THE ECONOMY OF PERFORMANCE: GÓMEZ-PEÑA'S *NEW WORLD BORDER*

Jill S. Kuhnheim

None of Guillermo Gómez-Peña's achievements fits comfortably within the category of literature. He is primarily known in the art community for his work on border cultural life; this work presently includes performance art, videos, CDs, books, and sites on the Internet, as well as theoretical articles and interviews. Gómez-Peña deterritorializes his production in several categories simultaneously, expanding the concept of the border to interrogate academic disciplines as well as linguistic, social, and epistemological domains. His boundary crossing, rather than marginalizing his creation, has enabled him in some ways to "crossover," reaching larger audiences and achieving a relatively high degree of recognition in several fields. His work has been recognized by literary critics such as Homi Bhabha; he has been invited as lecturer or artist-in-residence at many college campuses; he has performed at such elite cultural institutions as the Smithsonian and Whitney Museums and received many grants, including the MacArthur Genius Award. As a performer of border identities, Gómez-Peña can occupy multiple sites and no particular site at the same time; this can be a very useful, tactical approach to the artist's aesthetic and political projects. At the same time, this dislocation raises important questions about the line

between performance and text, self and community, subversive and commercial uses of art, and the positions we might assume to critique this kind of work.

A hybrid identity is also a slippery one; it allows a person to mutate, to slide between cultures, languages, and histories, assuming a marginal identity like the trickster, a complex emblem of cultural otherness. The elusiveness of this figure enables the border artist to avoid definition and, perhaps, also to escape criticism. However, in order to examine border identity, we must in some ways fix it, for, as Peggy Phelan puts it, "identity is perceptible only through a relation to an other—it is a form of both resisting and claiming the other, declaring the boundary where the self diverges from and merges with the other" (13).[i] Boundaries are inherent to the definition of subject positions, and a border identity is no exception. Gómez-Peña must inevitably participate in the activity that he is critiquing in order to make his critique. In assuming an evaluative stance and situating Gómez-Peña's work in terms of a particular discipline, I am in a similar situation as I read against the interdisciplinarity of his work in order to evaluate what happens when his performance is textualized. How does it function as literature, an aesthetic experience defined by reading words and images on the page? Reading Gómez-Peña's text in terms of its rhetorical techniques will also lead us to consider how it works in relation to the political project he proposes; in particular, his construction of a border identity—an identity that he does not simply declare but deploys in his work.

In a well-known essay from 1988, Gómez-Peña claims his own "borderness" (opposing it to "internationalism") and defines his art as a way to "reveal and subvert" mechanisms of mythification of Chicano/Mexican/Anglo identities that "generate semantic interference and obstruct the intercultural dialogue" ("Documented" 132). This early essay calls attention to the need for exchange, and part of the artist's act is to make us aware of the channels for communication. In contrast, in New World Border, he describes "borderness" this way:

> The presence of the hybrid denounces the faults, prejudices and fears manufactured by the self-proclaimed center, and threatens the very raison d'etre of any monoculture, official or not. It reminds us that we are not the product of just one

culture: that we have multiple and transitional identities: that we contain a multiplicity of voices and selves, some of which may even be contradictory. And it tells us that there is nothing wrong with contradiction. (12)

In this recent statement, border identity is based on hybridity and contradiction, and the aim of border art is not to clarify a multicultural dialogue (as in the 1988 essay), but to multiply positions within it. This is a theoretical complication and extension of the author's earlier ideas. Still, it does not answer the question of how the text under consideration *performs* its medley of identities via word and image and what place it allots its audience.

Gómez-Peña has reworked the concept of border identity in different forms since the early 1980s. A section of *The New World Border* entitled "Colonial Dreams/Post-Colonial Nightmares. A Chronicle of Performance Projects (1979–1995)," provides a history of some of the different approaches this performer has used to make the marginal visible. These include appearances in public places, such as sitting on a toilet and reading aloud "epic poetry describing my journey to the United States" (83), and the "Border Brujo" performance monologues, a series of acts that resulted in a video in which Gómez-Peña glides in and out of identities and languages with only a corporeal shift or glance to separate them. In the early 1990s he began to practice reverse anthropology in "The Guatinaui World Tour," in which he and Coco Fusco exhibited themselves as "undiscovered Amerindians" and chronicled the public's reaction to their presence (97). This concept then evolved into "techno-diorama" performances in which the artists invite audience participation in the piece as it happens through comments on the Internet, and then into "The Temple of Confessions," a site on the Internet in which readers are enticed to "confess [their] intercultural cyber-sins" in virtual form. Like his theoretical ideas, these performances are typical of Gómez-Peña's work in that they are continually in process, perpetually mutating into other forms.

Recounting these performances in descriptive chronology is not to reenact them in *New World Border*, but to employ them to another end—to create a portrait of the artist, to track the development of his ideas and to unify his shifting performance personae. The narration historicizes the performances and demonstrates how Gómez-Peña's

focus on border identity has been adapted to different models and moments. This textualization goes against the ephemeral ontology of performance art which "becomes itself through disappearance" (Phelan 146). Peggy Phelan submits that performance is "representation without reproduction" (11), reminding us that its duplication and distance from the "live moment" makes it something else—a product that participates in a reproductive economy. Recording live performances— via words, photos, videos, or CDs—alters them (in terms of both production and consumption). This leads us to a question Philip Auslander poses when considering performance's relation to mass media: which is the referent of which (128)? In contrasting the original performance to its filmed/televised/textualized reproduction, do we privilege the original or, as Auslander suggests, grant it "different cultural authority" (128)? The concept of the cultural authority of the original indeed shifts when we consider a text; moving from art to literature, the aura of originality changes and, in most cases, is separated from material or physical presence. Reading is also a different kind of consumption than viewing; one we can repeat, one that elicits a distinct type of analysis, and that is a more isolated, less interactive experience.[2]

The position of this performance history in *The New World Border* is also significant. It appears about halfway through the text, and what precedes and follows it is a generic mélange, including scripts of performances, letters, poems, essays, and rewritings of songs in a text that concludes with a glossary of "Borderismos." One of the effects of putting the chronology in the center is to frame the narrative of performances with pieces that "perform" in other ways. The accounts of the performances are, in effect, "bordered" by other documents. Like costume changes, switching hats or languages, the generic variety multiplies voices for Gómez-Peña, who is always the central speaker here. Yet this strategy does not undo the unity of his textual persona or really call attention to the disjunction between his biographical self and his performance identity (or, discursively, his speaking I and the I spoken about). As we will see in the examples that follow, despite an appearance of heterogeneity, Gómez-Peña primarily maintains a unified speaking position in *The New World Border*, one that ultimately reinforces his authority as artist and as emblem of a particularly masculine bicultural identity.

The essays in the collection present the theoretical framework sustaining Gómez-Peña's work. Embedding these essays between other kinds of creations—poems, chronicles, performance texts—that strive to *enact* ideas presented provokes a kind of critical distance that encourages detachment from and analysis of the more performative texts. The juxtaposition also calls attention to the mechanical nature of the practice here, for we most frequently find little difference between speaking positions. Despite the generic alternation, there is not a range of narrative "languages," no Bakhtinian social heteroglossia,[3] but one authoritative voice that reinforces itself in different ways.

We find an example of this in the segment entitled "The Free Trade Art Agreement/El Tratado de Libre Cultura," that begins, "I am a migrant performance artist" (5). This piece is an essay, almost a manifesto, about the work of the border artist. After a brief introduction, this selection is followed by the script of a performance, "New World Border: Prophecies for the End of the Century," a dialogue between Gómez-Peña and collaborator Roberto Sifuentes that elaborates the themes of the essay. Early on Gómez-Peña declares:

> I'm the representative of the Liberated Repubic of Aztlán in the signing of an Accord du Free Cultura among the artistas/activistas of the New World Border, ¿que no? . . . I warn you. This ain't performance art but pure Chicano science fiction. Anygúeyes, comenzamos sin translation cha-cha!
>
> Y ahora, nuestro corresponsal en los Estamos Hundidos. . . . (25)

The ideas coincide with the opening statement and other elements in the preceding essay; the principal difference in delivery is the code shifts that alter the position of the reader. The combination of English and Spanish privileges the bilingual reader and the visual over aural comprehension as well, for the double meaning is clearer in the written text. This bilingualism can be understood as a kind of performance of border identity, a performance that's clearly dependent upon our positions as readers. We find a more aggressive positioning of the reader in the performance mode (vs. theoretical discourse) as we are excluded or included depending on our language skills and level of cultural competence.[4] Gómez-Peña interpellates particular readers into specific discursive positions; in doing so, he is not perforating but

declaring (and reinforcing) the boundary between self and other, insider and outsider.

Gómez-Peña continually utilizes this inclusion/exclusion strategy to aggressively position his audience in performance and text. He creates his "other" in the process of creating his "self" (both discursive stances), demonstrating the mutual dependence and antagonism between these positions. He exploits the latter to provoke a response: this is "not your average feel-good multi-culti piece," he overtly states (127). One of the most important elements we lose in the translation from performance to text, then, is a range of response to this antagonism. The audience response is often scripted in *The New World Border* (e.g., the series of callers' responses [116–118], or stage directions such as "audience joins in" or "audience begins to applaud" [135]). These could be the reactions to a particular performance, but they are not identified as such and writing them into the text makes the responses static, like the scripted performance itself.[5] The text does not create dialogue or interaction but the *appearance* of this, implying perhaps as well that responses to Gómez-Peña's work are largely uniform. Including this pseudo-participation serves to reinforce the centrality of the speaker/performer, for all response ultimately comes through him. In this way, Gómez-Peña sustains his cultural and discursive authority and manipulates his readers to either support or reject it.[6]

There is a deceptive hybridity in this text; attempts to multiply personae do not fragment into difference but reproduce like echoes or mirrors. The speaker's identity depends upon an opposition between multiculturalism and a monoculture that he has asserted no longer exists, but that he must reinforce so that he can position himself as a hero destroying it. Ironically then, and in spite of his postmodern desires, Gómez-Peña is perhaps most convincing when he assumes a more conventional speaking position in the text. The segment "Real Life Border Thriller," for example, is an autobiographical piece in which he closes the distance between his historical self and his speaker when recounting an incident of racial paranoia and cultural misunderstanding (55). In this case of "mistaken identity," Gómez-Peña recounts how he was hunted down by the San Diego police after they received the report of a possible kidnapping from two Anglo women suspicious of a Mexican man leaving a restaurant with a blond child (in fact, Gómez-Peña was picking up his son for a weekend visit).

This section is set up as a "real" performance of prejudice in which the dangers of race and gender preconceptions are enacted. Called a "chronicle" in the table of contents, the title reinforces links to both the Western autobiographical tradition and conventions of pulp fiction, but the narrative itself does not overtly problematize the relation between fiction and history. The piece is introduced with a photograph that includes Gómez-Peña and his son, a visual element that adds to the truth-effect, and the veracity of the events recounted is corroborated by real names and dates. The narrative gains force because, unlike the performances or theoretical writings, the protagonist's identity is not created against a set of assumptions about the readers' suppositions but in response to an actual antagonism. In the incident itself, Gómez-Peña is objectified (metaphorically "arrested" even if the literal arrest is avoided) by another's misrecognition; analyzing the recounted episode demonstrates that one of the women's primary mistakes was reading only the surface of the scene they witnessed (brown-skinned man and blond boy equals suspect, Spanish spoken equals coded communication). Trapped in one set of cultural beliefs, they cannot read beyond the visual and aural script. Rather than a performance, the text is a representation of these women's misperception elaborated by the author's anger and speculations about the possible outcomes for a more vulnerable target.

There are also occasional moments of self-reflexivity in *The New World Border*, instances when the disjunction between speaker and persona are heightened. An effective example of this is "The Psycho in the Lobby of the Theater," a poetic confrontation between the first person speaker and an unresponsive man (60–61). In this case, the speaker verbally assaults his listener with his assumptions about who he is, escalating when he receives no response:

> its pointless to keep waiting
> this is the year of the barking dog . . .
> and I'm afraid your fears are . . . much bigger than your
> wishes
> *he stands up, his eyes wide-open, like a fish*
> I shake his hand
> you might be wondering who the hell I am?
> *the man is scared and still unable to reply*

I am your worst fear, caballero
an unpredictable Mexican with a huge mustache
3 chips on his shoulder
and extra-hot sauce on his cobra tongue (61)

The piece ends with an ironic twist as the silent interlocutor finally responds politely to this aggressive assertion of identity: "It's a pleasure to meet you. My name is Mario López. / I came to fix the xerox machine" (61). Gómez-Peña closes the section telling us of his embarrassment, leaving us with the irony of the situation. This is one of the few examples in the text when the relation between the speaker and his presumed audience shifts, for the "I" turns out to be the psycho in the lobby. The confrontation is a self-reflexive moment when the author's truculent positioning of himself and others backfires.

Yet, while this case may appear to problematize the authority of the speaking subject, it is also an instance that exemplifies essentialist notions of identity underlying Gómez-Peña's work. All the interlocutor has to do to contradict Gómez-Péna's positioning of him is reveal that he has a Hispanic name—this appears to automatically situate him as one of "us," not "them." The speaker categorizes him and then re-categorizes him—converting him from North American, purposeless "psycho" to regular Mexican or Chicano working guy—in both cases the result is a simplification rather than a complication of identity. While Gómez-Peña reveals how his identity is ensnared by others' prejudices and misconceptions, he is also trapped in his own set of cultural terms and preconceptions.

Gómez-Peña is continually enacting the idea of making the margins visible, and one of the features almost all the texts in *The New World Border* share is that they are all stories of being noticed, of wanting to be noticed. This desire for visibility is a response to the lack of public recognition of a border position, and making this possibility perceptible can be an important starting point for change. Calling attention to border identity is not necessarily transforming it, however; like the subject-object oppositions we have observed, moving the border to the middle can also reinforce these inherited places (center-margin, speaker-listener, male-female, etc.) rather than undoing them. In her book, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (a text subtending much of my thinking here), Peggy Phelan proposes that there are also subver-

sive possibilities in *going unnoticed*. Her entire argument is based on the idea that a false binary has been created between the power of visibility and the impotency of invisibility (13). Representation and display, which both depend upon more traditional positions of authority, have been valued over the power of silence, of the spectator. While Gómez-Peña wards off criticism in several places by reminding us that he cannot do everything, fight every battle, his technique of flaunting border identity leaves too many dualities in place, fixing both him and his readers in predetermined places that limit possibilities for transformation.[7]

The absolutes of gendered identities, for example, are reinforced rather than taken apart in this text. In several instances in *The New World Border*, he pokes fun at possible feminist critiques, closing off dialogue with these perspectives rather than opening it (for example, his references to the "Fem-arte" group and the "implacable Chicana feminist leader 'La Licuadora'" [146] or his flip response to a comment on his association with women artistic collaborators [159]). The book includes many traditional female images, both verbal and visual, and near the end of the text he allies woman with the land: "on whose breasts will I be resting next century? / on whose land will I be resting for good?" (234). At the beginning he includes this line that reveals the violent conventionality of his masculinist stance: "The work of the artist is to force open the matrix of reality to introduce unsuspected possibilities" (6). Rather than sabotage it, this kind of aggressive penetration clearly reproduces traditional oppressive power structures.

There is a clash between how Gómez-Peña defines border identities—as multiple, heterogeneous, subversive, transitional—and the unified speaking authority with which he deploys them. While he frequently turns a self-conscious eye upon himself, this scrutiny uncovers an essentialized identity in *The New World Border*. As we have seen, the aggressive speaking position employed also constitutes the text's audience in specific ways—we are either in or out, with him or against him, trapped in a binary arrangement that seems to preclude movement across identities. This kind of side-taking has a facile appeal, for it offers simple solutions to complex situations, and I find this aspect of the work especially troubling. Gómez-Peña appears to participate in a banking concept of identity (to extend the economic metaphor); he

chooses to consolidate border identity, to be representative, instead of exploring the multiplicity of both real and imagined identities.[8]

Gómez-Peña might shift the balance in his work by making more of the moments when identities are less coherent, more contradictory, moving toward another concept of economy. Instead of a banker, he could position his speaker as a manager of resources—what if Mario López actually said his piece? This stance might allow him to explore the potential of incorporating some of the more paradoxical elements of performance (other voices, audience response, clash between image and words, crossing over into different performance personae) into his textual construction of identity. For, while Guillermo Gómez-Peña's work in *The New World Border* calls attention to border identities, it also signals the necessity of expanding the strategies of identity politics beyond visibility and toward more broadly transformative possibilities.

Notes

I am appreciative of my graduate students', Danielle Maxson and Mark Streeter, insights into Gómez-Peña's work and of Professor Laurie Beth Clark's comments on an earlier version of this paper.

1. Stuart Hall defines the production of a postcolonial identity as a combination of two apparently contradictory positions: one that is based on an imaginary coherence or essence and another founded on differences, discontinuities, and otherness (112). As Hall proposes, a consciousness of the interaction, interdependence, and historical construction of these two positions is essential to our discussion of the production of cultural identity here.

2. Less interactive at least in conventional textual forms; the Internet offers other possibilities for responding to texts. In Gómez-Peña's websites that I visited, however ("The Virtual Barrio@The Other Frontier," "Temple of Confessions," and "Of Mariachis, Spam and Santa Pocahontas"), while the reader can sometimes express an opinion, our access to responses is mediated by Gómez-Peña.

3. For a complete discussion of this idea, see "Discourse in the Novel" from *The Dialogic Imagination*.

4. For example, after a list of Hispanic performance artists that appear in the glossary to *New World Border*, he addresses us directly: "Dear

Reader, if you don't recognize any of these names, you are an incurable ethnocentric" (243).

5. An alternative to this scripting could be to include a variety of responses from different performances or to allude to audience response in a more general way.

6. Tony Bennett insightfully connects the construction of an audience with Pierre Bourdieu's statement that public opinion does not exist but that its effects are real (146). Bennett uses this idea to support his argument that authors organize into being their particular readers or audiences. In Gómez-Peña's case, this audience is constructed as either in-on-the-joke or as the brunt-of-the-joke in a fundamentally dualistic manner.

7. Avery Gordon theorizes the problem of the hypervisibility and the unvisibility of the African American man in relation to Ralph Ellison's work, noting that it "underscores the need to conceptualize visibility as a *complex system of permission and prohibition, punctuated alternately by apparitions and hysterical blindness*" (17; original emphasis). Her analysis reinforces the idea that there is no simple relation between being seen and unseen.

8. I find strong alternative possibilities for undermining the authoritative structure of subject positions in performances such as that of Angelika Festa, who Phelan describes as upsetting the stable set of assumptions about the positions of the theatrical exchange in her refusal to participate in representational economy at all (163). Festa's performances portray disappearance itself. Anna Deveare Smith offers another alternative in her presentation of a variety of identities in *Fires in the Mirror* and *Twilight*, her theater pieces based on the Crowne Point and Los Angeles uprisings, respectively. Tania Modelski has called Smith's work "an expression of Adornian non-identity in which the subject does not seek to identify or categorize the object, but to let it be in its difference" (61).

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