos of plaster animal statuary. Throughout, there is a profusion of textures and colors and a jumble of things. (156)

By juxtaposing objects of mass culture with traditional iconography the Border Brujo's costumes and (Almada's) *altar* replicate the (con)fusion of urban signs that characterizes a *barrio*. This practice of juxtaposition is obviously not attempting to render a realistic representation of life in the area, but rather to echo the aesthetic ambiance of a *barrio*. In this way Gómez-Peña's text could be said to constitute a *mise en abyme* of Mexican-American urban culture. The visual text manifests a condensed view of the *barrio*. Close inspection of this costume and altar, furthermore, reveals that the representation contains within it the larger aesthetic context from which it arises.

Ybarra-Frausto specifically notes that Gómez-Peña manipulates "rasquache artifacts, codes, and sensibilities from both sides of the border" (161). Madeleine Grynsztejn arrives at a similar interpretation of one of Almada's altars:

This accretion of material and information accurately conveys a sense of the complexity of the border and the cross-pollination of ideas and cultures. Almada couches his vision in the formal language of Mexican folk and even of pre-Hispanic art, thus consciously allying himself with his indigenous roots, even as he acknowledges his community's and his art's own hybrid natures. (29)

Collaborating with Almada, and performing as part of Almada's altar, Gómez-Peña elaborates a kind of double border *rasquachismo*. He appropriates and merges Chicano poetics with Mexican and "Gringo" counterparts to engender an intertextual conflation of transnational signs.

If Gómez-Peña's body/text emerges from the altar aesthetic, his performance also stages the process (an alter process) of altar construction. In terms of narrative, the movement does not

follow a linear "progression." In his preface to a performance entitled "Califas," Gómez-Peña writes that "the structure is disnarrative and modular, like the border experience" (67) This statement could describe any of his performances. In his most recent book, The New World Border: Prophecies, Poems and Loquerías for the End of the Century (1996), Gómez-Peña begins his acknowledgments by declaring that his texts exist in a continual state of transition: "Since I never 'finish' a text, there have been several versions (not just drafts) of most of the pieces included in the book, and there will probably be others which are yet to be realized." Reading Gómez-Peña as critics, then, we are faced with the problem of determining how to read an ever-changing, but never evolving, series of "texts." Here I would like to focus on movement within individual performances, particularly with respect to the manner in which Gómez-Peña punctuates his representation of constant transformation. Passing from one flat character to another, he repeatedly adds and removes articles of clothing (wigs, hats, glasses, bandanas, wrestling masks etc.) to signify shifts of character. In his introduction to "New World Border" he emphasizes the relative non-existence of traditional characters: "There is really no plot, nor recognizable 'characters.' The performers on stage are mere media images and virtual reality clones of our own (fictionalized) identities" (21). As Gómez-Peña varies his image by changing costume, the visual text perpetually moves. It is this aesthetic of change, more so than the individual characters, that shapes Gómez-Peña's performance of transformation.

Dressing Across the Border

At several places in "Border Brujo" Gómez-Peña "becomes a transvestite." The concept of "transvestism" proposed by Marjorie Garber in her book, Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety, lends itself particularly well to Gómez-Peña's manipulation of vestimentary signifiers because it can be applied to cultural as well as gendered "cross-dressing." Garber sustains that transvestism indicates a place of "category crisis" in culture: "a failure of

definitional distinction, a borderline that becomes permeable, that permits of border crossings from one (apparently distinct) category to another" (16). Gómez-Peña transgresses categories precisely in order to draw into question the existence of clearly delineated cultural classifications. Analyzing his performance in terms of transvestism will underscore the positionality from which Gómez-Peña articulates his critique.

Garber describes cross-dressing as an interrogation of gender categories: "Drag is the theoretical and deconstructive social practice that analyzes these structures from within, by putting in question the 'naturalness' of gender roles through the discourse of clothing and body parts" (151). The spatial metaphors of this paradigm are striking: Drag constitutes a critique of gender that functions from within. One can never get outside of gender. We can change clothes as well as our sexual make up (the most extreme case being sex-change operations), but we cannot get outside of our bodies. By cross dressing, a drag performer (in this case Gómez-Peña, performing on the U.S.-Mexico border) simultaneously underscores and effaces the boundary. In Garber's words, "to transgress against one set of boundaries was to call into question the inviolability of both" (32). The Border Brujo problematizes the question of identity in precisely this manner. He does not move towards a permanent resolution of binary oppositions but instead delineates a fluid, non-fixed, condition that is subject to continuous change.

Although the transvestite is by no means the central protagonist figure in Gómez-Peña's performance (there is none), I would argue that the process of "cross dressing" defines the manner in which Gómez-Peña articulates his multi-coded critique. Gender represents only one of the *brujo's* transformations, yet the metaphor of transvestism applies to the manner in which Gómez-Peña dresses across a myriad borders. Similarly, in a study of Carmelita Tropicana, a Cuban-American performance artist who dresses at times as a man, José Esteban Muñoz underscores the wide reaching application of cross dressing: "Drag's elasticity extends to depict various subjectivities that traverse not only gender-identification but also national-, class-, and

geographical- identity coordinates" (44). Cross dressing in performance art, explicitly calls attention to the representation of gender as well as social, cultural and class boundaries. Gómez-Peña moves between performance personas in much the same way as a transvestite's appearance moves between genders. Oscillating between the immediately recognizable signs of *pachucos*, *mariachis*, wrestlers, *machos*, transvestites and other "Others," Gómez-Peña employs a brand of parodic "transvestism" that crosses and transgresses sexual, cultural and discursive borders.

At the risk of sounding ironic, Gómez-Peña is not a 'real' transvestite. While the fictional nature of his transvestism might seem an obvious consequence of theatrical performance, this act of simulation reflects Gómez-Peña's theoretical concept of identity. A natural, or un-simulated act of transvestism would almost certainly speak from a different position. Notice how Chicano performance artist Luis Alfaro gives testimony to his experience as a cross-dressing Chicano queer in a performance entitled "Cuerpo Politizado:"

I am a Queer Chicano.
A native in no land.
An orphan of Aztlán.
The *poch*o son of farmworker parents. (235)

Here Alfaro stakes a claim of identity, albeit within the doubly marginalized no-place of Chicano homosexuals. While the quote above reflects his personal struggle for identity, in "Vistiendo en Drag" Alfaro speaks in a collective voice, representing the history of the Chicano transvestites with whom he identifies:

We all aspired
(*los señoritas* of Hype-rion Avenue)
to the *Mexicana* icon.
Preferred long-suffering *mujeres*
over *chichona* Jayne Mansfields.
Drag, it is a man's field ... (217)

Alfaro represents a very different drag than does Gómez-Peña's parody of a transvestite voice. In contrast to Alfaro, Gómez-Peña's characters do not represent him. Cross-dressing drag, Gómez-Peña neither represents the character of a woman, nor that of a man who identifies

himself as a woman. More so than any particular character or gender, Gómez-Peña performs the *act* of transvestism, the process of changing the surface image of identity. There are times when Gómez-Peña speaks in a "normal" voice and even relates an experience from his own personal history, but he never entirely identifies with any of his characters.

In another of Gómez-Peñas performances, "1992," he recalls a number of personal memories. At one point he flashes back to a radio interview in Berlin. "But Mr. Gómez," asked the interviewer: "Where exactly do you live? & Who are you really?" (117). His answer expresses a perpetual state of marginality:

Soy el otro fuera de mí
el otro dentro de tí
the other tras de tí. (117)

Gómez-Peña-the-performer—*the other outside of me, the other in you, the other behind you*—paradoxically denies the very possibility of authentic representation. As Gómez-Peña writes in his poem "El 7 Máscaras Super Héroe Fronterizo," he really doesn't represent anything or anyone in particular:

Yo soy el vato relamido
que sí, que no
el va todo lamido
soy nada & en la nada me revuelco. (155)

At the same time, nevertheless, this masked anonymity allows him to conjugate a collective (non)identity that opposes the hegemony of dominant culture from the *inside*:

En la movida
me explayo & multiplico. (155)

Rather than speaking from a firm platform of identity, Gómez-Peña always seems to represent another "Other," marginalized between dominant discourses. He clearly distances his work from a testimonial perspective. In "1992" he questions his own existence, his direction, and even the link between Gómez-Peña-the-author and his writing:

I'm not even sure there is a North really
 not even sure I really exist
 do I?
 do I?
 do I?
 I see my face on the page
 but I hardly recognize it. (116)

By problematizing his own identity while performing that of "Others," Gómez-Peña underscores the tension that defines, and complicates, his agenda of political performance activism. He attempts to uphold the values of the disenfranchised without going so far as to promote an attitude of minority nationalism.

Since the policy of border control operates through the xenophobic construction of negative images and stereotypes, it is difficult to mount opposition without paradoxically asserting a (counter)discourse of minority nationalism. The concept of border control presumes a definitional division between, *us* and *them* that Gómez-Peña's performances attempt to highlight and deconstruct. Instead of predicating resistance on a praxis of identity politics, Gómez-Peña invokes a parodic posture of non-identity. Rather than attempting to represent the situation on the border as a polarizing *us* versus *them* struggle for hegemony, Gómez-Peña interrogates the mechanism of representation itself. His critique is akin to the "politics of hybridity" that Muñoz associates with Carmelita Tropicana: "Identity politics need not be rooted in essentialized notions of the self and simplistic understanding of resistance. . . . A politics of hybridity works best within and outside the dominant public sphere insofar as the very performance of a hybrid self contests the ascendant racial, sexual, and class strictures" (50). Gómez-Peña's performances work *within* the dominant sphere of popular representation, and contest the confines of gender, class, ethnicity and social stereotypes. *Dragging representation*, Guillermo Gómez-Peña cross-dresses the hegemonic trappings of identity politics.

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¹Originally from Mexico City, Gómez-Peña now lives in Los Angeles. He co-founded a performance troupe, Poyesis Genética in San Diego (1981), which after several incarnations, became the Taller de Arte Fronterizo/Border Arts Workshop in 1985. These groups staged collaborative, interdisciplinary performance interventions on the U.S.-Mexican border. In 1986 Gómez-Peña began co-editing and publishing a bilingual and

binational magazine, The Broken Line/La Línea Quebrada with the express purpose of highlighting issues on the border. Additionally, he has collaborated on large-scale installations, photomontages and radio programs. In 1994 Gómez-Peña released a compact disc entitled Borderless Radio (Word of Mouth Productions) compiling solo and collaborative works from 1985-1993. He has been awarded a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship (1991), a Prix de la Parole (1989), and a New York Bessie Award (1989). Many of his performance texts as well as the bulk of his critical articles are compiled in his books Warrior for Gringostroika (1993) and The New World Border: Prophecies, Poems and Loquerías for the End of the Century (1996). All Gómez-Peña quotes in this essay correspond to the pagination in Warrior for Gringostroika unless otherwise noted.

²Based on the latin root--*confundere*, meaning "to pour together" or "mix"--I am interested in texts that manipulate semiotic (con)fusion as a strategy to foreground cultural and political confusion. A text is a collection of *signs* that articulates "meaning" through internal and external (hence intertextual) juxtaposition. Since meaning is constituted through difference (De Saussure), and *différance* (Derrida), textual articulation does not arise from a simple cumulative addition or concretion. Gómez-Peña stages (con)fusion as a means to critique (what Homi Bhabha has called) "the disjunctive cultural 'signs' of these (postmodern) times" (222).

³In another performance, as the "Warrior for Gringostroika," he literally writes on his body, scrawling "Please don't discover me!" across his chest. See the photograph on page 138 of Warrior for Gringostroika.

⁴ See the preface and introduction to Richard Terdiman's Discourse/Counter-Discourse: The Theory and Practice of Symbolic Resistance in Nineteenth-Century France for a discussion of the paradox inherent to discursive resistance.