

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: PERFORMING BORDERS:
 GUILLERMO GÓMEZ-PEÑA

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In *Performing Borders: Guillermo Gómez-Peña*, I examine selected interdisciplinary and multi-media work of contemporary Mexican-American artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña. I develop an alternative set of strategies for reading across-the-border(s) identitarian, artistic and pedagogical encounters in the work of Gómez-Peña. Drawing upon ideas of archive, identity and body in cultural studies, I analyze various performative acts of the artist; varying from visual arts representations, performance art etudes, public art interventions and the written word. As I juxtapose Mexican, Latin American and Latina/o discourses on identity in Gómez-Peña's work, I aim to see where they overlap and where they differ. Moreover, I search for where Gómez-

Peña is creating an identity that is informed by a globalized, cosmopolitan visual culture. I give an account of Gómez-Peña's dialogue with two important identitarian discourses on the Mesoamerican past on both sides of the US-Mexican border: those of Octavio Paz and Aztlán. I analyze the way Gómez-Peña transforms and furthers these two discourses through his reinterpretation of pre-Hispanic codices (*Codex Espangliensis*). Furthermore, I offer a reading of Gómez-Peña's somatic work through its uncanny similarities with the Gonzalo Guerrero figure and discuss a possibility of an identitarian paradigm shift. I examine how Gómez-Peña's performance work reinterprets two theater conventions: Augusto Boal's Forum Theater and the Mexican *carpa*. I present a reading of the "Performative Town Meeting" staged at the Smithsonian in the 1990s, and show how Gómez-Peña blends Boal's engaged theater matrix with *carpa*'s ludic conventions to provoke a conversation about the role and limits of performance art. The dissertation concludes with an analysis of an experimental series of workshops that I taught using Gómez-Peña's performative methodology. I examine how the identitarian movement in Gómez-Peña work translates into a dynamic classroom scenario as I argue inherent links between performance and teaching.

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by

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Introduction

In this doctoral dissertation, I examine selected interdisciplinary and multi-media work of contemporary Mexican-American artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña (1955, Mexico City). Gómez-Peña has earned his notoriety through his performance art, which was where he began in 1978. Since then, he has used a variety of artistic media to create performance art that crosses several social, cultural and linguistic borders. Gómez-Peña's work combines multiple media including printed text, video, plastic arts and theater, utilizing techniques from popular theatre happenings and political art actions.

Gómez-Peña is both a prominent figure in the U.S. Latino art and, at the same time, a controversial one. In 1991, he was the first Latino artist to receive the famous MacArthur "Genius" award and was included on the board of advisers for the future Smithsonian American Latino Museum in Washington DC, advocating for its creation. At the same time, his art doesn't cease to shock some: in 2008 he wasn't allowed to perform at the Polish-German border, due to the intervention of the Polish Catholic church that blocked his entrance to the performing venue. The official reasons were "obscenity" and "iconoclastic images" alluding to figures of Jesus and Virgin Mary on which, according to the church officials, Gómez-Peña built his performance *Mapa Corpo*. He also has been criticized for a "shortsighted" view of the Chicano/a movement and the "trivialization" of the border socio-political complexity by such prominent scholars as Debra A. Castillo. Nevertheless, Gómez-Peña continues to be an active artist

who reaches out to the greater Latino and U.S. public with performances in many venues.

I met Gómez-Peña for the first time in one of his performance workshops, at the University of Connecticut at Storrs, in October 2007. After a week of intense sessions where we put Gómez-Peña's performative methodology into practice, and conversations with both the artists and the participants, I was captivated by his work. I was interested in learning *how* the magic of these workshops and Gómez-Peña's performances happen and can make artists, academics and activists so entrenched in Gómez-Peña's project that they start life-long collaborations. I was also interested in the ways Gómez-Peña seemed to successfully negotiate his own dual identity to create a more inclusive model for himself *and his art*, avoiding (identitarian, artistic, etc.) essentialisms but also easy humanistic utopias. This first impulse to understand the dynamics at play in Gómez-Peña's work led to an over three-year long investigation into the interdisciplinary art and the artist that culminates in this dissertation.

To the date, scholarship has approached Gómez-Peña's work from the perspectives of Chicanismo, performance studies and Lacanian psychoanalysis. Chicano movement from the late 90s has been very critical of Gómez-Peña work and has pointed out to exaggerated artistry and individualism of Gómez-Peña, and his detachment from the Chicano movement goals and ambitions. Elaine Peña, Gómez-Peña's Chican@ scholar and co-editor of his latest anthology of texts, *Ethno-techno*, as well as Debra Castillo, renown U.S. Latino and Hispanic cultures scholar from Cornell, share that

critical perspective. Elaine Peña in a series of conversation at the end of the Ethno-techno argues with Gómez-Peña for his stronger engagement with "the community" (Chicanos) and the anthology ends with a symptomatic to her viewpoint "Ay Guillermo... it's just the first step" (Ethno-techno 290). Debra Castillo has been known for her criticism of Gómez-Peña's construction of "border" as an artistic concept. In her *Border Women: Writing from la Frontera*, she accuses Gómez-Peña of "fabricating" the U.S.-Mexican border and leading "audiences to think that the border represented by this artist is "the" U.S.-Mexican border" (*Border Women* 12).

Theater and performance studies scholarship often looks at Gómez-Peña through a slightly anthropological lens: there is a strong emphasis on the role of ritual in Gómez-Peña's performances (Victor Turner, Richard Schechner and David Kertzer, among others) and a lot of emphasis on the Gómez-Peña's "reverse anthropology" gesture. Theater scholar Laurietz Seda from the University of Connecticut at Storrs and organizer of one of the Gómez-Peña's famous workshops investigates the notion of acting and participation in the volume that she edited in 2009 with a theater scholar Jacqueline Bixler: *Trans/acting: Latin American And Latino Performing Arts*.

There are two important analyses that look into Gómez-Peña throughout the Lacanian psychoanalysis lens. John Ochoa in his article "Bordering on Madness: The Licenciado Vidriera, Guillermo Gómez-Peña and the performance of Liminality" (2002) and Ezequiel Peña in "Reconfiguring Epistemological Pacts: Creating a Dialogue between Psychoanalysis and Chicano/a Subjectivity, a Cosmopolitan Perspective" (2003) are good examples of this approach. Both Ezequiel Peña and John Ochoa talk

about the psychoanalytical underpinnings of the Mexican (in Ochoa) and Chicano (Ezequiel Peña) identitarian ethos. I discuss both of them in the first chapter of this dissertation.

I look at Gómez-Peña's art from an original perspective inspired by the 1994 Diana Taylor and Juan Villegas anthology *Negotiating Performance: Gender, Sexuality and Theatricality in Latin/o America*. This volume was one of the first efforts to combine the U.S. Latino and the Latin American perspectives on performance art. In my dissertation, I follow the Taylor and Villegas logic to consider the broader Americas archive as a whole, yet I go a step further to actually bring to the surface both U.S. Latino and specifically Chicano perspectives and put it vis a vis Mexican and broader Latin American discourses to analyze a specific case of art of Gómez-Peña. I trace both Latin American and U.S. Latino discourses and archives in Gómez-Peña interdisciplinary work, in order to show how he is transgressing and destabilizing the said discourses and archives of identity, theatrical conventions and pedagogical praxis.

While looking at the diverse archives intersecting in Gómez-Peña's work, I discuss elements of these archives that were marginalized within themselves, like the little-known figure of Gonzalo Guerrero, from the Conquest period (in case of the Mexican archive and identitarian discourse) and the oft-forgotten Brazilian theoretician Augusto Boal (in case of Latin American theater at large), who both acquire an important space in this analysis. I also make very specific links between Mexican and Chicano identitarian discourses and artistic conventions as related to Gómez-Peña's work. The last archive and set of conventions I examine is the praxis of teaching in Gómez-Peña's

work. While putting Gómez-Peña's performative methodology into test myself, I examine how Gómez-Peña transgresses pedagogical conventions and how can this can or cannot be incorporated into a contemporary college classroom/institution (Chapter Three).

Gómez-Peña and the Border(s)

Gómez-Peña is one of the central figures in the field of so-called Border Art,¹ art that focuses on cross-cultural issues of perception, identity and stereotype in the relationship between the U.S. and Mexico, as focalized at the U.S.-Mexican border. Border Art explores transculturation at the junctures of opposing societies, cultures and languages and makes an inquiry into disjunctive experience of life on and around the U.S.-Mexico border.

The concept and the reality of the border has been the cornerstone of Gómez-Peña's work since coming to the U.S. in 1978 as an art student in California. Gómez-Peña was crossing the physical border between Tijuana and San Diego for several years. Gómez-Peña conceptualizes the border in his interdisciplinary work in the early 1990s,

¹ An attempt to stabilize the definition of Border Art appears in Guisela Latorre's "Border Art," *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Latinas and Latinos in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 209-213, but the controversy starts well over a decade earlier with Jo-Anne Berelowitz's article "Conflict Over 'Border Art': Whose subject, whose border, whose show?" *Third Text* 40 (Autumn 1997): 69-83.

when the border discourse became important to cultural studies in U.S. academia. Around the same time, Gómez-Peña and other prominent scholars and writers - Gloria Anzaldúa, Walter Dignolo, Sandra Cisneros – started to think and talk about the topic. As Roberto Dainotto suggests, the important question is whether the border is to be treated as a metaphor, a utopian space where differences are blurred and conflict vanishes (Anzaldúa) or – to the contrary – a quite physical entity that is still a site of major violence and intolerance, even in the twenty-first century. In this dissertation, I argue that Gómez-Peña draws on and mixes both attitudes in his treatment of the border. Gómez-Peña crosses not only the physical borders between Mexico and the U.S., but also the borders of artistic conventions and pedagogy, pushing the discourses and becoming *an active actor of change*. Guillermo Gómez-Peña's performance practices use the symbolical capital of the *limítrofe* with its problems and challenges in his performative *art*, but the movement goes back toward the socio-political reality engendered by the border.

I analyze how Gómez-Peña is crossing different borders in his art, from the very personal biographical movement across physical borders to the borders of expression and the use of the body (Chapter One). I investigate how Gómez-Peña draws on artistic conventions and genres that have been, quite literally in the case of the *carpa*, crossing the U.S.-Mexico borders (Chapter Two). Finally, I go back to reconsider the very first question his work posed to me: how does it all translate to the praxis, to the methodology Gómez-Peña elaborated in his teaching practices (Chapter Three). I suggest that

ultimately, the question of crossing borders is the question of the role of the art and artists in the societal change.²

My thesis is that Gómez-Peña advances important identitarian, artistic and pedagogical conversations on both sides of the border and beyond it, by performatively expanding these discourses and conventions. In this analysis, I suggest a notion of *performing borders* to describe the innovativeness of Gómez-Peña's multi-media art and as a metaphor for ways in which the artist transgresses ("performs") the limits ("borders") of the discourses.

In Chapter One, I look at the identitarian discourses on both sides of the border. In the first part of the chapter, titled "Quetzalcóatl, Malinche and Minnie Mouse³. A Reading of the Serpent Motif in *Codex Espangliensis* and *Friendly Cannibals* through the Lens of the Discourses on the Mesoamerican Past on Both Sides of the Border," I offer a reading of the serpent motif in *Codex Espangliensis* and *Friendly Cannibals*, two collaborations between Guillermo Gómez-Peña and another Mexican-American artist, Enrique Chagoya. I bring to bear two discourses on the Mesoamerican past that draw on pre-Hispanic mythology: Octavio Paz's interpretation of Mexican identity and Chicano/as' (re)construction of Aztlán. I focus on the example of one of the most

² I draw here on ideas advanced by historian and social activist Howard Zinn (1922-2010), in *Artists in Times of War* (2003) and *Original Zinn: Conversations on History and Politics* (2006).

³ Minerva "Minnie" Mouse is an animated character created by Ub Iwerks and Walt Disney. It is an icon of U.S. pop culture.

prominent mythical figures, Quetzalcóatl, the half-serpent, half-bird deity. I analyze a few fragments from the two books by Gómez-Peña and Chagoya and show how Gómez-Peña is using figures of Quetzalcóatl but also the Malinche and Minnie Mouse as entry points to establish a dialogue with the discourses on the Mesoamerican past. I demonstrate how by doing so, Gómez-Peña draws on both discourses and at the same time pushes them both, "crossing the borders" of the identitarian discourses and literary/artistic genres (codex).

In the second part of the chapter, titled "Gonzalo Guerrero and the Paradigm Shift," I look at the Gonzalo Guerrero figure. Guerrero was a Spanish conquistador who arrived at the Mexican peninsula in the early 16th century, assimilated himself into the Amerindian culture, and became a military chief, fighting against the Spanish. I suggest looking at Gonzalo Guerrero's figure as a model for Gómez-Peña insofar as the paradigm shift in considering the questions of identity through body. I point to several similarities between Gómez-Peña and Guerrero, although the two are obviously not perfectly mirrored. The first similarity is that Gómez-Peña, like Guerrero, moved to a new country, which led to a continuous renegotiation of his identity. Gómez-Peña intentionally chooses to no longer identify himself as Mexican, yet has not entirely assimilated himself into either the U.S. mainstream or Chicano cultures.

The "paradigm shift" I support, as suggested by Sandra Cypess, should be to replace the existing foundational couple of Malinche-Cortés and the "Chingada" destiny of the Mexican nation, with that of an alternative foundational figure – Gonzalo Guerrero, who chose to relinquish his ties to Spain, married an Amerindian princess, and

provides an alternative origin story for the mestizos (Cypess "Arquetipos viejos..."). Taking Guerrero as a foundational figure reverses the hierarchy of the colonizer and colonized.

The third reason to compare Guerrero and Gómez-Peña is the emphasis on the body as a canvas to paint one's identity. With his warrior headdresses and his tattoos, Gómez-Peña's performing body nearly mimics Guerrero, while he does not ever explicitly mention him. While Gómez-Peña initially used his tattoos to shock his audience, in later years he has come to think of his body as a map to be examined carefully, a new means of expression at the same epistemological level as the written word.

In Chapter Two, I examine how two theater conventions are being reinterpreted and creatively put into play in Gómez-Peña's performance work: the political theater of Brazilian Augusto Boal, and Mexico's popular *carpa* tradition. One of the theorists who is usually summoned as Gómez-Peña's mentor is the renowned U.S. performance art scholar Richard Schechner (1934-). Gómez-Peña himself refers to Schechner as his "conceptual *padrino*" (*Ethno-techno* 20). However, in the first part of this chapter, I demonstrate how Augusto Boal and the *carpa* tradition are also important (and Latin American) influences on Gómez-Peña's performance art. I show the evidence of the influence of Boal's politically engaged theater on Gómez-Peña in the example of the Town Meeting.

In the second part of the chapter, I discuss the *carpa* and its influence on Gómez-Peña's performance style. Another contribution of this chapter is to separate the twin

strands of the *carpa* and Teatro Campesino traditions, which are frequently conflated by other critics. The *carpa* became popular around the Mexican Revolution and crossed the borders to the U.S. where it survived till after WWII. In the U.S. in the 1960s, Teatro Campesino picked up where *carpa* left off, adding to *carpa*'s genre Chicano movement's political agenda of the time. Because of that, in some scholarship (Broyles-Gonzalez) the discussion about *carpa* often gets entangled with the discussion of Teatro Campesino. In this chapter, I argue that the *carpa* and Teatro Campesino, although they share certain characteristics, are part of different political and social trajectories and should not be conflated.

In particular, Gómez-Peña draws more directly on the *carpa* tradition. *Carpa*'s Mexican and popular culture origins are used in Chicano scholarship as an argument to prove the genre's link to the "Mexican" and furthermore "Chicano" national essence, which is imagined to be non-European, collective (versus individual-based) and non-male. The *carpa* and Teatro Campesino shared characteristics, such as the predilection for laughter/*relajo* (artistic chaos), linguistic games and the use of stock characters, made this performance form especially fertile in the hands of contemporary Chicano performers, such as Gómez-Peña. Although far from inscribing himself into the political quarrels of the movement, and similar to *carpa*'s most famous representative on the silver screen, Cantinflas, Gómez-Peña draws on the genre mechanisms to build his performances.

In Chapter Three, titled "Teaching as Performance and Performing as Teaching," I analyze Gómez-Peña's approach to pedagogy and, at the same time, I propose my own

methodology of teaching Gómez-Peña's interdisciplinary work in a literature and culture college classroom. As part of this chapter, I taught three experimental classes for selected students at the University of Maryland. These sessions were video-recorded and edited into a short movie, which also forms a part of this dissertation. The goal of the experiments was to address how Gómez-Peña's workshop methods could influence a university classroom. In the classes, I emphasized the similarities between performance art and the type of class that could actually spark societal change outside of the classroom, which also is one of Gómez-Peña's objectives.

Gómez-Peña, in his performances, frequently breaks the so-called "fourth wall" between the performer and the audience. I suggest that the performative classroom should also break this fourth wall, changing the roles of students as passive spectators into "spect-actors" who actively participate in their education. In performance art, there is room for unscripted moments, improvisation, and raw emotions. Inspired by Gómez-Peña's exercises and methodology, I suggest that the same have a place in the performative classroom. The deeper involvement in the direction of the class should lead to the students' personal transformation, an equivalent of theater's personal catharsis, and ideally encourage societal change.

Chapter One

Today, after twenty-four years of crossing that bloody border back and forth by foot, by car, and by airplane, as I write this text I wonder, does it even matter when it happened? I realize that the space between my remote Mexican past and my Chicano future is immense and my identity can zigzag across it freely.

- Guillermo Gómez-Peña, *Ethno-techno*

Quetzalcóatl, Malinche and Minnie Mouse. A Reading of the Serpent Motif in *Codex Espangliensis* and *Friendly Cannibals* Through the Lens of the Discourses on the Mesoamerican Past on Both Sides of the Border

The art of Guillermo Gómez-Peña is physically and symbologically positioned in between two countries: Mexico and USA. As a result, Gómez-Peña's work negotiates the corresponding sets of discourses on the Mesoamerican past. On the Mexican side, there is Octavio Paz's discourse on identity and on the USA side, the Chicano/a (re)configurations of the mythical Aztec land, Aztlán.

Gómez-Peña's work inevitably oscillates between these two realities as he lets his identity "zigzag" freely, in a serpentine movement, between his "remote Mexican past" and his "Chicano future." Born in Mexico, Gómez-Peña doesn't perceive himself as

entirely Mexican anymore, and not yet as a "Chicano" – his trajectory is wandering in the in-betweenness, crossing the national "bloody" borders incessantly "back and forth by foot, by car, and by airplane." Gómez-Peña came to the USA for the first time in 1978 with an artistic scholarship and later for years commuted daily between Tijuana and San Diego, crossing the very physical border between the two countries. At the same time, he was undoubtedly influenced by Latin American discourses during his college years as a student of literature and art at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México in México City.

In this chapter, I analyze two discourses on the Mesoamerican past produced in the twentieth century to offer an enriched reading of fragments of *Codex Espangliensis. From Columbus to the Border Patrol* (City Lights Books 2000) and *Friendly Cannibals* (1996). In order to do that, I look closely at how an important part of the Mesoamerican belief system, the serpent and its godly incarnations, functions in the discourses. Let us remember that the serpent in the pre-Columbian, Mesoamerican tradition had a very different connotation than in Christian symbology. In the second part of this chapter, in my discussions of the figure of Gonzalo Guerrero, I suggest, after scholars such as Sandra Cypess, yet another discursive proposition that can possibly constitute a change of paradigm in looking at the Latin American and especially Mexican past and can shed new light on Gómez-Peña's work.

The figure of the snake takes us deeper into a topic that Enrique Florescano, an influential Mexican historian, aptly termed "memoria mexicana." In the Mesoamerican tradition the serpent is associated with reproductive abilities of the earth and is the image

of resurrection: the serpent sheds its skin every year and by doing so regenerates its powers. As Florescano observes in *Quetzalcóatl y los mitos fundadores de Mesoamérica*, one of the most important serpentine incarnations, the myth of Quetzalcóatl, "The Plumed Serpent" hero-deity, influenced the imagery and representations of the figures both in the Toltec and Mayan world. In the Mayan world, Kukulcan, who founded Chichén Itzá, and the Toltec Topitzin Quetzalcóatl, who founded Tula, both are reincarnations of the same, half-serpent, half-bird deity. Miguel León-Portilla observes in his article "Those Made Worthy by Divine Sacrifice: The Faith of Ancient Mexico," that Aztecs inherited the serpent deity from Toltecs.

As León-Portilla recounts the myth, Quetzalcóatl, the Feathered Serpent god, symbol of divine wisdom, was asked by the other gods to take care of restoring human beings. Quetzalcóatl went to Mictlán ("The Place of the Dead") in search of the bones of human beings who had lived in previous ages. In this manner he eventually succeeded in restoring human beings to inhabit the now reestablished earth. While he was in the "Place of the Dead," Quetzalcóatl had to overcome many obstacles. Once he was able to gather the bones, he took them to Tamoanchan, the "Place of Origin." In order to transmit new life to the bones, Quetzalcóatl bled his virile member. He and the other gods at once did penance and sought to be worthy of what they desired. In Nahuatl and also, as a loan word in several other Mesoamerican languages (León-Portilla 43), the word "human being" means literally "being worthy," "that which is deserved by the gods' penance, deserved it." Quetzalcóatl hence is the god that represents human civilization, culture and fertility.

In 1996 and 2000, Gómez-Peña collaborated with visual artist Enrique Chagoya and Felicia Rice on two books that mix Gómez-Peña's writings with Chagoya's printmaking experiments. The *Codex Espangliensis* is inspired by the pre-Hispanic codices that escaped immolation during colonial invasions. The made-up name "Espangliensis" is Gómez-Peña's play on the Latinized version of "Spanglish" and reflects the artist's not-so-serious yet very critical take on the Spanish conquest and the situation of the Latinos in the USA. The original native codices were a "metaphorical recuperation of that textual heritage and, at the same time, a reminder of what has been lost or transformed in the fusion of European and indigenous cultural contact" ("Introduction" *Codex*). The *Codex Espangliensis* brings together in a unique blend both pre-Hispanic and colonial imagery (codices) and twentieth-century popular culture iconography (Mickey Mouse, Superman, Batman, Captain America, Wonder Woman, Asterix). While the presence of the comic-book iconography in this Gómez-Peña and Chagoya collaboration offers possibilities for an interesting U.S. pop cultural analysis, in this chapter I choose to concentrate on discussing the Mesoamerican imagery that the artists use in their work. I am interested in learning how to read the images in the *Codex*. Why do they evoke Mesoamerican deities, such as The Plumed Serpent, Quetzalcóatl, one of the most prominent of the religious myths of the pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica? What is at play here?

In order to address these questions, I propose looking at two discourses of the Mesoamerican past that bear great importance here. The first discourse has been constructed around a famous essay by Octavio Paz, "Los Hijos de La Malinche" (The

Sons of La Malinche), and looks at the Mexican national identity through the figure of La Malinche, a native woman, *Cortés'* lover, translator and confidant and mother of -in symbolic terms - the first mestizo.⁴

Malinche, who in nationalistic Mexican discourse embodied both the biblical serpent and the Eve paradigm was, according to Sandra Cypess "a central figure in the Conquest, an emblem of Mexican national identity and also a symbol of all Latin American women" ("Mother' Malinche..." 14). Malinche's portrayal as a treacherous serpent was rooted in the Catholic imagery and differed significantly from the pre-Columbian, Amerindian interpretations of the serpent motif. This biblical, European context shaped the Malinche and *Cortés'* foundational story of the first Mexican parents that resembles the biblical narrative of Adam and Eve. As Cypess notes "of all the narratives of the American conquest, only Mexico has chosen to report its development as a mestizo nation by using the Biblical narrative of a founding couple" ("Mother' Malinche..." 15).

As Cypess observes, the dark legend of Malinche and the status of her "evil" relationship with Cortés still constitute a predominant paradigm in Mexico and Latin America.⁵ In the Octavio Paz's essay, Malinche is presented as "La Chingada," the bad

⁴ I address this point later in this chapter.

⁵ Cypess summons another emblematic couple, Gonzalo Guerrero and his Mayan wife and their children that "could well have become the symbols of the Mexican mestizo, instead of the son of Malinche and Cortés" ("Mother' Malinche..." 21). I discuss Guerrero's myth and its importance for Gómez-Peña's work later in this chapter.

mother who abandons her child, the Mexican *nation*, and leaves it in an eternal and self-perpetuating state of "desmadre,"⁶ a term that Gómez-Peña plays with in his work.

Through this figure, Paz outlines what he sees as the Mexican character's ambivalent ties to his past, which he characterizes as an experience of "separation and negation."

This perspective on the figure of Malinche forms part of a broader approach to ideas about "mestizaje," marked by an "obsession with the legitimacy" (Paz's *Foreword* to Lafaye xii). The search for "mexicanidad," the essence of the Mexican identity became "the hobby-horse of twentieth-century Mexican thought" (Ochoa 4). As Paz and Cypess discuss in their studies, being the child of an indigenous woman and a Spanish father poses psychological and cultural problems for Mexicans. This is in addition to the fact that the question of identity in general is hyper-present in Latin American thought. As Roberto González Echevarría notes: "remove the concept of national identity from the language of Latin American literature and all that literature becomes nearly silent" (qtd in Ochoa 4).

This obsession was also present in the conflicted search for identity by the colonial inhabitants of New Spain. New Spain searched for and, at the same time, repudiated its identity in the pre-Colombian world, favoring Spanish cultural elements. As Paz notes, New Spain describes a singular society that passionately denied its antecedents (Lafaye xi) and its ancestors – the Indian world and the Spanish world- and

⁶ "Desmadre" in Spanish means either having no mother or living in chaos. More on the negative iconology of Malinche through the times in the seminal work by Sandra Cypess "La Malinche in Mexican Literature."

at the same time formed ambiguous links with both; in its turn, that society was to be denied by modern Mexico.

Quetzalcóatl is a perfect example of such a "schizophrenic" attitude. At the beginning of the Spanish conquest of the New World, Quetzalcóatl's story gave a start to polemics about the nature of the Quetzalcóatl cult. According to Jacques Lafaye's famous study, *Quetzalcoátl and Guadalupe*, the monotheist and messianic nature of the Quetzalcóatl cult was among the reasons "why other Spanish religious [people], anticipating some modern historians, saw in Quetzalcóatl an apostle of Christ or an Irish missionary" (Lafaye 143-144). The myth of The Plumed Serpent was quickly converted into a myth of Quetzalcóatl-Saint Thomas. Itself never popular, it represented an effort at historical and theological interpretation rather than a religious mystery (Paz xix). Quetzalcóatl disappeared from the historical horizon of the nineteenth century, yet, according to Paz, did not die: "He was no longer god or apostle but a national hero. He was called Hidalgo, Juárez, Carranza, the quest for legitimacy has continued down to our own time" (Paz xix). Paz suggests here that the original indigenous myth has fertilized the representations of the subsequent Mexican national heroes and that its impact continues "down to our own time."

Paz's influential interpretations are, not at all surprisingly, present in Gómez-Peña's writing. Yet, he modifies if not abandons the discourse's historical directionality. Gómez-Peña uses Paz's main concepts ("meta-orphanhood," "desmadre"), yet he does so to talk about a more global than Mexican/ Latin American phenomenon:

We are living in the age of pus-modernity, a blistering, festering present. And in these times, all known political systems and economic structures are dysfunctional. They are being reformed, replaced, or destroyed. Many see this as the era of *la desmodernidad*, a term that comes from the Mexican noun *desmadre*, which can mean either having no mother, or living in chaos. The Great Fiction of a social order has evaporated and has left us in a state of meta-orphanhood. (*New World Border* 25)

Gómez-Peña's play on word "postmodernity," calling it bitterly "pus-modernity," is reinforced by the elaboration of the metaphor – "blistering, festering present" - that secures the intended meaning of the metaphor. A similar thing happens with the notion of "desmodernidad," a play on words of postmoderninty and "desmadre." Both "desmadre" and "hijos de la chingada" refer to the above mentioned discourses of Mexican fate, the dark legend reinforced by Octavio Paz who in *El laberinto de la soledad* famously called the mestizos, offspring of the relationship between La Malinche and Cortés as "los hijos de la chingada." For Gómez-Peña here, the *chingada* y *desmadre* fate are no longer purely Mexican, not even Latin American. They have become "global": an issue of confused identity and nationhood ambiguity that affects "all known political systems and economic structures". "Living in chaos" and "having no mother" has became for Gómez-Peña a condition that transcends the purely Mexican philosophical frame. La Malinche ("La gran chingada") experience affects not only Mexico or Latin America, since "The

Great Fiction of a social order has evaporated and has left us [all] in a state of meta-orphanhood."

The second formative discourse for Gómez-Peña's work that can help us contextualize his *Codex Espangliensis* and help position the discourses on the Mesoamerican and colonial past, is Chicana feminism. Chicana feminists, as noted by Laura Elisa Pérez, herself a feminist theorist, further redefined the notion of nation and pushed the discourse of Aztlán.

Chicano, a term coined during the upheavals of the civil rights movement of the 1960s "asserts *la mexicanidad* as a positive quality of national origin, counteracting ethnic stereotyping and discrimination" (Arrizón 24). Chicano nationalist leaders tapped the Mexico-Aztec cultural connection when they adopted "El Plan de Aztlán" during the first National Chicano Youth Liberation Conference (Denver, CO, 1969). The term "Aztlán" offered a redefinition of space and identified the U.S. Southwest as the geographical site of the pre-Hispanic Chicano/a homeland (Arrizón 23). According to myth, Aztlán is the ancestral homeland in the north that the Aztecs left in 1168 when they journeyed southward to found the promised land, Tenochtitlán, in 1325. Aztlán thus represented for the Chicano movement the spiritual power and transformed the elements of pre-Hispanic and indigenous past into a powerful tool of political and indentitarian affirmation.

Although the majority of the appropriated ideology of the Chicano civil rights movements dealt with romanticized Aztec symbology, the manipulation of La Malinche

and the term *malinchista* were used primarily as a rhetorical strategy to squelch dissent from *within* Chicano discourse communities. Chicano cultural nationalists, during the civil rights movements of the 1960s and '70s, used the term *malinchista*, a derivation of Malinche, as a symbol of cultural prohibition. Norma Alarcón traces the use of the story of La Malinche as a trope against cultural transgression (in Ezequiel Peña). Mexican Americans thought to be assimilationists were labeled *malinchistas*, sellouts, traitors to the race. Chicano activists argued that energy diverted from the Chicano nationalist agenda threatened the unity of *el Movimiento* (the Chicano Movement) and was tantamount to a betrayal of Chicano culture (Sosa Riddell 163). Among those maligned as *malinchistas* were Chicanas who argued for women's rights and the installation of an egalitarian Chicano/a culture based on gender parity.

Chicana feminists have altered the "logical" order of patriarchy and homogeneity of the Chicano movement from 1960s and '70s, and have re-imagined their Aztlán and re-configured the figure of La Malinche. Chicanas' Aztlán is an ever-recovering space with no borders, the "nepantla"⁷, in-between-worlds space, as represented in the re-configurations offered by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, probably among the most prominent Chicana writers. By using the re-configured La Malinche to shift the Chicano discourse of the 1960s and '70s, these writers attempted to move beyond ambivalence regarding Mexican racioethnic hybridity and its ties to a national identity forged out of Mexican nationalism and indigenism.

⁷ For more on the etymology and meaning of this Nahuatl term see James Maffie's "The Centrality of Nepantla in Conquest-Era Nahua Philosophy."

As Arrizón notes, this "shifting conceptual framework moves Aztlán's spatiality and mythical subjectivity beyond Chicano nationalism into a more liberated realm" (24) and reimagines *mestizaje* as a form of broadly understood "transculturation," when several different geographies, bodies and knowledges interact to modify and change each other in the process. Chicanas' "Aztlán *performs* the border space. Its dramatic state is an ever-evolving product of the collision, separation, and re-engagement occurring among nations, languages, cultures, and histories" (Arrizón 26).

Gómez-Peña, himself heavily influenced by the Chicana feminist writings, captures this movement. In the first Gómez-Peña and Enrique Chagoya collaboration, *Friendly Cannibals*, they use the pre-Hispanic codex form. As Moraga writes in her "Codex Xerí": "The Chicano codex is *our* book of revelation. It is the philosopher's stone, *serpentine* [my emphasis] and regenerative" (*The Last* ...191). Laura Elisa Pérez reminds us that both Anzaldúa and Moraga in their invocation of the *tlamatinime*, glyphs, and codices, and ancient deities and rituals are not nostalgically encrypting the "exotic" cultural difference, rather by means of these elements they attempt to "disenchant" and re-empower artists through the recognition of political power. As Moraga writes in her "Codex Xerí: El momento histórico": "The Chicano scribe remembers, not out of nostalgia, but out of hope. She remembers in order to envision. /.../" (*The Last Generation* 190). The Mesoamerican symbology is for Chicanas a tool of re-configuration and repositioning of a new subjectivity, inclusive of all gender, race and eventually nationality. It serves to build a larger discursive space, that Ezequiel Peña names "cosmopolitan."

For E. Peña in his essay "Reconfiguring Epistemological Pacts: Creating a Dialogue between Psychoanalysis and Chicano/a Subjectivity, a Cosmopolitan Perspective," this new cosmopolitan subjectivity extends discourses on Malintzin Tenepal (one of La Malinche's many other names) and pre-Hispanic mythology to allow for a "reading of the more complex subjectivity her image embodies, a reading expansive in nature and irreducible to discourses of an edenic precoloniality and women's sexual difference that imagines a space beyond nation(alistic) ties" (316). To embark on such a new reading, Peña suggests going further beyond the Chicana interpretations of Malinche as primordial mother of Mexican racial hybridity in the spirit of Chicana/Mexican women's vindication and instead suggests to re-envision her as "the primordial cosmopolitan" of the Mexican nation-state. E. Peña's "cosmopolitanism" proposes a subject position suggestive of multiplicity of voices, and harbors an affinity for radical self-reflexivity: "Beginning from her origins and moving beyond them, the figure of Malintzin, as the symbolic mother of modern Mexico, inhabits a transcultural, transethnic, and trans-gendered space in her performative role as the polyglottal translator for Cortés that is evocative of cosmopolitanism" (316).

I suggest that Gómez-Peña and Chagoya's *Codex* moves in a similar discursive direction to E. Peña's cosmopolitanism. Both authors open their *Codex* to multi-voiced and profoundly self-reflective readings, and leave readers to make their own connections out of radically juxtaposed images and text. For instance, in one of the images in the *Friendly Cannibals*, there are two figures: one is a Mexican dressed like Emiliano

Zapata, in his stereotypical hat⁸, who slowly undresses to show his Superman suit and haircut underneath his national dress, the other figure is a Mesoamerican god in his half-human, half-serpent form. In this scene, Zapata-Superman has two comic-book dialogue clouds next to him, but there is no content in them. The scene is fashioned to bring to mind a set of historical associations: the first encounter between Cortés (mistaken for Quetzalcóatl) and the Amerindians and the miscommunication of this encounter. The "Mexican" hat leaves no doubts that the figure is a Mexican, yet disturbingly, he proves to be someone else, a Superman. The rest of the scenery remains unfilled and blank. A "cosmopolitan" reader, for whom Gómez-Peña most certainly calls, needs to write and read this scene on his own, fill in the blanks, complete the dialogue, draw the background landscape. Its openness exceeds any national or identitarian claims to control the discourse. Gómez-Peña and Chagoya unleashed the demons of the past and they freely inhabit the present, with its cartoon heroes and freedom of interpretation.

The strategy of presenting the reader with unfinished, fragmented montages is further employed in the *Codex*. In the very first fold of the codex, Cortés weds La Malinche amidst images of condemnation: the couple approaches what seems to be gates of hell, with a priest-demon waiting for them at the entrance of a gigantic demonic mouth that will devour the foundational couple forever. The only commentary that a reader is left is the image of a disproportionately gigantic Superman interposed on the dark

⁸ "Mexican hat" or *sombrero* is a broad-brimmed and high-crowned hat formerly used in rural areas of Mexico and popularized both in Mexico and U.S. by the itinerant mariachi groups.

wedding's drawing that flies over these historical events. In another place in the *Codex*, Minnie Mouse stands behind the stage of "Auctioning of the New World" where Quetzalcóatl sits at the very top of the stage, exposed to the auction that Mickey Mouse quietly controls. Gómez-Peña's fragments from "Free Trade Art" and "Chicanost: Radio Nuevo Orden" enliven Chagoya's images with incoherent fragments regarding the "Tijuana Nirvana" and "First World Second World Third World." Action figures (Superman) and cartoon icons (Minnie Mouse) stand in here for cultural imperialism perpetuated in commercial as well as political realms. "Superman, Mickey Mouse and Wonder Woman join in a visual history of political oppression and exploitation that is both violent and seductive" (Jennifer Gonzalez *Codex*).

Tattooed Bodies: Gonzalo Guerrero and the Paradigm Shift

In the previous section, I discussed two important discourses on Mesoamerican past that help contextualize Gómez-Peña's work. Here, I look at another discourse (on the Latin American past) centered around the figure of Gonzalo Guerrero, one of the conquistadors who arrived in the Yucatán Peninsula in the early sixteenth century. As I will discuss further in this section, Guerrero is strongly associated with body markings and tattoos.⁹ For that reason, I suggest reading Gómez-Peña's interest in the body through

⁹ The Oxford English Dictionary gives the etymology of the word "tattoo" as originated from the Polynesian "tatau." Although forms of body markings (usually bearing a negative connotation such as markings on slaves and criminals) were known in Europe since Roman times, the word *tatau* was introduced as a loan word into English by

the lens of Guerrero. Guerrero's bodily presence can offer an enriched perspective on one of Gómez-Peña's performance *études*, *El Binational Boxer*.

El Binational Boxer forms part of Gómez-Peña's selection called "Los Videograffitis" included in the video anthology of his collaborative works published by Border Art Clásicos in 2007. This short *étude* is almost entirely non-verbal. The very few words pronounced by the otherwise eloquent and verbose artist make the silence and non-verbal clues the more salient. Instead of words, Gómez-Peña chooses his body, its markings and clothing (or lack of thereof) as his performative tool. Similarly to Gonzalo Guerrero, Gómez-Peña can speak (Spanish in the case of Guerrero and Spanish and English in the case of Gómez-Peña), yet he chooses to express himself in a not entirely linguistic way. The somatic aspect of both Gonzalo Guerrero's "performance"/ act(ing) and this Gómez-Peña piece calls immediate attention to and poses questions of why Gómez-Peña chooses an arsenal of corporal signifiers so strikingly similar to Guerrero's? Although Gómez-Peña is not openly addressing the influence of the figure of Guerrero, the question remains: what is the appeal, meaning, and the repercussions of the Guerrero story?

Gonzalo Guerrero and Jerónimo de Aguilar were shipwrecked in the Yucatan in 1511, eight years before Hernán Cortés started the conquest of Mexico in 1519. While Aguilar refused to acculturate, Guerrero "went native": tattooed his body, married a local

the eighteenth-century explorers. In the Amerindian world before the arrival of Columbus, the various religious and social functions of the tattoo (mostly positive) were in stark contrast with the Old World's body marking tradition.

princess and became a local cacique. When Cortés sent a letter to both men asking to aid the Spaniards in their conquest, Aguilar gladly took on the offer while Guerrero declined with these famous words: "Go, and God's blessing be with you. But my face is tattooed and my ears are pierced. What would the Spaniards say if they saw me like this? And look how handsome these children of mine are!" (Díaz 60). This quote, to which I will return later, alludes to the irreversibility of the corporal changes that Guerrero's acculturation implied.¹⁰

In the New Spain discourse, Jerónimo de Aguilar was a celebrated figure, while Guerrero was represented negatively. As Rolando Romero notes in "Counter Malinche" (Harris 252), this reflects the values that the Spanish Crown wanted to emphasize. Aguilar returned to the Spaniards and reconfirmed Spain's racial, religious, and imperialistic mission; Guerrero stayed in his adopted culture with his Mayan wife¹¹, and was consequently characterized as a traitor and a Jew. Romero notes in his work on Gonzalo Guerrero that "Guerrero's life is never a part of those [Conquest] narratives" and

¹⁰ Sandra Cypess adds that "what Guerrero offers as the explanation of his refusal to rejoin the Spanish forces: he shows not only his marked (tattooed) body, but also the products of his body: his mestizo children." As Cypess suggests later, "these children could well have become the symbols of the Mexican mestizo, instead of the son of Malinche and Cortés, who arrives chronologically later but remains to this date the icon of mestizaje" ("Mother" 21)

¹¹ We don't know much about her except her name, as the Spanish chronicles made a point of completely erasing her story.

as a consequence, "historians mention him only briefly and always with contempt" ("Texts" 345).

Gonzalo Guerrero's story can be positioned not only against that of Aguilar's but also against the relationship of Cortés and Malinche. Guerrero and his Mayan wife reverse the old paradigm of European-over-Native hierarchy as symbolized in the Malinche-Cortés pairing described in the previous section. The 19th- and 20th-century's selection of the Malinche-Cortés couple over the Guerrero-Mayan wife couple as the allegorical parents of modern Mexico and the model for Latin American syncretism reflects the "prescribed alignment of gender and race" (Harris 252). Sandra Cypess suggests exploring the consequences of the use of the Cortés-Malinche couple as a "synecdoche for gender and racial relations and consider other ways to move beyond the Eurocentrist, patriarchal perspective" ("Mother" 15). The recuperation of the relationship between Guerrero and his Mayan wife would certainly be one effective way to do so and could suggest "another cultural pattern" ("Mother" 20-21) in the history of Latin America. Gómez-Peña plays with that kind of a strategic substitution of the Conquistador figure with a Gonzalo Guerrero-type image of cultural contact (in which the European man assimilates to the native woman's culture) to upset a time-tested gender-race paradigm (Harris 14).

Persephone Braham in "El feliz cautiverio de Gonzalo Guerrero" points out how Guerrero recently became a figure of national reconciliation, in response to "un apetito generalizado de cerrar la distancia entre una caótica modernidad y un momento pretérito, reverenciado como seminal en la historia y la identidad mexicanas" (Braham 4). Braham

analyzes one particular account of Guerrero's life, *El Relato de Gonzalo Guerrero*, which, according to Hans Prem, was fabricated in the second half of the twentieth century:

A diferencia de las otras versiones de la historia, *El Relato* no presenta un ícono, sino un personaje complejo, ambiguo /.../ que nos hace enfrentar las complejidades y contradicciones de un encuentro de culturas al inicio de la edad moderna. (Braham 16)

Roseanna Mueller, in "From Cult to Comics: The Representation of Gonzalo Guerrero as a Cultural Hero in Mexican Popular Culture," also registers this attempt to change Guerrero's image. She notices that, among the twenty five volumes of the comic book series devoted to the discovery of the New World and published in 1992 by Planeta-de Agostini, there is one volume dedicated entirely to Guerrero: *Conquistadores en Yucatán: La desaparición de Gonzalo Guerrero*. This volume retells Guerrero's story as "father of Mexican *mestizaje*" (*Twice-told tale* 140). As Mueller recounts, the volume opens with an introduction by Fernando Savater, Spanish philosopher, who asks the reader to re-consider the question of ethnic identity, and Mexican national identity in particular. In an attempt to break with the nationalistic essentialisms surrounding Guerrero's figure, Savater suggests that an important question to ponder is not so much "Where do you come from?" but "What are you or what have you become?" The comic book answers this question. In it, Guerrero, *el jefe militar* de Chetumal at the time, is

reported dead to the Spaniards. The Spaniards failed to identify Guerrero's body because of his tattoos that made him look like an Indian warrior:

As the report is about to be written, Cerezada demands the truth from his informant, who says, "We will never know the truth. A renegade to some, a hero of legends for others, what was his real role in this madness?"

(Twice-told Tale 141)

Mueller shows how in this comic book Guerrero's "betrayal" started to be read (and, literally, "seen" – given the book's predominantly graphic form) differently. She suggests how subsequently, even if only in this one book, Guerrero has been transformed into a popular (culture) hero.

Granted that the repositioning of Guerrero in *Conquistadores en Yucatán: La desaparición de Gonzalo Guerrero* is noteworthy, it is also, by and large, an isolated case. The Guerrero paradigm has not yet "entered into Mexican consciousness" (Cypess "Mother" 22). Nevertheless, the story of Guerrero and his "beautiful kids"¹² could and

¹² It is worth briefly addressing the question of "the first mestizo," that was signaled in the previous section. "The first mestizo" dispute is closely linked to the questions of the perception of the past and discourses of legitimacy that are at stake here. As Cypess points out, Martín Cortés, the son of La Malinche and Cortés, is not the first mestizo born in Mexico, and the preference of Cortés and Malinche's son as "Mestizo #1" reflects "the same ideological decisions that erased any other couple from consideration" (21).

should start a paradigm shift and imply that "the European can reject aspects of his heritage in favor of the Amerindian pattern" (Cypess 22).

Guerrero's story echoes in Gómez-Peña's work, thus contributing in an important way to that discursive change. Playing with the notion of identity and body is an important technique in Gómez-Peña's performative repertoire and I suggest that Gómez-Peña's use of his physical body to construct his identity mirrors the story of Gonzalo Guerrero from the U.S. side of the U.S.-Mexican border. Gómez-Peña's performance piece, *El Binational Boxer*, is a good example of this uncanny similarity with the Guerrero story and exemplifies well Gómez-Peña's artistic technique/strategy while using body to address identity.

El Binational Boxer is a clever commentary on the previously discussed Mexican and Chicano discourses on the past. In this piece Gómez-Peña places himself both symbolically and physically inbetween the two countries: Mexico and the USA During the piece, the artist receives fierce blows to his body. The blows are coming from the hands of Gómez-Peña himself. He is wearing boxing gloves that are representing two countries: the right hand stands for Mexico, the left for the USA The artist is caught between the attacks from both sides, his body taking on the impact, the sweat splashing all over the filming camera. The mostly silent scene is both perplexing and illuminating, as it catches perfectly the discursive positioning and internal "battle" of Gómez-Peña and, at the same time, is visually bold and unabridged. The audience can almost feel Gómez-Peña sweat, as his body fluids splash on the camera.

El Binational Boxer starts with Gómez-Peña getting us acquainted with his body and (lack of) clothing. The artist stands in front of the camera dressed in an animal print suit, his chest naked, numerous visible tattoos displayed for the audience. The introduction to the piece is hence the introduction to the artist body.

For Lázaro Lima, Latino bodies inscribe in them “mnemonic history, a living and remembering body of knowledge” (Lima 19). Guerrero’s body was deeply and consciously marked: he chooses to tattoo and pierce himself in a deliberately distinctive, irreversible way that shocked his Spanish compatriots: “What would the Spaniards say if they saw me like this?” His (in)famous piercings and tattoos - “my face is tattooed and my ears are pierced” - carry the memory of an identity choice that changed the history of the New World. After all, Guerrero not only fought alongside the Maya against Europeans, but also his descendents are the mestizos of the Yucatán Peninsula, his adopted homeland.

For Gómez-Peña, a “remembering” body plays a crucial role in his artistic projects. In a poetic fragment called “1492 Performances”¹³ from his *Dangerous Border Crossers*, Gómez-Peña states:

¹³ By alluding to the very beginning of the conquest, the poem emphasizes the fact that the relationship between the Old and the New World had elements of a public spectacle from the start. Adam Versényi goes as far as to claim that this relationship is central to Latin American theater. Versényi makes an interesting cultural analysis of the *spectacular* arrival in 1524 in the New World of 12 Franciscan monks requested by Cortés to demonstrate how religion, politics and theater were interconnected in Latin

I choose to continue remembering the singular journey
That led me to this stage
Five centuries of foreign domination
Total
1492 performances
in which
I've cut my hair
Sliced my wrists
Farted & eaten on stage
Danced on fire & ice
Recreated my birth
Invoked my ancestors
/.../
repositioned my soul within my body
reshaped my body to accommodate
your whims
or to confirm your fears. (3)

America from the start. To learn more on the topic, see Catherine Boyle's review of Adam Versényi's book. For more on the notion of spectacle, see Adam Versényi in *Theatre in Latin America: religion, politics, and culture from Cortés to the 1980s* and Guy Debord in *The Society of the Spectacle*.

Later in the poem, in a gesture of political praxis¹⁴, Gómez-Peña introduces Spanish: "aquí, tu miedo encarnado/ en mi cuerpo" ("here, your fears embodied in me") and Spanglish. By doing so, he furthers the reflection on the colonization of the New World and establishes a parallel with a position of Spanish language and Latino culture in the contemporary USA:

aquí, tu miedo encarnado

en mi cuerpo

my body elastic

mi cuerpo celluloid

my body passional

mi cuerpo folkloric

my body cartographic

mi cuerpo cyber-punk

my body rupestre

mi cuerpo ceremonial

my body militant

mi cuerpo metaphorical

my bloody body

¹⁴ For more information see two seminal texts: one by Ilan Stavans, "Spanglish: A User's Manifesto" and one by Ed Morales, *Living in Spanglish*.

cuerpo adentro
 me interno
 en un concierto
 de adioses
 me amortajo
 hacia el futuro incierto (3)

Gómez-Peña treats his body as an important artistic medium as he confesses to his audience to have “repositioned my soul within my body/ reshaped my body to accommodate your whims or to confirm your fears.” His body is a flexible, moldable intermediate: “my body elastic,” able to express the symbolic levels of reality: “mi cuerpo metaphorical.” Performing his body serves as an act of remembering: “I choose to continue remembering /.../ Five centuries of foreign domination/ Total 1492 performances.”

Just as Gómez-Peña uses his written texts, he also uses his actual body to express his ideology. Gómez-Peña’s body remembers through tattoos;¹⁵ they are often present and are an entry into a realm of political reflection:

¹⁵ Tattoos originated in Polynesia where they were a privilege of a few distinguished members of a tribe. For the Amerindians before the arrival of the Spaniards, body markings had a very positive connotation. In contrast, Christians at the time of the conquest used involuntary tattoos to mark prisoners and outcasts in general.

A tattooed brown body has very specific connotations for U.S. law enforcement agents. It is a bold act of social defiance, and signifier of a criminal past. (*Dangerous* 78)

Gómez-Peña traces the story of his “tattooed brown body” in one of his essays.¹⁶ It is a diary of transformations and “decolonization” that his body went through; from “bold pre-Columbian snake etched on my left shoulder” to a sophisticated, carefully arranged scene on his right shoulder representing:

A detailed map of Mexamerica made up of intricate computer circuits with Quetzalcoatl leaving the Yucatan on a “lowrider motor boat,” while to the north, Zorro bursts out of the U.S. on his rearing black stallion. This one-of-a-kind tattoo functions as a biographical/ historical map of my journey as a Mexican immigrant, one that goes from south to north and from pre-Columbian America to high-tech Chicanismo. (*Dangerous* 77)

Given that, it must have been a source of profound confusion for Spaniards to see Guerrero's tattooed body.

¹⁶ “Tattooed Brown Body” was written in 2002 for National Public Radio’s *All Things Considered* and is a version of a 1998 text, “My Third Tattoo,” published in *Dangerous Border Crossers*.

Indeed, Gómez-Peña invokes Quetzalcoatl from the indigenous world to Zorro, the Mexican-American Super Hero, a nobleman fighting against colonial injustice in what is now Southern California.

It's interesting to see how Gómez-Peña's awareness of various body politics deepens over time. He starts with a literally juvenile intention (Gómez-Peña is 27 at the time) in the 1982 poem "Punk Angst" to simply "scare" and shock his own people with the tattoo (in a sense, reenacting the Guerrero story, from the other side of the border):

sometimes I feel
 I should shave my head
 Tattoo my face with Chinese calligraphy /.../
 & fly back to Mexico
 to scare my relatives & friends /.../ (*Warrior* 150)

In "Third Tattoo" (1998) in *Dangerous Border Crossers* he presents a matter-of-fact vision:

I've always taken tattoos seriously. As a performance artist, my body is my laboratory of experimentation, my canvas and diary. In this most personal book, scars are like imposed inscriptions, whereas tattoos are the words and phrases consciously chosen by me. (*Dangerous* 77)

Gómez-Peña starts here to distinguish between the scars and tattoos, the involuntary and/or imposed and voluntary bodily markings. The last kind is the one that over the years becomes a very important tool of expression for the artist: "tattoos are the *words* and phrases *consciously* chosen by me" [my emphasis].

In *Ethno-techno* (2005), Gómez-Peña further fine tunes his critical language:

Our body/corpo/ arte-facto/identity must be marked, decorated, intervened culturally, mapped out, chronicled, repoliticized /.../.

Our bodies are also occupied territories. Perhaps the ultimate goal of performance, especially when you are a woman, gay, or a person “of color,” is to decolonize our bodies and make these decolonizing mechanisms apparent to our audience /.../ (*Ethno-techno* 24)

The decolonization of the body that started with Gonzalo Guerrero continues with Gómez-Peña. Guerrero’s story shows how his image was *staged*, from the first chronicles to the contemporary comics, *playing* the importance of bodily marks to ultimately reinforce his persona as inherently ambiguous, *guerrero* (Spanish for warrior, a namesake given to Gonzalo probably by the chroniclers). For Gómez-Peña, who is most likely a textbook example of an anti-hero¹⁷ and a modern reincarnation of Guerrero, the bodily

¹⁷ Jorge Ibarguengoitia talks about Guerrero and the notion of *hero*. According to Grant Jones, Mexicans from Yucatan continue to retell Guerrero’s (and other “heroes”)

iconography that includes “tattoos, body paint, adornments, performance prosthetics and/or robotic accessories” (*Ethno-techno* 24) are props in an on-going performance, helping him to more efficiently *play* his countless selves. Gómez-Peña’s bodily self-creation is his bread and butter, his creative tool and *razón de ser*. His experiments with the notion of identity are embodied in a constant succession of images on the *canvas* of his “tattooed brown body.”

In *El Binational Boxer*, then, Gómez-Peña is not only approaching his past (represented by the "Mexican" boxing glove) and his future (the "USA" glove representing his Chicano identity) but also by deliberately choosing to use his tattooed, naked body, he is echoing Guerrero's history with all its discursive implications. Therefore, by doing so, he is integrating this long-omitted part of Latin American history and mediates the Latin American colonial past with the Chicano "future."

legend. Jones claims that the Guerrero figure may be a creation of romances and popular fables (Jones 28).

Chapter Two

The Latin American Roots of Gómez-Peña's Performance Art: Augusto Boal and the Mexican *Carpa*

One of the theorists who is usually summoned as Gómez-Peña's mentor is a renowned U.S. performance art scholar, Richard Schechner (1934-). Gómez-Peña himself refers to Schechner as his "conceptual *padrino*" (*Ethno-techno* 20). However, I view Augusto Boal and the Mexican popular theater known as *carpa* as the Latin American roots of Gómez-Peña's performance archive.

There are several similarities between the work of Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Brazilian theater practitioner Augusto Boal (1931-2009). Beginning in the 1960s, Boal created a politically-engaged street theater called Legislative Theater where he intended to mix direct political action with artistic happenings. Like Boal, Gómez-Peña engages his audience in fictionalized scenarios or "performance games" that are meant to elicit strong responses that become the subject of reflection and, ideally, lead to social change.

Augusto Boal was part of an important movement in Latin America. Starting in the 1960s and through the 1970s, Latin American theater saw a proliferation of groups on the political left. Most of them treated theater as a vehicle to advance political action and to achieve social change. For these groups, the message had priority over the means of expression and any theater focusing on technique was labeled "formalist" (Watson 22).

These groups were inspired to some degree by Bertolt Brecht's work with epic theater. According to Iris Smith, Bertolt Brecht envisioned epic theater as "a distinctly political but not dogmatic enterprise – a cabaret for the mind" (492). Smith explores the metaphor of Brechtian theater as a cabaret: "In fact, the image of 1920s cabaret clings to epic theater: a smoke-filled room where spectators, sitting back or strolling around, comment freely on the action" (492). Epic theater plays with theatrical conventions and leaves them open for view for the audience. Brecht's early experimental plays encourage audiences to "co-produce" meaning, to recognize that the self is layered in illusions, and to take control of those illusions (Wright 110). By giving audiences such power, Brechtian theater turns its back to (and sticks out its tongue at, in a cabaret spirit) the division between people who do (actors) and people who watch (audience). By breaking this division, fundamental to Western theater, he draws the spectator away from "the well-made play, with its closed forms and consumer ideologies" (Smith 493).

Boal fully engages with Brecht's theatrical project. Brecht's influence on Boal seems evident, especially the impact of Brecht's "learning plays" of the 1930s such as "The Measures Taken" or "The Exception and the Rule" (Schechner 46).¹⁸ Boal pushes the active presence of audiences in his theater even more. The audience is meant to both model and mirror the behavior of citizens in a democratic society. Boal's Forum

¹⁸ More about Brecht's reception in Latin America in Fernando de Toro's work.

Also, Elin Diamond offers an important feminist criticism of Brecht's theater.

Theater¹⁹ resembles the Greek agora²⁰ as a forum for citizens to voice their concerns and speak up and makes the link between Boal's performance and politics explicit. Forum Theater is an agora, a public place where the democratic experience takes place.

From the beginning, Boal's theater was conceptually an "in the streets and squares" operation (Heritage 27). The street for Boal was Legislative Theater's hothouse, a focal point of political and artistic happening.²¹ Boal uses his theatrical sensibility when thinking about public space.²² For him, the public sphere has more than just a physical

¹⁹ "Boal's theater" in this paper is synonymous with Theater of the Oppressed, Forum Theater and Legislative Theater. The method elaborated in the 1960s by Augusto Boal is known under the general name of "Theater of the Oppressed." "Forum Theater" was a further development of this method that would allow both actors and audience to stop a performance at any time and suggest/ perform a different version of the scene. "Legislative Theater" was a political forum created when Boal was city councilman in Rio de Janeiro (1992-1996) that gave citizens an opportunity to voice their opinions regarding current issues using theatrical methods.

²⁰ *Agora* derives from the Greek *agoreýō* meaning "I speak in public."

²¹ Paul Heritage notes the overall importance of the street as a medium for Brazil: "the impeachment of the president in 1982 was an effect of the theatrical in nature street protest" (Heritage 32). It was not caused by investigative journalism or any other grassroots movement.

²² German sociologist and philosopher Jürgen Habermas (1929 -) elaborated in 1962 the category of *public sphere*. As Nicholas Garnham points out, in his model –

dimension to it; it's more than a point in space where he can enact his theatrical experiments: "When we get together, many people looking at one point, they create a space which is different from the physical space. It's more than a physical space. It's pentadimensional, not three dimensions. It also has memory and imagination. So we create theatricality" (Interview). It's a space enriched by personal memories and unique imagination that Forum Theater participants bring with them. It becomes a "theatrical" forum, dramaticized and staged, for dialogue between people. Boal's improvisations, by virtue of being "pentadimensionally" topical, had a capacity to "evade censorship and to facilitate democratic participation" (Allain and Harvie 162). This gave them great political potential and the ability to challenge the "grand narratives."²³

based on Western European countries in the XIX century - Habermas doesn't take into account the rhetorical or playful aspects of public discourse, as well as any other forms of public discourse *not* directed towards consensus. In his critique of Habermas, Garnham postulates recuperation of Rousseau's notion of public festivals and the link between citizenship and theatricality as of "particular importance in thinking about the role of the mass media in contemporary democracies" (360).

²³ Jean-François Lyotard discusses the concept of "grand narratives" in *The Postmodern Condition; A Report on Knowledge* (1979). He suggests that one of the main traits of the "postmodern" condition is its "incredulity towards meta-narratives" (6). According to Lyotard, these grand-narratives are large-scale theories, such as progress in history, the attainability of freedom, the ontological powers of science, etc. Lyotard argues that we have stopped believing such narratives and that we become more alert to

Legislative Theater was created by Boal in a period of time when he was a vereador²⁴ in Rio de Janeiro, 1992-1996, as a project to “do *theater as politics* and not merely political theater” (Schechner, Chatterjee and Boal 78). In a letter to Schechner, Boal explains how he intended to embark on an experiment of “democratizing politics through theater”: “we want democracy; theater can help in this process – why not?” (80). When Boal systematized his political philosophy for the first time into an aesthetic language, a language known as “theater of the oppressed,” he was living under a rigid military regime in Brazil. Boal was imprisoned and had to leave Brazil in 1971 only to come back to Rio fifteen years later. These experiences inevitably shaped his theatrical aesthetics. Boal talks about theater being a language for him and the ideal form of it being a dialogue (90): “in too many cases /.../ one part begins to monologue and the other part is reduced to listener-only. One commands, the other obeys” (90). Boal identified monologue with oppression and dialogue with (inter)action, critical thinking and democratic ways of governing. For Boal, theater is a “language that must be spoken, not a discourse that must be listened to. It also stresses theater as a process that must be developed, rather than a finished product that must be consumed” (Boal and Epstein 35). Boal believed that all relationships between humans should be dialogic in nature (Goodman) and that a monologue of the traditional performance should be converted into a dialogue between the audience and the stage (Paterson and Weinberg 18). If theater is

the diversity of our personal aspirations, beliefs and desires (what he calls “micro-narratives”).

²⁴ City councilman.

dialogic, then it becomes an extraordinary tool for all kinds of political and social transformations.

The Theater of the Oppressed was a movement towards a participatory form of theater as a way of promoting self-knowledge and awareness, as well as democratic participation. Given that at the core of this theater there was the belief in a dialogic nature of the relationship between stage and audience, the audience's capacity for intervention was pivotal. The goal of this theater was to search for the solutions to concrete problems together with the audience. Boal's method was to create an alternative for the story that was usually a problem that had to be solved. The possibilities were thought of, rehearsed and experienced to the full in the safe space of theater. Boal aimed at clarity of these solutions. However he was not afraid to challenge participants on both sides; the theatrical discussion "will go as far as the participants are capable of going" (Paterson and Weinberg 18). In the Theater of the Oppressed, games, "exercises", and entire workshops were aimed to challenge and break the mechanical ways of thinking and interacting. Boal aimed at breaking with the social ritualization of behaviors. As Boal states, the "predictable solution is worse than none. What matters is that Forum Theater encourages thinking. What changes is the attitude of the spectator, of not being only consumer, but someone who questions" (Paterson and Weinberg 18).

In his theatrical endeavors, Boal was aiming to reach efficient solutions and concrete actions. He took theater a few steps beyond the experimental performances in a public sphere. His work was always highly political and his ultimate goal was to alleviate the misery in Rio specifically and Brazil in general. In Brazil, Boal's work started a

movement of New Citizenship, to create alternative ways for citizens to participate in the political processes.²⁵

There are differences among critics (and between critics and the artist himself) in positioning Gómez-Peña within the Boal genealogy. While Gómez-Peña minimally mentions Boal as one of the influences on his “intellectual formation,” along with “Carlos Fuentes, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Oscar Chavez, Felipe Ehrenberg, Jose Augustin, William Burroughs, Michel Foucault” among several others (*Warrior* 38), Elaine Peña²⁶ doesn’t hesitate to position Gómez-Peña next to both Boal and Paulo Freire as well as Baz Kershaw’s “the radical in performance.” Peña reads Gómez-Peña as a continuation of the “challenging” and “valiantly undertaken” (*Ethno-techno* XXIV) scholarly/activist community projects strongly influenced by theater activists such as Boal (*Ethno-techno* 290). In her conversation closing *Ethno-techno*, Elaine Peña elicits a response from Guillermo Gómez-Peña:

²⁵ An example of how the theater can affect the political scene is the case of the Brazilian sociologist Herbert de Souza who started a campaign called *Citizen’s Action against Hunger and Poverty*. These Boal-inspired initiatives were “instrumental in establishing a national debate that is outside of the normal political structures” (Heritage 33).

²⁶ A Latina scholar, performer and editor of *Ethno-Techno* (2005), an anthology of Gómez-Peña's texts and poetry.

Gómez-Peña: Thanks to this book, it is becoming very clear to me that teaching performance, sharing strategies and methodologies, is as important as performing... it is now clear to me that building community through performance pedagogy is, can be, an extremely political act, and this is a true epiphany. I knew it way deep inside, but it wasn't conscious, or wasn't as clear to me as it is right now. This book is definitely my clumsy attempt to articulate an epiphany.

Peña: *Ay Guillermo...it's just the first step. (Ethno-techno 290)*

Peña's "*Ay Guillermo...it's just the first step*" sums up an approach of Chicano/a criticism that puts a premium on activism, community and political involvement of arts where "teaching and sharing is as important as performing." Earlier in the same conversation, while describing the collaboration with Peña, Gómez-Peña comments on this tendency: "I must confess that at times I felt you had little patience with some of the texts which weren't overtly political" (286). Gómez-Peña's concern that his "quintessential irreverence was going to be confined" (286) by such an "overtly political" approach is shared by Coco Fusco, a long-time Gómez-Peña collaborator (*Couple in the Cage*). She talks about the "overpowering paradigm" (Fusco 4) of agitprop political interpretation of Latin American and Latino cultural production:

As brilliant and necessary as the contributions of Paulo Freire and Augusto Boal have been to the understanding of radical pedagogy and

social change, the desire to restrict the validity of Latin American cultural production to its capacity to politicize the underprivileged is a symptom of the frustration of leftist intellectuals and a way of ghettoizing Latin American cultural production. (Fusco 4)

Fusco suggests here that using Boal as an interpretive lens may be a way of putting Chicano/a production into the marginalized "Third World" box. She questions, not without reason, an ethnographic focus in Latino studies, proposing that this focus has led academics and "leftist intellectuals" to overlook works that don't fit a particular "political" agenda.

Mady Schutzman concurs with Fusco's analysis, and suggests that the transposition of the Boal/ Freire "third-world aesthetic of resistance to a first-world aesthetic of self-help" (Schutzman 78) is problematic. According to Schutzman, it's hard to read Boal in an even remotely similar way decades later (a significant time lapse from 1960s to 1990s). Schutzman also points out how the change in context from Latin America to North America and Europe changes the nature of power relationships and how it changes if not distorts the reading of Boal (78).

I agree with both Fusco and Schutzman's acute observations and, following Fusco, suggest that seeing Gómez-Peña's work only as a function of the "capacity to politicize the underprivileged" marginalizes Gómez-Peña's (and any other) artistic production and eventually proves highly counterproductive both as an artistic and interpretative strategy. Omitting the profound contextual differences between Boal and

Gómez-Peña pointed out by Schutzman isn't an effective strategy either. Yet, Boal's legacy is at the core of the political engagement of Gómez-Peña's performance art. Gómez-Peña builds on Boal's methodology.

For example, Mark Fortier points out some unique Gómez-Peña characteristics that go beyond Boal's approach. As Fortier notices, Gómez-Peña mixes the ironic and the politically compelling (215) which differs from Boal's straightforward way of bringing his audience to a clear and direct understanding of issues. In Gómez-Peña's "imaginary political speech" given during a campaign for "the first Mexican president," serious political propositions cohabit with more absurd ones:

Imaginary Political Speech #12

[Stoner voice]

Dear generic American citizenry,

If you vote for me

I can assure you that as the first Mexican president of the USA,

I will fulfill your fears and desires like no other politician ever did,

And all your stereotypes will come true *carnales*, uufff!

I'll open all borders, legalize drugs,

Create nude university campuses,

Make daily sex mandatory,

Make Spanglish the official language,

Expropriate all TV stations and hand them over to poets,

Abolish the police force and the national guard,
Ban all weapons, from handguns to missiles,
Deport Bush back to Texas
And Ashcroft back to Episcopalian Inferno

Orale, feels great to imagine... (*Ethno-techno* 200)

Here, Gómez-Peña paints a picture of “generic American citizenry” in the imagined aftermath of electing a Mexican president of the USA. In this scenario, Americans would be faced with a reversal of the current socio-political situation; change in sexual behavior (“make daily sex mandatory”) and abolishment of those who are in power (“Deport Bush back to Texas/And Ashcroft back to Episcopalian Inferno”). Gómez-Peña plays with contradictions, role reversal, absurdity and irony. Although this performative piece, like many others by Gómez-Peña, discusses crucial political issues, like immigration, border politics, and abuse of power by the police, the audience members are practically on their own to find (or not) their way through this purposefully confusing fiction. The text moves beyond Boal’s clear practicality. The reader is being teased with the presentation of impossible socio-political scenarios and no concrete solution is being presented.

Nevertheless, there *are* important similarities between Boal and Gómez-Peña: they both put a premium on the importance of dialogue, interaction and blurred boundaries between spec-actors in the theater. Both emphasize action and critical

thinking. Yet, Gómez-Peña's signature approach is chiefly playful for the play's sake. Boal's discourse focused on the public sphere and its democratization while Gómez-Peña's is more engaged in a project of deconstructing identities through the body (as we see in his appropriation of the Guerrero figure). While Boal is more practically oriented, Gómez-Peña is more rhetorical. Gómez-Peña's political approach to art is, at best, a soft version of Boal's. Gómez-Peña has been for most of his career a romantic rebel, a solo artist, while Boal was focused on community and the political implications of his theater. Gómez-Peña's performance art is engaged with political reality, yet to date the artist has not engaged directly in the system at the policy-making level.

I suggest that Gómez-Peña's *strategy* to immerse his spectators in confusion and contradiction while bordering on absurdist humor is rooted in the Mexican popular theater tradition known as *carpa*.

The *Carpa*

It takes watching Guillermo Gómez-Peña's performances live to realize how much he draws on the *carpa* and the Teatro Campesino tradition. The *carpa*, which means "tent" in Spanish, was a family-based traveling theater form that originated in Mexico around the late eighteenth century. Teatro Campesino is a continuation of the *carpa* tradition that began in the 1960s in the USA. Although several authors have treated the *carpa* and Teatro Campesino as one and the same phenomenon, there are significant differences between them that I will show in this analysis. Gómez-Peña's performances

draw on the *carpa's* use of humor, language games, and social role inversions. He shares with the Teatro Campesino the urge to control his audiences.

In other contexts, there are reasons why the *carpa* and Teatro Campesino can become almost undistinguishable. After all, el Teatro Campesino points itself towards the *carpa*: Teatro Campesino performance pieces often times contain “*carpa*” in their titles (“La gran *carpa* de los Rasquachis”²⁷). Luis Valdez, the creator of El Teatro Campesino, famously used to watch *carpa* performances as a child. The family of El Circo Escalante made a great impression on the young Valdez. The Escalantes were itinerant artists who lived from performance and farm labor. This became a model for the early Teatro Campesino. As Broyles-González notes about Teatro Campesino: “We evolved - in our own earthiness - characters that emerged from Cantinflas and the whole comic Mexican tradition of the *carpa*, the tent” (Broyles 38), there is “the memory system shared by the *carpa* and El Teatro Campesino” (26). I will further discuss the role of Teatro Campesino in Gómez-Peña's work later in this chapter.

Yet, there are also valid reasons to try to separate the two forms. In this section, I offer an in-depth analysis of the *carpa* and, furthermore, I show the *carpa's* influence on Gómez-Peña. Gómez-Peña's performances are a specific variation of the *carpa*, yet the characteristic traits of this theatrical form are latent and recognizable in his live performances: linguistic playfulness, inclination for *relajo* (artistic chaos), use of stock

²⁷ More on rasquachismo in Ybarra-Frausto's seminal text "Rasquachismo: A Chicano Sensibility."

characters, and an intimate rapport with the audience. I was reminded of that when I saw Gómez-Peña performing at the Smithsonian Museum of American History on September 23rd and 24th 2010 as part of a symposium taking place for the anniversary of the Mexican Revolution. Gómez-Peña thrives on the closeness and active participation of the audience, and more - he is dependent on the creative participation of the spectator, who is a *cómplice* more than a consumer.

Given the importance of the *carpa* for Gómez-Peña's work, the question is what exactly is the *carpa*? Catherine Wiley formulates it in a matter-of-fact way: the *carpa* is a "Mexican performance practice" (111). Yolanda Broyles-González, the author of an important monograph on Teatro Campesino claims that "it is impossible to define the Mexican *carpa* as one thing; for it encompassed a field of diverse cultural performance practices /.../" (7). Yet, in her book she refers to the *carpa* as "rough," "elemental," "hilariously ribald" (8), "disenfranchised," "vitriolic," "counter hegemonic," (7) and brings the opinion of Miguel Covarrubias who identifies the *carpa* as "crude, vulgar and tainted with bad taste" (8). Broyles-González further formulates a working definition of the *carpa* as characterized by: "wildly exaggerated and broadly mimetic acting style; the archetypal stock characters, such as the hilarious *peladito/ peladita* (underdog); or the witty and irreverent attitude toward *language and norms* of propriety conveyed through a general spirit of *picardía* (ribald humor). Yet in essence this humor was dead serious" (27).

According to Mexican playwright Emilio Carballido, *carpa*, the form discussed in this section, originated in Mexico probably around the eighteenth century, if not earlier

(cited by Broyles-González 2). As Broyles-González claims, the *carpa*'s popularity was always correlated with social activity: “*Carpa*'s periods of vigorous revival coincide with periods of social upheaval and popular distress” (7). One such moment in the history of the *carpa* phenomenon was the aftermath of the U.S.-Mexican War (1846-48). In the following years and decades, “*carpas* poked subversive fun at assimilated Mexican-Americans’ inability to understand Spanish, while also teasing Mexicans from across the border about their ignorance of English. Selling out completely was laughable, but so was the inability to get along in two distinct cultures” (Wiley 108). In this time period, *carpas* easily passed from north to south along the border. Their “comic routines became a sounding board for the culture conflict that Mexican-Americans felt in language usage, assimilation to American tastes and life-styles, discrimination in the United States, and pocho status in Mexico” (Kanellos, *A History* 100).

After the U.S.-Mexican War, the *carpa*'s offshoots split and took different turns on either side of the U.S.-Mexican border. North of the new border, the distinction between institutionalized theater and popular, on-the-streets *carpas* sharpened in the years following the U.S.-Mexican War. Mexican theater became well established in the decades following 1848. According to Arturo Rosales, the Latino community in the U.S. supported theater longer than did the dominant Anglo culture. Rosales argues that Mexican theater and the community's attachment to it can be seen as an institutionalized negotiation with the dominant culture and a way how this theater helped consolidate identities and political positions in the decades following 1848 (15).

Broyles-González suggests that the *carpas* started to replace an institutionalized Mexican theater during the Depression. Kanellos confirms that fact: “While Mexican-American theaters suffered a loss of patronage during the Depression and Repatriation due to the exile of many actors in addition to the influx of cinemas, the *carpas* were small enough to survive and, never completely died out” (106). According to Ybarra-Frausto, *carpas* performed mostly in small farming towns between harvests and were thus not subject to the vagaries of population shifts in larger cities, as was the case for larger theaters (Broyles-González 46).

Itinerant *carpas* continued to operate in the southwestern U.S. until after the World War II. According to Chicano critics such as Broyles-González and Ybarra Frausto, these later *carpas* discussed discrimination, assimilation, and survival (Broyles-González 55). The *carpa* was formative in validating “Chicano vernacular” and introducing the *pelado*, an anti-establishment figure representative of Mexico's urban working-class. In the 1960s and 1970s the Chicano movement sought to revive the *carpa* aesthetic in the form of Teatro Campesino.

South of the new border, Pedro Granados, a former *carpero*,²⁸ gives a romanticized account of the *carpa*: “[México es] la única nación en el mundo que ha tenido salones de variedades movibles...las famosas *Carpas*, las cuales tienen una historia tan maravillosa que es casi imposible creerla”(24). In an account popularized in Mexico in the 1920s and 1930s, Granados presents *carpas* as a uniquely Mexican phenomenon that experienced resurgence after the long and bloody Mexican Revolution (1910-1917):

²⁸

Carpa performer.

Viene la paz, el pueblo harto de sangre y matanza, pero también harto de necesidad, retorna a la plazuela, a su barrio... a convivir con su miseria y su mugre, pero al no tener donde explayarse, lo hacen en las calles de su querido barrio, donde se lanzan a cantar sus corridos y sus canciones de amor. Ahí se forma el crisol de los primeros verdaderos artistas netamente mexicanos, los carperos pioneros del teatro mexicano. (25)

Granados' emphasis on the ludic and populist elements of the *carpa*, the “pueblo harto de sangre y matanza” as well as the street and *barrio* character of it (“lo hacen en las calles de *su querido barrio*”) echoes Broyles-González's work. For Broyles-González, *carpas* in Mexico were part of the post-revolutionary movement towards the nationalist consolidation and “regional celebration” (55) and played out the tensions between the urban and rural.

South of the border, the *carpa* tradition finds its innovative contemporary reinterpretation in troupes such as Mexico City's Cirko de Mente. Cirko de Mente is a company founded by Andrea Peláez and Leonardo Costantini in 2004 that offers a modern reinterpretation of the street theater and traditional circus elements present in the *carpa*. Cirko de Mente, with the help of UNAM (the National University of Mexico), revitalized the *carpa* tradition and brought together various local Mexico City communities of artists, intellectuals, activists, poor working class, and aspiring middle class.

For some critics, tracing the timeline/origins of the *carpa* has to do with reclaiming the national roots of this genre. The emphasis on the orality of the *carpa* serves as a tool to reclaiming the link to a mythical past and is a secret key that opens the doors to the essence of Mexican national character.

For Broyles-González, establishing the *carpa* lineage from “the largely overlooked Mexican popular performance tradition” is closely linked to the necessity of a reconfiguration of the genealogy of El Teatro Campesino. The Teatro Campesino is seen by this scholar as heir to the “performance memory system” of the *carpa* (29), and both are perceived as nurtured by the same powerful Mexican past.

Broyles-González suggests the interchangeability of usage between “Mexican popular performance tradition” and “culture of orality” (5). By doing so, she places “performance,” “Mexican,” “tradition,” and “orality” at the same discursive level in an effort to critically re-elaborate “the entire field of Mexican oral culture - as a unified field of cultural practices” (5). Broyles-González also proposes considering the Mexican popular performance tradition as a “*body*” and not only “*one*” oral performance form (5). She points out how traditional oral performance forms the “oral culture” or “oral tradition” that involve not only words but the “entire *body* engaged in the ‘dailiness’ of life” (6): music, dance, ritual or no words at all. Broyles-González claims that this expanded view of oral performances constitutes a “political economy of performance” (24) which she defines as memory, community history, and the human body merged within the social practice of performance.

Although Broyles-González is searching for the “authentic” Mexican past and its manifestation in cultural phenomena such as the *carpa*, her approach is, at the same time, critical of the *carpa* and Teatro Campesino archive. Her goal is to deconstruct some of the Chicano identitarian issues, especially those concerning the male and individualistic nature of this archive and the question of Mexican, U.S. and European heritage of both genres.

The question of the European origins of the *carpa* and Teatro Campesino is strongly present in Broyles-González’s discussions. For this scholar, building an academic discourse about the *carpa* and Teatro Campesino on sources referencing Brecht is synonymous with “discounting the Mexican reference and tradition” (7). Broyles-González advocates against making the European or U.S. traditions the main focus of the scholarly discussion; she discounts Brecht, as well as Spanish equivalents of the *carpa*: zarzuelas, sainetes and entremeses present in Mexico since the nineteenth century that inspired the Mexican form such as Rataplán.²⁹ She also rejects the influence of U.S. forms such as vaudeville and burlesque in Mexican *tandas de variedad* and *teatro de revistas* of the 1920s. She claims that this “foreign influence” was limited mainly to

²⁹ Rataplán is a Mexican parodistic version of the French review *Bataclán*, which traveled to Mexico during the 1920s. U.S. entertainment forms also made an inroad in the form of vaudeville and burlesque influences, which had come to be felt as early as the 1920s in the *tandas de variedad* and the *teatro de revistas*. For more on the topic see Laura G. Gutiérrez, *Performing Mexicanidad: Vendidas y Cabareteras on the Transnational Stage*.

Mexico DF. In her adversarial discourse, Broyles-González talks about the *carpa* “competitors,” other related performance forms that also emerged in the 1920s and 1930s that “temporarily captivated working-class audiences but did not enjoy the longevity of the *carpa*” (8). In an effort to construct the *carpa* as a purely Mexican and authentic form, she discards non-Mexican influences and even treats them scornfully claiming they were characterized by “fabulous expensive wardrobes and foreign song” (9).

Whereas much scholarship has sought to establish a European ancestry for the *carpa*, Broyles-González claims that “the deep and ancient Native American roots of Mexican farce and comedy remain relatively unexplored” (34). She suggests that the *carpa* draws on the richness of the pre-European, pre-Colombian traditions:

Although this is not the place to trace in depth the ancient roots and evolution of the *carpa* tradition, it must be stated that the culture of laughter and humorous performance forms involving buffoonery, acrobatics, clowning, and satire has been an important part of the Mexican social formation since before the arrival of Europeans. (Broyles-González 33)

She also points to Bernal Díaz del Castillo and Diego Durán, documenting the existence of buffoonery and clowning in native performance genres of the sixteenth century, to which the *carpa* is heir (33).

Broyles-González continuously re-emphasizes the non-European, pre-Columbian elements in the *carpa* tradition. After presenting Bakhtin's carnivalesque theory, a European framework, Broyles-González abandons it in favor of the viewpoint of a Mexican thinker, Miguel León-Portilla, who identifies the *carpa* with comedy, "actuación cómica" (comedic performance), as "one of the four major categories of pre-Hispanic Nahuatl theatrical activity" (33).

Seen from the above perspective, the orality of the *carpa* presents a critical, counterhegemonic discourse. In his landmark study of Mexican and Chicana performance forms, Charles Briggs (1988) highlights the inordinate critical capacity of traditional Mexican performance forms such as historical discourse, *cuentos* (story telling), *dichos*, legends, or jokes (Broyles-González 26). As Broyles-González notices:

Individually and as a group, oral cultural practices provide an alternative interpretative system, which resists the dominant hegemony by critically exploring and shaping social experience from a specifically Mexicano working-class and ethnic perspective. (26)

Humor is an important component of orality. According to Valdez: "our use of comedy originally stemmed from necessity - the necessity of lifting the strikers' morale" (Broyles-González 27). As Mexican philosopher Jorge Portilla opines in *Fenomenología del relajo* (1966), the humorous practice perfected within the Mexican popular performance tradition, *el relajo*, is "una burla colectiva" o "un desavío de algo" (a

derailing of something) (qtd in Broyles-González 28). According to Broyles-González: "the spirit of *relajo*, disruptive group cheekiness, constitutes a subjective positioning of dissent vis-a-vis the dominant values of the social whole" (28). The humorous linguistic forms in the *carpa* and Teatro Campesino, puns, joke-telling (*chistes*), the verbal competition of *albures* (verbal jousting with sexual overtones or insinuations), and *cábula* (banter or verbal dueling) are enacting a role reversal of a kind (40).

Tomás Ybarra-Frausto also talks about these verbal strategies, comedy and non-sensical word play as preceding the *carpa/ tendas de variedad* tradition (41). They were a weapon of the Mexican underdog:

Marginalized sectors within the Mexican and Mexican-American subcultures weave pyrotechnical displays of language that often function as subversive strategies against imposed orders and hierarchies. (Ybarra-Frausto, "I Can Still Hear" 46)

As Monsiváis notes: "in the verbal wear-and-tear of the *barrio*, non-sense has a strong meaning: one says nothing to communicate something" (qtd in Broyles-González 42). The humorous juggling and inversion of dominant grammatical linguistic practices at once assimilates and subverts the "proper" language of officialdom by deploying it against itself (42). De Certeau describes this strategy as "playing and foiling the other's game":

That is where the opacity of a “popular” culture could be said to manifest itself - a dark rock that resists all assimilation. What is there called “wisdom”...may be defined as strategem..and as “trickery”. Innumerable ways of playing and foiling the other’s game. (De Certeau 18)

In the context of De Certeau’s observations, it is much more understandable what Broyles-González means by the “*carpa* repertory of verbal forms of combat” (43).

A critical alternative to the quest for authentic Mexican origins is presented by Catherine Wiley in “*Teatro*³⁰ Chicano and the Seduction of Nostalgia.” Wiley approaches the *carpa* and other forms of *teatro*, and analyzes how nostalgia for Mexico works in them. Wiley defines nostalgia as the dependence on Mexico “not only for its origins, but for its essential meaning as well” (99). She suggests that the nostalgia for Mexico belongs in the *teatro* tradition and notices that nostalgia re-appears as the “collective tenor of early *teatro* Chicano” and is in the core of the ethnic pride that inaugurated the 1960s Chicano movement (100).

Wiley proposes that this nostalgia should be resisted and/or reformulated (114). In her critique of the *carpa* and Teatro Campesino she points to the exclusion of issues of gender, homosexuality, and the questions of Indians in their performances. She contrasts it with the *teatro*’s recent incorporation of these previous Chicano cultural taboos by Cherríe Moraga in “Giving up the Ghost,” noticing that “as a bi- or even tri-cultural

³⁰ Wiley uses the italicized term *teatro* in her otherwise English text. She doesn't offer a specific definition of the term.

performance genre, *teatro* mediates Mexican, American, and Chicano cultures” (103). She proposes that “if all of these taboos are unstable, then other assumptions about cultural and individual identity may be malleable as well” (113). Gómez-Peña's performances exemplify this malleability by addressing questions of gender and race, previously silenced in the Mexican theater tradition, and therefore breaks off from the above described notion of nostalgia.

Grzegorz Welizarowicz in “*Carpa Clash –Folklore and Modern Theater*” presents another understanding of the role of orality in *carpa* and Teatro Campesino that can be helpful in analyzing the work of Gómez-Peña. Welizarowicz discusses the relationship between folkloric aspects of performance and the notion of tradition, understood as the past and the source of mythical origins. He argues after Dan Ben-Amos in “Toward a Definition of Folklore in Context” that not all folklore is traditional. “Folklore does not need to depend on oral transmission and, like any other art, it is a symbolic action” (Welizarowicz 92). He understands performance as a process of communication not only between actors and audience but, more importantly, between different forms and traditions. Furthermore, he explores the possibilities to conceive performance as a transgression of the boundaries of *traditional* art. It is an important critique of Broyles-González's approach. For Broyles-González, the entire argument was to show how the *carpa* and Teatro Campesino through the orality of performance forms are rooted in the “Mexican tradition,” where tradition is understood as some vague mythical past that is purely “Mexican,” and not influenced by the European and other “foreign” art forms. In contrast, Welizarowicz envisions Chicano identities as Gómez-Peña does, as *dynamically*

anchored in cultural memory. For Welizarowicz and Gómez-Peña, identities do not feed on nostalgia for the idealized past and instead constantly revisit the content of the cultural memory of a group, therefore always dynamically reshaping it.

Cantinflas and Gómez-Peña

Mario Moreno “Cantinflas” (1911-1993) was part of the *Carpa* Valentina in Mexico City around 1929. Cantinflas can be seen as Gómez-Peña’s Mexican precursor, although he was lacking in Gómez-Peña’s late twentieth-century technical and cosmopolitan sophistication. Yet, Cantinflas was a catalyst of all of the *carpa* tradition, perfectly juggling the art of *relajo*, linguistic games, humor, and the use of stock characters (*pelado*, “the naked,” underprivileged one). In addition, he was the first *carpa* actor to become a movie star, and notoriously famous. Monsiváis talks about Cantinflas:

A la falta de recursos, Cantinflas le opone la feliz combinación de incoherencia verbal y coherencia corporal. El libera a la palabra de sus ataduras lógicas, y ejemplifica la alianza precisa de frases que nada significan (ni pueden significar) con desplazamientos musculares que rectifican lo dicho por nadie. (44)

Carmelo Esterrich, and Angel M. Santiago-Reyes in “From the *Carpa* to the Screen: The Masks of Cantinflas” note that the image of Cantinflas is derived directly from a cultural space of Mexican *carpas*. Cantinflas is presented then as a “twofold icon” – *peladito* on the one hand and a character employing very special language skills on the other.

On one hand, there are marked elements of circus in the *carpa* and Cantinflas' practices. In the 1920s a new type of clown appeared, the Hobo. The Hobo, despite his poverty, lives like a rich man. Carmelo Esterrich and Santiago-Reyes suggest how Cantinflas is in fact a Mexicanized Hobo in the figure of the *peladito*: hungry, poor, yet pretending to live a life without limitations. Dario Fo in his analysis of the discourse of the clown notices how clowns always speak of hunger: "Clowns, like minstrels and 'comics', always deal with the same problem – hunger, be it hunger for food, for sex, or even for dignity, for identity, for power" (172). Cantinflas is famous for his many roles in which he plays the part of the hungry tramp. According to Esterrich and Santiago-Reyes this hunger contributed to the audience's love for Cantinflas. The *peladito* or "hungry" character was easy to identify with.

On the other hand, Monsiváis draws interesting conclusions about Cantinflas' verbosity.³¹ For Monsiváis, Cantinflas says, "Don't take notice of what I'm saying, but of what I want to tell you." His "verbal incoherence" (Monsiváis 97), or in Salvador Novo's terms, "dislalia" (184), make an important point. Cantinflas's speech shows how an entire social class can lose the hegemony over its discourse.³² Cantinflas's speech is loaded with word games, puns, and semantic changes. Only Cantinflas knows what he is saying; the Other is missing the referent. Cantinflas offers an alternative language against a rhetoric accepted and standardized by the dominant class.

³¹ Discussed in the "Linguistic Mask" section of the Monsiváis' article.

³² He was aiming specifically at a higher class and their language dominance.

As Aurelio de los Reyes states it, in Mexico “el papel del cómico es decisivo: representa la vanguardia verbal, agrade antes que nadie a los cánones lingüísticos operantes y propicia la aparición de nuevas formas” (174). Cantinflas’s collision of linguistic registers was, and always has been, a question of the collision of social classes and the hegemony of the speech.

Gómez-Peña takes liberally from the *carpa* archive. Humor is the most important element of the *carpa* present in Gómez-Peña’s performances. Both for Cantinflas and Gómez-Peña, humor is a powerful vehicle for critique. Language games and blurred speech whose aim is *not* to mean, as well as the general *relajo* tone, are techniques on which Gómez-Peña relies heavily.

Gómez-Peña also draws on the power of oral forms, proper to the *carpa*. Although Gómez-Peña is an author of sophisticated *written* texts, his stage persona and the audience interaction are crucial for him. It is Gómez-Peña’s favorite form of communication. In oral forms, a critique is usually embedded, lines are drawn, sides are taken. Gómez-Peña’s oral performances do not aspire to be objective.

Gómez-Peña also draws on the *carpa*’s stock characters: *vato loco* – the street dude, crazy gangster, prototypes that evolve finally into the robo-gang member from *El Mexterminador*,³³ his 2002 anthology of texts compiled in Spanish.

³³ “El Mexterminator (ethno-cyborgs & artificial savages)” is the name of an interactive piece from 1995 featuring both Gómez-Peña and Sifuentes. It is also a title of the 2002 Mexican anthology of Gómez-Peña’s texts -“El Mexterminator. Antropología inversa de un performer postmexicano,” edited by Josefina Alcázar. The name is a play

In the broadest view, Gómez-Peña also draws on the structure of the *carpa*'s itinerant troupes as he has traveled through the U.S., Mexico and other parts of the world with his group of collaborators, La Pocha Nostra. The choice of the name, La Pocha Nostra, is a conscientious inflammatory gesture since "pocha" ("pocho" is the masculine form) is a pejorative term used by native-born Mexicans to describe Chicanos who are perceived to have forgotten or rejected their Mexican heritage. Gómez-Peña started traveling from south to north, crossing the border of Tijuana-San Diego and evolved into a kind of "intellectualized" or academic *carpa*, touring mainly universities and important cultural centers.

One of the most important differences between the *carpa* and Gómez-Peña is the approach to "the legacy of hardship" (Welizarowicz 99). In his works, Gómez-Peña of 2010 doesn't exploit the "hardship" or "injustices" of his condition. He does not rely in his work on a set of oppositions either: us versus others, Mexicans versus Anglos, etc. He does *not* subscribe to Ramón Saldívar's point of view that Chicano culture can be "potentially liberating" when exploiting a "set of oppositions to the dominant cultural system surrounding it" (4). Gómez-Peña exposes such binarism as another form of exclusion, if not racism.

on words: "Mex" and "Terminator" and alludes to the 1984 movie with Arnold Schwarzenegger who plays the Terminator, a cyborg assassin. The Gómez-Peña performance addresses stereotyped and racist representations of Latino/as, where El Mexterminator could be the one killing Mexicans.

Carpa's Legacy

The *carpa's* legacy is not monochromatic. From the Chicano nationalist perspective, *carpa* epitomizes the history of Mexican-Americans and their difficult coexistence with the Anglo-American population. A good example of such an approach is the 1982 movie *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez* starring a Mexican-American actor, Edward James Olmos. Gregorio Cortez's 1901 killing of Texas Rangers and the epic escape that followed is symbolic of the struggles between Anglos and Texans in south Texas. The movie reinforces the symbolic position of Gregorio Cortez as a suffering hero of the Chicano movement, fighting against Anglo society. This is an example of the treatment of the *carpa* tradition that reflects a very specific, yet still popular, Chicano perception of the Chicano-Anglo relationship. The movie looks *back* at the *carpa's* tradition for reaffirmation of identity and most certainly for a recognition of the wounds suffered by Mexicans in the USA. Gómez-Peña distances himself from this approach.

Welizarowicz and Wiley suggest different interpretations of the *carpa* legacy, both of which are important for understanding of the role that *carpa* plays in Gómez-Peña's work. Welizarowicz discusses “*Carpa Clash*” (1993), a *carpa*-inspired performance by a Chicano theater group, Culture Clash, as attempting to “open up chicanismo” (107) and envisioning Chicano identities that are both dynamic and anchored in cultural memory. Another production based on the *carpa* tradition, *La Carpa Aztlán*, is set in the near future (2021), and like Gómez-Peña's futuristic performances, it shows a world where “Chicano Man and Woman are underground; they had assimilated so well in the 1990s that they disappeared from the mainstream and thus exist only in the imaginary spectacle

of the *carpa*” (111). As Catherine Wiley suggests, *La Carpa Aztlán* illustrates the translation of a nineteenth-century Mexican performance tradition to contemporary community-based, political theater (112).

Culture Clash's dynamic and playful approach reflects Gómez-Peña's take on Chicanismo that has evolved into a more inclusive, open version of the movement, one that Gómez-Peña himself calls a "nomad identity" – cultural politics that breaks with a nationalistic and self-righteous Chicanismo and embraces other cultures and identities from all over the world (Interview 2010).

A Word About *Teatro Campesino*

In contrast with the *carpa*, Teatro Campesino only slightly influenced Gómez-Peña, I, nevertheless, would like to suggest looking at some of the most important points of contact between Gómez-Peña and Teatro Campesino.

Teatro Campesino focuses mainly on propaganda and education of the workers, yet Valdez was also very interested in the intersection of politics and aesthetics. In an interview with Carl Heyward,³⁴ Valdez says that “as a theater company, we are consciously and deliberately trying to provide certain kinds of *images*” (emphasis added). Valdez continues:

While we had the strength and urgency of the struggle, our *artistry* [my emphasis] had to sustain our politics. Ultimately it is artistry that makes

³⁴ San Francisco writer Carl Heyward met with Valdez in 1985.

the point and cuts across the barriers to understanding. There is a certain quality of excellence that we have discovered over the years, that a lot of people assumed that we didn't have to have, you know? They assumed that we could be rough and untutored and primitive, and still maintain our charm.

The audience in Teatro Campesino was under much more control than in the *carpa*. In the interview Luis Valdez claims that: "We had a willing audience, a message, and that was the raw material." Similarly to Gómez-Peña's workshop process, Valdez put a premium on the right selection of the audience (something that was a non-issue in the case of the *carpa*):

The audience has always been looked upon as the main factor in our presentation. Once you have a mixed audience in that way, which is a true cross-section of the country, there is a dynamism and electricity that helps each performance. It is just as important for us to cast the audience, as it is to cast the play. We have found that playing just for Chicanos evokes certain things, just as playing for Anglos...neither is correct. What we call "The New American Audience" is a cross-section of the country that brings us to the future. We have to respond to the whole audience, the whole country. You are protected against your own racism and narrow-mindedness, and are urged, due to the make-up of that audience and the

need to reach them, to reach a higher place. That is the truth that needs to invade Broadway—get in touch with the world.

The picking of his own audience— in the case of Valdez and Gómez-Peña – gave the performer control over who watches them, and created a sounding board made up of like-minded participants. There was no such sophisticated control tool in the case of the *carpa*.³⁵ Despite these similarities between Gómez-Peña and Teatro Campesino, Gómez-Peña chooses to draw on the playfulness of the *carpa* style and techniques, more so than on Teatro Campesino’s political agenda. In his performances, *relajo* and linguistic virtuosity *are* the staple.

³⁵ The *carpa*’s audiences were known to be intensely involved (Broyles-González 46). Broyles-González describes how aggressive *carpas* audiences were; *albores* between audience and actors and the throwing of objects were common. As Miguel Covarrubias (593) notices about the *carpa* audiences of the 1930s: “The audience is unruly and informal and takes an even more direct participation in the performance than in the popular theaters.” Broyles-González reports the existence of *Cóccoras* - the actively participating audience groups or “lobbies” which will shout at performers cat calls, lively remarks, interjections, etc. Yet there was no organized, scripted effort to manipulate the audiences by the troupes or performers themselves.

Gómez-Peña's Artistic Method. The Town Meeting. Between Boal and the *Carpa*

An example of Gómez-Peña's performance that combines Boal and the *carpa* methodology is the Town Meeting. Gómez-Peña gives his own definition of this project at La Pocha Nostra website:

A civic, political and artistic mixing bowl hosted by Guillermo Gómez-Peña and/or other Pocha Nostra members.

Bringing together community leaders, civic activists and artists from the host city as well as from around the country, the Town Meeting project attempts to provide a unique, engaging format for the frank discussion of issues of race, nationality, language and their effects on the local and global community.

In the Town Meeting projects, politics and performance intersect as Gómez-Peña introduces performance elements into a standard round-table format, where scholars, politicians and activists gather to talk about important political and social issues. The mixing of the two formats, artistic and scholarly, is meant to change the participants' modes of behavior, ritualized by the conference genre, and in a Boalesque spirit, inspire new solutions. There are also several *carpa*-like surprising and whimsical "interventions" - during the course of the round table, while the presenters read their papers on the state of affairs in their communities, they are being constantly interrupted by performers and invited local artists and poets. In addition to that, after every presentation by each of the

panelists, Gómez-Peña as "El Mexterminator" and Sifuentes as "CyberVato,"³⁶ moderate an open mike discussion. A third party like Dr. Leticia Nieto, a conflict resolution specialist, intervenes as well.

These experimental Town Meetings took place in Washington, D.C., San Francisco, San Antonio, Los Angeles, and Toledo, Ohio. As Art Silverman from National Public Radio observes at the La Pocha Nostra website: "It worked. I will never be able to sit still during a serious panel discussion again. All public meetings need to be interrupted by Mexterminators. The discussion gave context to your performance, your performance made the talk tolerable."

One such Town Meeting took place at the Smithsonian in the late 1990s.³⁷ Several distinguished immigration lawyers, theorists, historians, activists, and artists formed a panel on issues of immigration. Among the participants were Baldemar Velásquez, a

³⁶ CyberVato is Sifuentes' character, also known as Information Superhighway Bandido.

³⁷ Of Gómez-Peña's seminal pieces, three were presented at the Smithsonian in the 1990s: "The Year of the White Bear and Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West," also known as "The Couple in the Cage," was staged at the Smithsonian Natural History Museum in 1992. In 1995, Gómez-Peña collaborated with James Luna, a well-known Native American artist, to create a piece called "The Shame-man meets El Mexican't at the Smithsonian Motel and Golf Course." The Town Meeting was the last of the performances staged at the Smithsonian in the 1990s. The exact date and place of it has to be yet researched in the Smithsonian archives.

Mexican-American labor union activist; Abel López, the national director of National Association of Latino Arts and Culture at the time; Susan Harjo, an advocate for American Indian rights; and several of Gómez-Peña's collaborators.

The performance artists designed the stage and structured the event as if a performance art piece were to take place, with lights, video projections, and sound. Inside this performance space, they placed a table with activists and radical scholars from the Latino, Indigenous Americans, and African-American communities. The performance artists asked panelists questions about lack of leadership, intra-Latino conflicts, and inter-ethnic conflicts. They were also dressed as waiters and served food, and every now and then the waiters would go into "performance mode." In addition, any time the conversation became redundant and fruitless the performance artists intervened with a skit or a spoken word text.

The Town Meetings have elements of political performance but what makes them truly unique is the element of *relajo*, chaotic irreverence, that can be traced back to the *carpa* tradition. This mix ("mixing bowl" in Gómez-Peña's words) is meant to not only destabilize racist and xenophobic discourses by addressing them in the experts' presentations during the panel, but also to destabilize and break free from the solemnity of these very discourses, as a gesture of conscious political praxis. Gómez-Peña's artistic and political praxis go hand in hand insofar they denounce the solemn orthodoxy of any political position and any artistic convention. There couldn't be a better example of that than the Town Meetings.

Chapter Three

People who do not tell stories well, listen to stories effectively, and learn to deconstruct those stories with a skeptical ear will be more apt to be victims of . . . exploitation and power games . . . Part of exploitation is to deny an interpretation, point of view, or experience, that differs from the dominant view. Rhetoric about healthy, happy, and terrific harmony and unity can mask just the opposite reality. A simple sounding moral or prescription about consensus or teamwork can mask deeper costs in terms of power and domination.

Managing in the Postmodern World: America's Revolution Against Exploitation

-David Boje and Robert Dennehy

Teaching Performance and Performing Teaching

After having described the political uses of performance art of Guillermo Gómez-Peña, I'll now analyze his relationship with pedagogy. Gómez-Peña's model of relating to the audiences-- teaching them to engage in active response -- is the very goal of radical pedagogy,³⁸ whose main proponents, Paulo Freire and Henry Giroux, I will discuss later in this chapter.

³⁸ The concept of "radical pedagogy" has different meanings. For some, a discussion of radical pedagogy implies an analysis of the politicized aspects of educational institutions, policies and practices and, further, that education can and must be oriented

Researching and writing about Gómez-Peña inspired me to plan how I would use his ideas in my classroom. The experience of teaching Gómez-Peña and introducing students to his work at the same time became a way of being influenced by the artist and taking on a new pedagogical persona in the classroom.

For Gómez-Peña, pedagogy is a very important issue. Besides his traveling workshops with La Pocha Nostra, he has also taught undergraduate and graduate level performance art seminars at UCLA, MIT, UNAM, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, the Art Institute of San Francisco (Ethno-techno 96). For Gómez-Peña, the classroom has become a place where theory and practice can be "reconciled":

I thought: If I could only turn the classroom or workshop-studio into a performance and rehearsal space, reconcile my theory and praxis, and utilize my performance techniques to teach, I may be able to find a temporary utopian space within an educational context. (Ethno-techno 96)

For Gómez-Peña, the classroom presents a possibility of creating a "utopian space within an educational context." It allows for an experiment in stretching the democratic muscle

towards radical social change (Freire, Giroux). For others, radical pedagogy refers to cutting edge developments in the field of education: the latest theories, methods and practices that promise to reinvent the process of teaching and learning. Different as these perspectives may appear to be, they are nevertheless linked.

of the educational institution and, ultimately, testing the system in which the institution is embedded:

I saw the potential of the classroom and workshop space. It could become an extension of both the performance space and the social worlds, a kind of demilitarized zone and nerve center for progressive thought and action. This temporary space of utopian possibilities had to be highly politicized, anti-authoritarian, interdisciplinary, (preferably) multiracial, and, ultimately, a safe place for students and workshop participants to really experiment. With these elements, students could push the boundaries of their fields and identities, take necessary risks, talk back, and be heard. If performance is a form of radical democracy then performance artists must learn to hear others and teach others to hear. (Ethno-techno 96)

According to Gómez-Peña, the classroom can become a place to practice "radical democracy" in a pacifist way (his "demilitarized zone"), a place where students and teachers can experiment with their identities and cultural fears, push boundaries and ultimately destabilize the dominant discourse.

In 2004, Gómez-Peña and La Pocha Nostra established a summer institute in Oaxaca, Mexico, for artists from all over the world. Every summer, an international group of artists from the U.S., Latin America and Europe attends a 2.5-week long

workshop. In my interview with Gómez-Peña in December 2010, he talks about the Oaxaca project, calling it "a nomadic performance school":

I think that our border project has really become an international project and we have done that through our troupe and through our pedagogy, through the idea of a nomadic performance school. We now have alumni all over the world, and we are in the process of creating a website that will be a resource center for all the alumni of Pocha where people would be able to exchange ideas, props, costumes, music, places to stay when they visit other countries. It is a very important project. Through the Oaxaca school we re-entered Mexico through the back door.

This pedagogical initiative has made Gómez-Peña and his troupe nationally and internationally renowned; moreover, having his work acknowledged in his native Mexico since 2004 bears special significance for the Mexico City-born artist.

Gómez-Peña and his long-time collaborator Roberto Sifuentes elaborate the questions of pedagogy in a forthcoming book, *Exercises for Rebel Artists. Radical Performance Pedagogy*. As we learn from the publisher's site, in *Radical Performance Pedagogy*:

Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Roberto Sifuentes use their extensive teaching and performance experience with La Pocha Nostra to help students and

practitioners to create “border art”. Designed to take readers right into the heart of radical performance, the authors use a series of crucial practical exercises, honed in workshops worldwide, to help create challenging theatre which transcends the boundaries of nation, gender, and identity. *Radical Performance Pedagogy* advocates teaching as an important form of activism and as an extension of the performance aesthetic. (Routledge)

From the description, this long-overdue book will finally address the importance of radical pedagogy for Gómez-Peña and the relevance his workshops have gained, becoming a staple of his artistic career.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Gómez-Peña’s pedagogical ideas can be seen in the context of the broader movement towards the Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. The term Culturally Relevant Pedagogy is used interchangeably with several terms like culturally responsive, culturally appropriate and culturally congruent to describe effective pedagogy in culturally diverse classrooms. This approach was especially designed for minority students and nowadays is applied to English as Second Language Learners.

In that context, Culturally Relevant Pedagogy echoes Gómez-Peña pedagogical philosophy of adaptation to and appreciation of cultural difference. Culturally Relevant Pedagogy builds on the premise that “how people are expected to go about learning may differ across cultures. In order to maximize learning opportunities, teachers must gain knowledge of the cultures represented in their classroom, then translate this knowledge

into instructional practice” (Villegas 13). Similarly to Gómez-Peña’s approach, student achievement is not the only goal. Teachers are also meant to assist students in *changing* the society, not merely learning how to navigate the current status quo.

At some point during my research on Gómez-Peña's performance art, it became clear that part of the research endeavor is translating his ideas into a pedagogical experience. I became inspired by what Gómez-Peña stresses about performance art and its relationship to teaching. The question kept arising: how can I effectively transmit Gómez-Peña's ideas to a literature and language classroom? How does teaching *about* performance become inevitably a performative act itself and what are the implications for me and my students? What can we learn from talking about and using performance techniques? When and how does this experience become part of radical pedagogy, understood both as aiming at social change and reflecting on the teaching process in search of innovative teaching methodologies?

Some of the most important innovations in pedagogy can be traced to John Dewey (1859-1952), an American philosopher who looked into the link between education and forms of democracy. This approach appears in a politicized, contemporary form in the work of influential Brazilian thinker Paulo Freire (1921-1997) and French philosopher Henry Giroux (1943-). Paulo Freire, known for his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* that influenced Augusto Boal, addresses the question of the linkage between academic research and teaching and ways of challenging the "traditional bifurcation" between the two (Stucky and Wimmer 2):

There is no genuine instruction in whose process no research is performed by way of a question, investigation, curiosity, creativity; just like there is no research in the course of which researchers do not learn – after all, by coming to know, they learn, after having learned something, they communicate it, they teach. (*Pedagogy of Hope* 192-193)

Freire helps us to understand that the classroom has an inherently performative component; that the link between the "investigation, curiosity, creativity" and the act of "communicating" is at the core of pedagogical endeavor. As Stucky and Wimmer observe in *Teaching Performance Studies*: "The innovative and interdisciplinary nature of much performance studies research has necessarily provoked innovation in curricula and in the presentation of the course content" (2).

Giroux further elaborates the ideas of radical pedagogy in *Fugitive Cultures: Race, Violence, and Youth*. He differentiates between *political* education and *politicized* education. Giroux considers politicized education a kind of terrorism that refuses to examine its own ideological constructs. In contrast, he suggests a political pedagogy to provide students with agency, the ability to act on and take responsibility for their own education. It transforms students from being passive consumers of dominant cultural capital into "public intellectuals," a term also used by Gómez-Peña to describe his role as a performer artist, who are capable of moving across cultural boundaries and various sites of learning in order to challenge the politics of their education (124).

Gómez-Peña's approach to pedagogy resonates with Freire's and Giroux's ideas as well as with the work of feminist critics such as bell hooks, a pseudonym of Gloria Watkins, distinguished professor of English at the City College of New York. hooks decries education that merely amasses facts and figures. Her concept of critical pedagogy considers the political effects of education. What, she asks, does it mean to participate in a democratic culture where different opinions are voiced and heard and actively contribute to the creation of a more just and equal system. In *Teaching to Transgress*, hooks observes: "To engage in dialogue is one of the simplest ways we can begin as teachers, scholars, and critical thinkers to cross boundaries" (130).

In her book *Never a Dull Moment. Teaching and the Art of Performance* (2001), Jyl Lynn Felman, feminist scholar, educator, and Professor of Women's Studies at Brandeis University, describes how her students intentionally turned their presentations into "transformative, truly miraculous performances that utilize the body to inform and incite their audience, the class" (101). I share with her my amazement at how students, left to their own imagination and creativity, figure out stunning, powerful performative pieces that help them express complex issues. I have seen this transformation first hand in my classroom, as I shall explain below.

This brings up the question of the use of the body in the classroom. As Jyl Lynn Felman points out, in order for such teaching experiments to succeed, both the teacher and the student have to understand that the body must be present too, active and engaged in the learning process. As Stucky and Wimmer inform us, the root of any kind of

understanding lies in a "*felt-knowledge*" (3, my emphasis) of human experience – and calls for an *embodiment* of ideas and experiences.

The question of "teacherly" bodies is at the core of pedagogical praxis of Patrick Johnson, Professor of Performance Studies at Northwestern University, and author of *Appropriating Blackness. Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (2003). In the final chapter of his book titled "Performance and/as Pedagogy: Performing Blackness in the Classroom," Johnson draws on the classes he taught in the performance of literature. He shows, through a series of case studies, how "teacherly" bodies can (un)authorize interpretations of texts and cultural phenomena in a scarily easy and effective way. Johnson suggests that the only way to counterbalance that "teacherly" body power and truly bring out the student's voice is through self-reflection and analysis of the teaching dynamics. Johnson's chapter puts "peda" (meaning "to lead") back into *pedagogy* and makes it evident that teaching equates, inevitably, to taking a pedagogical stance.

Inspired and encouraged by Johnson's experience, I envisioned my own *Teaching performance and performing teaching* experiment. I designed and taught three one-hour classes about the interdisciplinary performance art of Guillermo Gómez-Peña. Each class was meant to correspond to a section of my doctoral dissertation. An introductory class discussed the parameters of performance art in general, contrasting it with Gómez-Peña's written texts. The second class addressed identity politics that come out of Gómez-Peña's bodily experience as Chicano-Mexican. The third class focused on the political dimensions of the performance art form. It analyzed performance as a vehicle for Gómez-

Peña's ideas and began to outline not only the political but also the didactic applications of performance.

The overarching research question for this project was how do students perceive avant-garde and performance art and its role in their education and life in general? How do they imagine their current and future roles in society, and how do they think the arts can contribute to advancing these ambitions? The nineteen subjects participating in this teaching experiment were recruited from among the University of Maryland students enrolled in the Spanish Cluster of the Language House, a living-learning program at the University of Maryland. Students admitted to the program are academically advanced and quite often accomplished. All but two of the Spanish Cluster students who participated in the project have a GPA between 3.5-4.00; two of them pursue double degrees, six of them have double majors, and two participate in the prestigious flagship GEMSTONE program for honor students at the university. Admission to the Language House is competitive and open to all majors, though each resident must possess and nurture a strong commitment towards improving him/herself in the chosen target language.

Students were recruited for the project by the Cluster's Spanish mentor, Óscar Santos-Sopena, through a series of announcements and internal Language House e-mails. All Spanish Cluster students were eligible regardless of age, sex, race, ethnic origin, religion or any social or economic qualifications. It was meant to guarantee a wide spectrum of participants and to assure that diverse opinions and approaches to arts and education were to be represented. The classes were recorded and edited into a short, 12-minute movie, which forms part of the dissertation.

Pushing the boundaries of the literature classroom:**Session #1: Recognizing the body as a site of cognition and expression: the influence of Gómez-Peña's performance on teaching dynamics**

The first session at Language House focused on the basic concepts of performance art. I worked with students on the fundamentals of performance as an art form. Inspired by the experience with Gómez-Peña's workshop in 2007 at the University of Connecticut, Storrs, I started the class by addressing the body and its potential for artistic and cultural expression. I followed the rhythm of Gómez-Peña's performing exercises that begin all of his traveling La Pocha Nostra workshops. The classroom quickly converted into a performing space as the similarities between teaching and performing started to unfold. The lesson plan became a performance script with each activity carefully designed yet allowing for (in fact, encouraging) unexpected and unscripted change, similarly to what happens during the performances of Gómez-Peña.

At the start of each class, I followed Gómez-Peña's exercise of warming up, stretching and breathing:

The point is for participants to get their blood and energy flowing, to sweat, and stimulate endorphins in the body. Warming up and stretching also help individuals reconnect with their bodies, to "reterritorialize" themselves inside the space, and concentrate on the tasks at hand.

Participants should be able to make the transition from the outside world into the performance arena (or sanctuary). At the end of the warm-up, we usually include ten to fifteen minutes of breathing exercises borrowed from yoga and martial arts traditions. This also helps increase focus within the group. (Ethno-techno 104)

This warming-up exercise worked out surprisingly well for the students. We all got into a circle and started the stretching/moving, followed by the deep breathing exercises. Students not only seemed to enjoy it, but it also allowed for a very effective breaking of the teacher/student dichotomy, as both my students and myself fully engaged in the exercise. I was there with them, breathing and making "funny" and "strange" moves with my body, and so were they. Also my positioning as the "teacherly body" side by side in the circle among my students broke from the very beginning with the traditional teaching molds, where a teacher as a source of knowledge and *the* authority stands in front of the students--passive recipients of the knowledge. The traditional teacher-student orientation of a classroom shows uncanny similarity with the divisions present in the traditional theater, where the *passive* audience members are seated in an assigned part of the room, whereas the *active* actors occupy the stage. The audience does not have any agency per se. Those entertaining/educating are the actors who occupy the space of the stage. The "fourth wall" between the two doesn't allow for any authentic interaction, nor any degree of role reversal. Performance art often breaks the fourth wall, the entire performance focusing on ways of breaking with that mold, and stepping out of the performer/actor –

audience division. It's interesting to see how classroom dynamics can take on either one of these models.

During these sessions, part of "breaking the fourth wall" in the classroom was reflected in the spirit of what the theatre practitioner Richard Schechner, Gómez-Peña's mentor, calls "prepared unpreparedness":

Whenever I teach a course, I make sure that a significant proportion of the resources – readings, media, fieldwork – are new. I don't overprepare: The thrill of "not knowing" is extremely stimulating within the community of a seminar. (ix)

During my classes, I left my carefully designed lesson plans and extensive notes on one of my knees, and eventually they ended up on the side of my chair. I never looked at them during the sessions. This Schechnerian gesture of "prepared unpreparedness" left room for the necessary dose of improvisation, which in turn encouraged students to participate more freely and allowed me to listen to them with a more open mind, one that doesn't always look for elements fitting in the script. This exercise echoed the nature of the Gómez-Peña's performances and the fact that not everything is staged in the performance piece.

The body-awareness exercises together with breath work and opening of the dialogic space in the classroom by means of "prepared unpreparedness," set the stage for student participation. Thanks to the Gómez-Peña-inspired warm-up exercises, the

students voluntarily performed two small *études*, already in our first session together. I asked them to portray their college experience. They were encouraged to think of a way of expressing their ideas not only with words, but also with their bodies. They were to practice the "somatic shift" (for more on that topic, see my Chapter One on Gonzalo Guerrero) by their own example, trying to complement if not replace words with body-based imagery.

The topic of a college experience, close to every student's heart, guaranteed that students identified and engaged with the task. Their short solo *études*, often wordlessly portraying their college experience, were bold, daring and surprisingly candid. They performed feelings of boredom, frustration, anger, and disappointment with the educational system. By using Gómez-Peña's basic performance exercises and switching the mode of expression from textual to corporal, the students were able to tune in to an altogether different level of interaction with the topic at hand. This reflects both Boal's and Gómez-Peña's perspective on the ultimate goals of theater: reaching a deep personal engagement of the audience and participants of the workshop or exercises in order to address social issues.

The students' candidness raised the issue of how to deal with their emotions. As Gómez-Peña emphasizes: "It is also crucial to stress that the workshop is *not* therapy" (*Ethno-techno* 102, my emphasis). Yet, the students' feelings and emotions can be used productively in a workshop/classroom scenario. In the performance studies classroom: "The feelings of the teacher and students are brought into play on their own and in relation to each other, not hidden under cloaks of 'objectivity' (Schechner ix). Thus

understood, students' subjectivity becomes a value, and teacher-imposed "objectivity" loses its privileged position. As both Schechner and Gómez-Peña point out, a classroom can not only channel but also capitalize on emotions.

Emotions played an important role in classical Greek theater. For Aristotle in *Poetics*, catharsis - the process of releasing, and thereby providing relief from strong or repressed emotions, that led to a personal transformation, was the ultimate goal of drama. It is the goal of Gómez-Peña's performance art as well. Gómez-Peña takes the catharsis a step further, not only to transform the audience members, but also to make them into agents of societal transformations themselves. Gómez-Peña's audiences cross the borders of their own fears, and by doing that, they became, ideally for Gómez-Peña, braver and more enlightened citizens. My experience with these sessions showed that a classroom can also take on such a transformative goal. Hence, the challenge for the following teaching Gómez-Peña sessions became *how* do I want to transform the students and the society they live in? I address this question in the second and third sessions, dedicated to teaching Gómez-Peña's performance art in the context of identity and conflict resolution.

Session #2: Using Gómez-Peña performance to talk about identity. Political praxis: Gómez-Peña's collaborations and class group work

"The Chicano is a good border-crosser with multiple identities. The Chicano is someone comfortable constantly crossing the boundaries between North and South, English and Spanish, between two different cultural traditions. *It is a very useful model to understand our contemporary condition.*"

(Interview with Gómez-Peña at El Rinconcito, December 12, 2010, my emphasis)

In the second session with the Language House students, I discussed Gómez-Peña's performance techniques with more detail and asked students to experiment, "play" with them. The idea of "play" and "performance game" is at the heart of Gómez-Peña's praxis:

The playfulness and seductive imagery of these performance "games" creates an atmosphere in which audience members are not always, immediately aware of the implications of their actions – until the next morning, when they wake up with a cultural hangover. (*Dangerous Border Crossers* 55)

Challenging the audience to choose whether or not to participate in this or that performance game means it becomes necessary for them to exercise their civic muscles and political intelligence. (*Ethno-techno* 83)

In this session, I wanted not only to give a mini-lecture about Gómez-Peña's art, but also to enable students to internalize his artistic principles by applying them to ("playing with") their own experiences with identity.

In the first part of the class, I screened a few of Gómez-Peña's pieces. Every 2-minute video was preceded by a set of questions that were meant to focus students'

attention and facilitate discussion afterwards. I asked students to look carefully at the videos and think of what they consider unique to the performance genre: "what captures your attention? What surprises you? How can you use this piece to talk about identity?" This exercise was meant to build the bridge between the theoretical knowledge they gained during our first session and the specific example of Gómez-Peña's art that they were about to watch and, later, imitate.

The first piece I screened was a fragment of *Temple of Confessions*, a performance created in collaboration with Roberto Sifuentes that was shown in the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. in 1996. This performance/installation combined the format of the pseudo-ethnographic "diorama"³⁹ with that of the dramatic religious "dioramas" displayed in Mexican colonial churches. As Gómez-Peña states, the piece "was based on religious meta-fiction: we became two living *santos* [saints] from an unknown border religion, in search of sanctuary across America" (*Temple 14*). The artists, as "living dioramas," exhibited themselves inside Plexiglas boxes and Gómez-Peña took the persona of an Aztec warrior drinking blood straight from a still-beating-heart. The audience was encouraged to "experience this bizarre pagan temple and confess to the saints their intercultural fears and desires" (*Temple 14*).

After viewing this piece, we discussed students' reactions to it, which ranged from shock about the viscerality of the Aztec heart Gómez-Peña was using, to the comments

³⁹ Gómez-Peña's dioramas are the parody of the colonial practices of representation and display. The original dioramas were mobile theatrical devices, meant to represent important historical events and scenes.

on what one of the students called an "out there" esthetics. That last comment opened a lively exchange about students' expectations regarding an avant-garde, experimental art.

The video from the Corcoran performance is complemented by Gómez-Peña talking about his "border identity": the split between the Mexican and Chicano realities that has shaped his personal life and art. In order to give more depth to the discussion, I talked to the students about Gómez-Peña's "dual heritage" and the main discussions (which I call "discourses on identity" in my Chapter One of this dissertation) that have informed the artist's identity: Octavio Paz's *Laberinto de la Soledad* on the Mexican side of Gómez-Peña heritage and the Chicano movement on the USA side.

To address Gómez-Peña's conflicted identity, I discussed the impact on him of Paz's influential idea of Mexico as an orphaned nation and the implications of the negative portrayal of the Malinche-Cortés as foundational couple. I also pointed out the manipulations of the identity in the case of the Aztlán, the mythical Chicano motherland that was an assemblage of various pre-Colombian and colonial elements created by the Chicano nationalist movement in the 1960s. Students were referred to Gómez-Peña's autobiographical essay, "On the Other Side of the Mexican Mirror" (*Ethno-techno* 5-10), for more information. With this background in mind, we then proceeded to the next video.

In the following piece, also part of the *Temple of Confessions*, three members of La Pocha Nostra are shown performing on the streets of San Francisco. Roberto Sifuentes justifies the choice of performance art to address the ever-changing nature of Chicano identity ("we are chameleons," says Sifuentes). This fragment together with the following

"Performance Artist as an Intellectual" from *Chicano Sci-Fi*, were used in the session to further problematize the role of the performance art and artist in a society. Gómez-Peña, accompanied by a noisy parrot, explains how he perceives his role, his "loud mouth" allows him to "speak out" about issues that "no one else wants to talk about." He sees it as a necessary exercise in a democracy, and not just what "the dominant society" sees as rebelliousness for its own sake.

The discussion held around the last two videos took the class to the more practical part of the session. Still having the voice of Gómez-Peña and his parrot in our ears, we watched the next Gómez-Peña piece, "The Binational Boxer." It is the most abstract example of performance art that I showed during these sessions. It is also the culmination of everything we discussed previously about the (elusive) nature of performance art. Students watched the video with Gómez-Peña posing as a half-naked boxer: one glove representing Mexico on his right hand, the other, representing USA on his left hand. Gómez-Peña almost wordlessly hits himself with both hands, alternatively (for more description of the piece – see Chapter One, Section Two about Gonzalo Guerrero). The students talked openly about their reception of the piece ("low budget," "out there" but also "strong" and "very effective") and the (dis) advantages of using a performance piece to address important societal and personal issues. I enjoyed watching them debate and enter into mini-polemics about the piece and the issues it raised. It was crucial to make the students actively reflect on the possibilities of performance art, outside of the classroom and beyond the mere entertainment value of the piece. Following Boal's and Gómez-Peña's methods, I wanted them to see performance as a new language that could

be helpful in achieving societal change. Before they were to move to the practical portion of the class, I wanted them to be aware, to *feel*, that they were about to be given a powerful new tool and that they were about to use it.

Political Praxis: Artistic Collaboration and Group Work

"Collaboration has been always part of my political praxis. If I can negotiate with you our borders, our differences, in the rehearsal room, in the process of writing of the book, we may become better at negotiating these borders in the larger society."

(Interview with Gómez-Peña at El Rinconcito, December 12, 2010)

An important part of this session was to engage the students in active collaboration with each other in order to create a performance piece similar to Gómez-Peña's "The Binational Boxer." They were asked to mimic Gómez-Peña's artistic language and create an *étude* that would talk about their own identities. They were supposed to portray a conflict between identities at different levels in their personal lives: from the school, sorority and university club, through state and politics to language, religion, and nationality. They needed to collaborate on a creative piece with another student and come together with an etude that then they would present in front of the entire class. The performances created by students were fresh and, again, very candid: the "real" life of a student, when teachers turn their heads, the confusion created by living in an increasingly multicultural society, and – the most visually innovative – a piece about the conflict between religion and secular life at a public university (included in the 12-

minute video). The results were impressive, yet the *process* of working together in a diverse group was of much significance here. As Gómez-Peña indicated: "If I can negotiate with you our borders, our differences, in the rehearsal room, in the process of writing of the book, we may become better at negotiating these borders in the larger society." The students did negotiate these borders, not without some misgivings (some comments included: "I'd rather work on my own," "It is hard to work in groups"), yet were able to cross the borders of their comfort zone and were ready for the third and last session.

Session #3: Performance Art and Conflict Resolution. Using Performance for Social Change

Inspired by Gómez-Peña's "Town Meeting" performed at the Smithsonian in 1998 (for more details - see Chapter Two), I designed this session to address the "real-life" applications of performance art. We started this third and final class with a mini-lecture addressing the political theater of Augusto Boal and we continued with a discussion about its possible applications to the students' lives: "can you identify major political/societal problems in your closest surroundings? What is the nature of this conflict? Who are the main players? What actions were already undertaken to solve it? How did they succeed and how did they fail?"

I asked them to imagine a situation of conflict that could take place in Langley Park, a locality near the University of Maryland, College Park that is heavily populated by immigrants from Latin America. We discussed how Langley Park could be the equivalent of Boal's conflict-ridden Rio de Janeiro from the mid-1990s. We talked about the site-specific problems of Langley Park: with illegal Latino immigration, crime, lack

of infrastructure, and latent Anglo racism. The imagined yet very possible conflict we decided to perform was a situation in which a Spanish-speaking illegal immigrant family gets cold treatment from a local Anglo business owner. I divided the class into three groups. Two of them were to represent one side in the conflict: the immigrant family and the Anglo owner. The third group was going to prepare an unexpected "intervention," much in the spirit of Gómez-Peña's *carpa*-esque intervention from the Smithsonian Town Meeting.

This time, students easily entered the group dynamic and picked up the idea behind Gómez-Peña's ingenious Town Meeting concept. Their fascinating group work was filmed. The group impersonating the anti-immigrant and English-only business owner had especially challenging work to do. Since these students were members of the Spanish cluster and self-selected for positive feelings towards Latinos, they were evidently acting against their own beliefs and didn't hesitate to express their frustration linked to that.

This session culminated in an amazing performance piece, performed by all three groups. What could have been a chaotic experience somehow turned out to be an extremely productive one. The third group's "intervention" allowed students to grasp how Gómez-Peña's "Town Meeting" could have worked and experience the challenges and benefits of the "unscripted" elements of the piece they created. The element of unpredictability, which worked so well for Gómez-Peña, was the element that stirred the after-exercise discussions the most.

We discussed the ethical ramifications of such "interventions" and –inevitably – we ended our session debating the overarching question for this teaching experiment: is art capable of changing societies? How can performance art change *your* environment, given that you are a college student? These questions brought us back to the link between the work of Gómez-Peña and teaching, and the lessons that can be learned from his art for the university classroom.

Students' Reflections After the Sessions. Performance as a Different Way of Knowing

In the anonymous essays after the last session, students were asked to address freely these questions and reflect on the experiences with the art of Gómez-Peña from the last few weeks. These essays captured the spirit of our in-class discussions, and I appreciated how candid and un-censored they were. Students evidently recognized the potential of performance art; they talked about performance art being often "irrational" and sometimes "poignant," yet able to "capture what words could not." They reflected on what performance art could possibly bring to their education by pointing out to our discussions about the relationship between performance and the classroom dynamics and the importance of emotions (versus what they call: "pure ideas") and body (versus words):

I think that there is room for both expression of pure ideas as well as emotions in the university classroom. Often times, it is difficult to express

one without the other, because many of our ideas are emotionally charged. The university is a place for individual growth in many areas, including both intellectual ideas as well as emotional growth. By expressing our feelings as well as ideas, we can receive feedback and create an environment conducive to personal growth.

Using the body in the classroom would only improve our education system. We are not meant to take notes and stare at screens all day. We learn more from real human interaction.

Students also reflected on the impact that the unpredictability of the performative classroom had on them. They admitted to feeling "uncomfortable" at the beginning of our classes since they had not had any previous experience with performing, and hadn't known Gómez-Peña's work. Yet, they noticed that stepping out of the comfort zone had its benefits:

I don't think you should necessarily always feel comfortable while learning because changes keep you on your toes and make you adjust to new concepts (which happens in all parts of life).

Similarly, they appreciated the surprise element of "intervention" that we enacted during our third session:

I think unpredictability can cause anxiety in students, but we could potentially learn how to deal with the inevitable variations in life as result.

For most of the students, performance art presented them a different way of knowing that draws both on body and emotions, in addition to words and ideas and one that takes you out of your comfort zone. They talked about how important it is for a student to have a mind open to "all sorts of knowledge." Quite a few of them expressed a yearning for an inclusion of "different" experiences in a college education in order to create a more "holistic" educational experience:

My job as a student is to study, and to study well. My job is to learn all that I can while I am here, to open my mind to all sorts of knowledge to build me into a better, fuller individual.

I expect to learn in the university, and I hope that this learning can convert into wisdom and, thereby, into a higher degree of enlightenment. Despite that, the drive to constantly meet all of the expectations others have of me as a student renders this enlightenment focused on an incredibly narrow range. I would argue, to the point of holistic myopia.

Once again, their frustration with being "only a statistic in this big University, not a student" and having "professors who are so obviously here for tenure track and research and do not care about students at all" surfaced. Two of them cynically claimed that, as a consequence of such a status quo, they were only interested in finding a "suitable career" and "developing a spectacular resume so that I can get a good job when I leave." The majority, nonetheless, expressed hope that, inspired by the experience of these three sessions, they can "change my interactions with my teachers by forming more personal and stronger relationships with them," claiming that "there is a lot that can be gained by getting to know our teachers personally and forming a stronger relationship with them." They saw performance art and art in general as a way of achieving it.

Based on the experiences from our sessions, they ventured into making observations about the link between performance art and the democratic process:

There could be a relationship between this type of art and democracy. At first, I didn't really see any direct relationship between the two, but after this class, I began to think about the values and power of performance art a bit differently. One of the other students mentioned how performance art may not be a method to actually practically enact solutions to conflict, but it can definitely be a way to explore possible ideas to resolve an issue, and *to learn about the views that other people may have on the same topic* [my emphasis]. As such, democracy – a combination of the views of the people in the group – can be expressed through performance art, where people are

exposed in a real way to more ideas and points of views than just their own.

I think that performance art gives space to talk about issues that may be unknown or taboo in a way that everyone can interpret in their own way. Like with democracy, everyone is enfranchised with the ability to express themselves through performance art. Everyone has a story, and performance art may be the most difficult but also the clearest way to express one's experiences.

Their observations about the plurality of stories that performance art encourages and the "space" that it gives to express them, found its culmination in reflections about the nature of radical performances:

Radical performance art is intentionally exaggerated and unrealistic in order to highlight a specific issue and express one's experience that shapes his/her perspective. I think this is what Gómez-Peña and Aviles [Quique Aviles] do with their art: point out problems with society through an exaggerated demonstration of their experiences in order to make them more obvious to others.

These comments brought me back to Gómez-Peña's pedagogy. Gómez-Peña in his "Workshop conclusions" notes that: "It is true that the performance itself carries a transformative seed, a seed that nests in the psyche of the audience in situ and grows in the weeks following the performance" (*Ethno-techno* 135). Yet, as he observes, "the actual *methodological process of developing original material*" by the performer or teacher is "the most politically transgressive and hopeful aspect of the work" (135, my emphasis). I second Gómez-Peña in suggesting that the *process* of creating and experimenting with a performative teaching methodology *is* at the heart of performative pedagogy. From this perspective, the emphasis is not only on the student's desired transformations and the evolving "psyche of the audience" but also on the transformative work realized by the teacher/performer by themselves *for themselves*. Both the "audience" (students) and the "performer" (teacher) are participants in an exercise, or a performance, where once again, the boundaries are blurred and the fourth wall is taken down. Participants are given the time and space to experiment and "play" with the versions of the script, and *neither* side is in the control of the outcome. For me, this is the essence of the performative, decentralized classroom.

Conclusions and Extensions

After having researched and written on Gómez-Peña's work, I have come to appreciate even more the importance of his crossing both physical and symbological borders and the role this contestatory gesture plays for advancing societal change in general and the educational system in particular. I've looked at how Gómez-Peña challenges the ritualized conventions delimiting the discourses of identity, theater, and classroom. In order to draw the boundaries of discourses that Gómez-Peña transgresses, I have researched Gómez-Peña's Latin American and Latino archive. From that research, I have picked a few instances that illuminate Gómez-Peña's performance project.

It was revelatory to look at Gómez-Peña's work from the perspective of *both* Latin American and U.S. Latino archives placed *vis a vis* each other. In that light, the analysis looks at the little-known figure of Gonzalo Guerrero, from the Conquest period, and the questions of Mexican identity and ties it to the formation of the Chicano movement since the late 1960s. In a similar gesture, I envisioned a dialogue between the oft-forgotten Brazilian theoretician Augusto Boal and the Mexican popular theater tradition, the *carpa*.

One of the most crucial points I have come to realize during this investigation is the complexity of the constructions of identity in Gómez-Peña's work. Gómez-Peña is constantly reshaping and redefining the notions of "Mexican" and "Chicano," and by jointly reading the two discourses of identity, Mexican and Chicano, I have learned about their mutual interferences.

Gómez-Peña not only incorporated various low- and high-brow Latin American and Latino theater traditions in his work, mixing them together and crossing their generic boundaries, but also he was able and use them creatively to become a factor of societal change in discussions about immigration, local communities, and the role of arts.

Studying Gómez-Peña's performance workshops and pedagogical practices revealed the uncanny similarity between performance art and teaching practices. One of the most personally and professionally inspiring outcomes of writing this dissertation came from examining how Gómez-Peña's artistic transgressions can be incorporated into a contemporary college classroom and making a link between performance art and the social domain. Being able to *do* things with Gómez-Peña's method that can contribute to personal changes in students, and future citizens, and – even more – developing my own performative classroom methodology, was the biggest reward of this dissertation.

The research started in this dissertation lends itself to four future related projects that I would like to undertake. As I investigated the nature and mechanics of the performance art of Guillermo Gómez-Peña, my research highlighted Gómez-Peña's visual and metaphorical language/method and his search for profound societal change. One important and overlooked point of entry to this topic is the theme of cross-border dressing, skin-identity-changing, *cross-dressing-like-condition* in both the artistic and biographical aspects of the artist's work. Literally, Guillermo Gómez-Peña was crossing the border at Tijuana-San Diego throughout late 1970's and early 1980's. Furthermore, as a performative artist he frequently uses the metaphor of a cross-dresser as a means of expression.

As a performative artist, Gómez-Peña draws on a very fruitful and prolific gesture of cross-dressing, cross-morphing across the Mexican-U.S. (and other) border(s). It is for him a very powerful *tool* for the artist to discuss the direction of societal and political change. Gómez-Peña also suggests a framing for the negotiation of the latent tension that resides in the societies on both sides of the border(s). By being rooted in and coming from the San Diego/Tijuana reality of actual cross-border movements and the distorted racial and other identitarian imaginings, Gómez-Peña's performance art reflects the direct effects of many border processes: globalization, immigration, and the uneven development of societies.

Gómez-Peña is constantly drawing on the figure of the cross-dresser as an effective artistic means of expressing his cultural positioning within the mainstream culture. The cross-dressing is a major rhetorical figure in his work, an embodiment of flexibility and change itself. His cross-dresser persona is not a homosexual body in search of empowerment, but rather a ready-to-shed-his-skins nomad who is actively hunting for new metaphors with which to fill his identity. Gómez-Peña's performances are often anti-identitarian, rejecting the obvious binary stereotypes. The cross-dressing is then at the core of Gómez-Peña's performances; the process of becoming someone else, reaching out. In the context of my dissertation subject it is also at the core of transgressing and questioning the border(s).

Another related direction toward which I would like to expand my dissertation research is to further analyze Gómez-Peña and Gonzalo Guerrero as an instance of cross-dressing. In the dissertation chapter, I looked at the importance of Guerrero as potential

foundational figure in Mexican history, but I would like to further investigate Guerrero in the context of Gómez-Peña's performative use of clothing and skin as a metaphor for crossing. In the context of a larger project on cross-dressing across borders, I would revisit Guerrero as a prototype for Gómez-Peña's cross-dressing in general, and a very prominent metaphor in Gómez-Peña's performative work.

In my dissertation, the third chapter covered how Gómez-Peña, through his pedagogical efforts, hopes to influence the educational systems and create a new citizenry. In the 1990's, Gómez-Peña was also influential in changing the artistic bureaucracies and systems of culture. Through three seminal performances at the Smithsonian, both by getting there and by being there, Gómez-Peña was influential in changing the presentation of Latino art and the institutionalized notions of what constitutes the U.S. national artistic patrimony. In further research, I would like to investigate not only the history of how Gómez-Peña was invited to present his pieces at the Smithsonian, but also the broader changing curatorial forces in the early 1990's and how Gómez-Peña shook the Smithsonian's institutional balance. This research would ideally use material culture and documentary collections of the Smithsonian and also the external archives to research and interpret the changing role of Latino artists in American museums.

In the course of researching this dissertation, I met with Gómez-Peña several times. In September 2010, I saw his solo piece "Strange Democracy" that he performed at the Smithsonian's American History Museum's Mexican Revolution Symposium. Then,

in December of the same year, we met at the GALA Theater for the performance of "Two Churches" - Gómez-Peña's collaboration with another performance artist - Reverend Billy. This last time, we decided to record our on-going conversation about Gómez-Peña and his art and start working on a printed interview. I quote this non-printed interview, recorded at the Central American restaurant "El Rinconcito" in Columbia Heights in D.C., several times in this dissertation. As an extension of this work, I would like to edit and publish the two-hour interview, in collaboration with Gómez-Peña.

Finally, since the inspiration for undertaking this dissertation was a Gómez-Peña workshop in which I participated at the University of Connecticut at Storrs in 2007, it bears special significance for me that, after defending this dissertation, I will be co-organizing a Gómez-Peña workshop at the University of Maryland in the spring of 2012 and coordinating the staging of one of Gómez-Peña's new performances at the Clarice Smith Performing Art Center in Spring 2012. Clearly, I intend to continue my research on the themes that were inspired by Gómez-Peña's performances and theories

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