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Guillermo Gómez-Peña

Interviewed by Mildred Thompson

Guillermo Gómez-Peña is a performance artist known for his cross-cultural texts, including performances as a borderland disk jockey of the future and as a cultural artifact (such as in Year of the White Bear, in which he and artist Coco Fusco exhibited themselves as recently discovered aboriginal Amerindians in the lobby of several museums, including the Smithsonian's Museum of Natural History). He was born in Mexico City and relocated to California in 1978. Since that time, his installations and performances have consistently interrogated the cultures of the Americas with incisive wit and provocative political analysis. A major source of the powerful effect he achieves in his work is his refusal to allow the audience a formal vantage point from which they view "objectively" the social situation in which they are in fact always intimately implicated. His point of view draws in a whole panoply of racial backgrounds, popular culture, social action, formal creativity, and a theatrical embodiment of individual human life. His work is the inherently provocative incarnation of the edgy, energetic postutopian America of the next millennium. He has received a MacArthur Foundation Grant, among other awards. Gómez-Peña has also published a book of his writings, Gringostroika Warrior, and a two-CD set of his radio works, Borderless Radio. The following conversation took place in 1993.

Mildred Thompson: The set for some of your performances, a dead chicken hanging, feathers, and candles, is itself very strong. Do these elements have a definite symbolism?

Guillermo Gómez-Peña: In terms of the chicken, there is of course a literal meaning that I am particularly interested in, but that doesn't exclude other possibilities. The literal meaning is that in Spanish the migrant workers are derogatorily referred to as *pollos*—chickens. In the thirties, the Texas Rangers used to hang migrant workers. So the image of the hanging chicken is a very powerful and sinister archetypal image of violence towards migrant workers. So that is perhaps the first reading of the image. But since a lot of the work I do explores the territory of cultural misunderstanding, and the border is also one in which symbols crack open and metaphors dilute or fracture or reshape themselves, I also welcome misreadings of the chicken. One common misreading is that of the use of the chicken in witchcraft, *santeria*, voodoo, *candomblé*, which often scares people. Many times in past performances where I have used dead chickens on the stage, people have this stereotypical image of the chicken as an object for witchcraft. And in the history of the South, as Keith Antar Mason has reminded me, African Americans would be hanged for stealing chickens.

Thompson: And the candles and feathers?

Gómez-Peña: As far as the feathers go, most of the characters I work with at Highways Performance Space are mixtures of multiple traditions, but all together they create a kind of cyber-identity, a kind of pastiche of identities, and I hope to embody these multiple identities on a stage. This particular character I'm working with, El Aztec High-Tech, has a very stylized mariachi suit which I designed, an Aztec headdress, a number of buttons coming from all political causes, heavy metal paraphernalia, the chest piece, and these very stylized dark glasses, this low rider touch, this Chicano touch. So I am very interested in creating characters which are hybrids. Each character contains a multiplicity of selves and carries a multiplicity of traditions on the stage. In terms of the candles—

I think that I am very much interested in a kind of portable theater, in a theater that can fit in a suitcase, low-tech theater—creating a total experience out of very simple elements. Candles have always been powerful sources for transforming the environment in a very rich way, in a way that electric lights cannot possibly do. And they are also sources of concentration for us. Every time that we lose concentration on the stage, we just look at the candles.

Thompson: The use of the boombox tape recorder was very reminiscent of *Krapp's Last Tape*—one man on a stage with a tape recorder, and him talking into it. But Beckett's stage setting doesn't have the symbolism, just the guy with the tape recorder.

Gómez-Peña: Working it out. Trying to deal with who he is and how he's become what he's become. Until you said it, I hadn't seen the relationship.

Thompson: Krapp records everything he's going through, and he plays back and plays forward, and it's his own voice—do you use that often?

Gómez-Peña: Yes. In the mid-'80s many performance colleagues felt that performance art had become so artificial, so infra-structurally and technically complex that we really needed to go back to the basics once more, to recapture the spoken word, to do work that was easily tourable, and also to go back to the basic items of popular culture. People in Mexico, just like in the African-American community, utilize the ghetto blaster in many ways; the ghetto blaster has multiple functions. A ghetto blaster in a car can turn the car into a nightclub. A ghetto blaster in a park can turn the park into a party. Walking down the street with a ghetto blaster, you can make an existential statement. The ghetto blaster becomes a companion, an extension of yourself, an extension of your mind; through the radio you view other realities. And the idea that the ghetto blaster is a musical instrument is something I've been working with since the mid-'80s. I arrive on stage with a couple of tapes, and I can switch from English radio to Spanish radio to one tape, change tapes, then go back to radio, and then intertwine my text into the radio and the musical patterns coming out of the ghetto

blaster. I use it very much as a musical instrument. Also, because I really get inspired by popular culture, youth with ghetto blasters completely inspires me.

Thompson: I find that your whole theme is prophetic. Do you feel that what you are saying is a prophecy, your relationship to the migration of the Mexicans?

Gómez-Peña: Before 1988, my world view was very utopian. Since the big smoke began, the big change, of the last four years, a change that I began just artificially to locate as beginning in the Tiananmen Square massacre—and that led to several international incidents, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the fall of “real socialism,” the fall of several Latin American dictatorships, the invasion of Panama, the cease-fire in El Salvador, the L.A. insurrection—we have been dealing with four years of incredible complexity when we have been unable to digest anything. And I find that what has happened in my work is that my vision has become distorted. Basically, the kind of world I am trying to articulate in recent texts is what I call end-of-the-century society. Of course I push reality to extremes, and I tend to interweave it with fiction. As I put it in one of the lines of the performance, we are living in a cyberpunk film directed by José Martí and Ted Turner. Yes, I do believe that we are living unprecedented changes at an incredible speed, and we are perplexed by them. Every day I wake up and I turn on the TV, and a major structural change in the world has taken place, and I haven’t even digested the one of the night before.

Thompson: It appears that these are isolated incidents, the fall of the Berlin Wall and so on. Do you feel that it’s really all the same force?

Gómez-Peña: In a sense, I feel that these are really the birth pangs of the new millennium. And especially now—we have been talking about the need to create the epic of the end of the century, the need to find an epic voice to describe this epic drama—we are living now through a series of incredible tragedies. Paraguay is completely flooded, the Iguazu waterfalls just disappeared last week, the city of Guadalajara exploded—several kilometers in a working class neighborhood,

and L.A. was on fire. Our continent is going through tremendous pains. And certainly I feel that this is linked with this triple end, the end of the decade and the century and the millennium, and with the beginning of a new society.

Thompson: Do you feel that the new society is already here?

Gómez-Peña: Yes, I do.

Thompson: You do a piece in which you say “art nostalgia, quality control,” and I wanted you to explain that.

Gómez-Peña: One of the things I am trying to investigate in my work is trans-culture, and what is happening to Latin American culture when it crosses the border, how the U.S. creates simulacra of authenticity, of Latin culture, how Latin America chooses through the departments of tourism and culture to broadcast itself to the outside. There is a text in this new performance, which I will call “The New World Border,” that deals very much with this official trans-culture, or what I call Free Trade Art. This, or the amigoization of the North, this kind of phony Latino culture without thorns, without barbed wire, without viscera, without blood and saliva, this homogenized kind of Latino American culture that is crafted to appeal to the desire of American and European yuppies. It often gets mistaken for what otherwise would be the true cultural achievements of the Latin American population within the U.S., whereas in fact it is the opposite. It is coming from above, and it is programmed perfectly to offer a simulacrum of peaceful coexistence and racial harmony. I in fact propose as an antidote to this official trans-culture, to this simulacrum of Latin America, to these inflatable Fridas and chili capsules and holographic naked mariachis that I talk about, I oppose this other culture coming from within, from underneath, this culture coming from a grass-roots level, this culture produced by the various communities who act in friction with everyday reality. There are two sources of identity for us: one imposed by the state, and one coming from within—or multiple identities coming from within, and those are the ones that interest me more; they are much more fluid, open-ended, and they allow for hybrids, for transition, for multiplicity, for duality.

For example, there is a difference between the post-earthquake rock and roll produced by the youth of Mexico City, which is an attempt to chronicle the pain of the city after the earthquake, this culture of reconstruction...

Thompson: The same sort of thing will happen in Los Angeles...

Gómez-Peña: ...versus the Latino boom created by Broadway tycoons and Hollywood moguls. I think that we often tend to mistake one for the other, but they are very very different. I oppose the Northern model of multiculturalism, which is a Dantean model, the *flâneur* who descends to the South, who descends to hell, to Latin America, in search of enlightenment, and then comes back to present what he or she has discovered, versus the multiculturalism of the South, which takes power from the state. And although I oppose the Dantean model of multiculturalism, I subscribe totally to the other one, in the same way that I oppose marginality for us who have experienced it for five hundred years—whereas the dominant culture glorifies marginality because it's an act of privilege for a Western bohemian to be marginal, to live in a bad neighborhood, to hang out with the bad guys, to drink exotic substances, to not have access to the media, to not have a national voice....

Thompson: But they always have their American Express card in their pocket, they don't leave home without it.

Gómez-Peña: And for us marginality is a five-hundred-year-old reality, and in fact what we want is to speak from the center. That's why I think that it's important to not mistake these processes that many people often mistake. In the Chicano community, for example, unlike the Anglo-American community, when an artist begins to get some recognition, he is not distrusted. In New York, if an Anglo-American artist begins to get too much recognition, he is immediately distrusted, because he obviously sold out, he has become commercial, he is not esoteric enough. Whereas I just found out yesterday that my beloved compadre, Amalia Mesa-Bains just won a MacArthur, and that is going to be a fact of celebration for the entire Chicano community, because we don't get MacArthurs that often.

Thompson: You received that grant too. Were you expecting to win it? How have you accepted it, and how have your friends accepted it?

Gómez-Peña: I received it last year. I wasn't expecting it at all. And as I say, for the most part the alternative arts community, the chicano community, and all my artists of color colleagues, have celebrated with me very much, and I have felt incredible gratitude. But it has also created incredible distrust in the dominant community, because they are used to seeing chicanos as disempowered, they are used to seeing us as emerging voices—

Thompson: *Always emerging.*

Gómez-Peña: This is so they *can* discover us, so they have the privilege to discover us, you know? And when suddenly we are speaking from the center, with access to the media, and there is a symmetry, they immediately distrust us. They wish that Guillermo was ill, poor, and unknown, as I was a few years ago. But the good thing is that this has given me a little bit more negotiating power, which I can hopefully use to open doors for other colleagues. And it has given my words some extra weight, and I have to be particularly more careful and responsible for what I say, because that has put me in a position of leadership in the chicano community.

Thompson: Do you like that?

Gómez-Peña: Yes and no. Because especially in the last two years, since I received the Prix de la Parole in the International Theater Festival in Montréal the year before I received the MacArthur, my life has been completely scrutinized. My private life has become threatened. And even the tone of the media has changed. Before, they used to deal with the content of my work, and now they want to deal with personal issues, which is not good. This country has a serious problem in making a distinction between having fame and having a national voice, between the culture of hype and the culture of ideas, between being a public intellectual and being a celebrity. And it's very hard to remain in the territory of ideas and public dialogue, and not just to become an icon of Otherness, or a seasonal celebrity. One is constantly fighting for that, because what one

wants to inhabit is a politicized intercultural space, and to use one's public voice to participate in the chronicling of contemporary America and the contemporary American crisis. What this country is undergoing right now is comparable to what many Latin American and African and Eastern European countries are undergoing. There is big trouble in America; there is an undeclared war taking place in the streets of America, and if we don't find very soon the models of peaceful co-existence and intercultural dialogue, we might end this century in a big racial war. I am extremely worried. I feel that what artists and intellectuals can offer is the creation of utopian models, but then the task is how to transfer these utopian models to the political arena, so they don't just remain within the confines of the artworld or the cultural institutions. I think Carlos Fuentes said it well: Our continent is inhabited by extremely imaginative artists and writers and extremely unimaginative politicians. He said that artists and writers have been developing incredible models of peaceful co-existence and cultural fusions, exchanges and dialogues, and yet these models have very rarely transferred to the political arena to create enlightened political systems that really speak to us as Americans in the widest sense of the term, as citizens of the Americas. But hopefully in the '90s we as artists can conquer more central spaces to speak from, and function as cross-cultural diplomats, as counter-journalists, as border pirates, as experimental activists.

Mildred Thompson is a painter and sculptor who has exhibited widely in the United States, Europe, and Africa. This interview was originally part of a longer discussion between Thompson, Gómez-Peña, and Keith Antar Mason.