



6. Uses of border in transnational art and in Guillermo Gomez-Peña's work

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Abstract This article focuses on the structural presence of the concept of border within different debates about transnational art by introducing the Chicano artist Guillermo Gomez-Peña. In his live and video performances, this transnational artist develops a “border art” using hybrid languages (Spanglish), cultures (Chicano), aesthetics (ethno-futuristic and queer) and alliances (amongst the “peripheries”) in order to resist the conformism of an illusory dominant assimilation. I will therefore analyse how Gomez-Peña builds his art around the concept of border, including it in a global and postcolonial world that requires taking into account the multiplicity of migrant identities.

Keywords Chicano | performance | video | transnational | border

INTRODUCTION

In this article, I will discuss how the concept of border has become a structural element of the artists' identities in the contemporary era of transnational mobility. As an example, I will present the work of an artist who is representative of many aspects of transnationalism and productively aware of the liminal status that transnationalism implicates, Guillermo Gomez-Peña. A performance artist active since the 1980s in various configurations – solo, in duo, or in a collective – but also a writer and intellectual, Gomez-Peña was born in Mexico in 1955 and immigrated to the United States in 1978. After his migration, he built his whole career around the question of the border: the physical – in particular between Mexico and the United States –, but also the symbolic – identity, gender, linguistic, artistic, corporal, cultural. In the first part of this text, I will indicate some ways in which contemporary debates have tried to define the transnational dimension of the art,

mainly in relation to the artists' own identity negotiations. In the second, I will focus on what Gomez-Peña calls *border art*, through certain specific examples within his work, such as videos conceived as a variation or record of the live performance or as works in their own right. We will see how, for the individual, the transition from one nation to another represents not only a political process, but also an inexhaustible creative process. These processes are constructed upon the continuous reinvention of oneself and of new affiliations, with communities that share the purpose of resisting as subordinate groups. What does it mean to be perceived as an Other inside a national space and to debate such distinctions and categorizations? What will emerge then will be a repertoire of images of difference and resistance, an ironic and radical gallery of transforming identity portraits – hybrid, provocative and elusive – which testify to a free and independent expression of migrants and outsiders.

LEAVING THE BORDER, BUT LIVING THE BORDER: THE TRANSNATIONAL ARTIST

The figure of the transnational artist has always existed historically in the international artistic panorama to the extent that the lives of artists – from Lysippus to Da Vinci to Picasso – have, since ancient times, been characterized by high mobility. Whether, due to travels, foreign commissions, or exile, it has become a paradigmatic example of modernity and even more of the era of globalization. Transnational artists are bridges between the local and the global. In their work, the construction of the self-image derives from a set of identity interrogations related to the difficulties of defining the subjects according to their national, cultural and social belonging. The work of art itself thus becomes a locus of identity, a means of claiming belonging or, on the contrary, a refusal of any precise cultural affiliation, by creating problematic short circuits in the relationship between the individual and the collective. Notwithstanding international debates (e.g. Elkins et al., 2010) which have set up many instruments to reflect on the place of art in the era of globalization – such as multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism, hybridity, and so on – one question remains apparently impossible to answer: where can we position the work of transnational artists? If the border dimension has played and continues to play a mythical role in the definition of national imaginary, it is today also a crucial perspective to understand the ambivalence of transnationalism, understood as a constant movement between different national spaces. Cross-border movement corresponds to a transcultural movement, and can help to give a new identity

impetus to the individual, by making a politics of displacement (certain political/economical situations of self-location) the root of a “poetics of displacement” (a set of cultural products and psychosocial situations caused by the spatial movement), according to Bishnupriya Ghosh and Bhaskar Sarkar (1995). In this conception, the border is more a place of expression and transformation than a delimiting line of a fixed identity space.

Arjun Appadurai (2001) has reinvested the phenomenon of globalization with a particular human value, placing at the heart of this process “the work of the imagination” (pp. 30–31), and thus a creative and alternative dimension. The Indian anthropologist re-reads the contemporary affiliations caused by the link between globalization, media and migration, in terms of an “affective community”, as “a group of individuals who begin to share their dreams and feelings” (p. 35). Appadurai argues that the transnational and minority movements of diasporic groups mobilize ethnicities no longer conceived as biological and confined to localism, but seen as an imaginative and global force (p. 78). His concept of *ethnoscape* – “the landscape formed by the individuals who constitute the moving world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers” (p. 69) – can therefore be useful in addressing possible new affiliations in the cohabitation between particularism and the universal.

Attempts to expand the borders of art, to embrace and nurture all possible transnational and international artistic exchanges, have occupied a remarkable place in the museum and academic (especially American) milieu. Carolyn Loeb (2010), for example, has emphasised the importance of transcultural studies: “it is about looking at how art (visual images and objects) embodies or manifests interactions between cultures, and whether these take the form of commercial relations, political alliances, immigration, colonization, conquest, or other types of encounters” (pp. 226–227). Like any contemporary subject who is searching for themselves despite the difficulty of preconceived models to take into account, the transnational artist shapes their art from their relationship with space and change. Living on the border requires a capacity for negotiation, exchange and renewal. Donald Kuspit wrote in 1996: “we have abandoned any claim to an ideal identity. [...] An idiosyncratic art of idiosyncratic value articulating an idiosyncratic identity is all that is possible in a decadent society” (p. 5). In the absence or the inadequacy of the models foreseen by society, it is only possible to have a self-image that can be expressed in an idiosyncratic conflict, accompanied by a sense of frustration and uncertainty, as well as irony, by mixing and recycling the myriad elements of the past and the present. According to Joëlle Busca (2001), the new “ideal” in the art world would be:

The nomadic artist, a political refugee born in Kinshasa, living between his studios in New York and Amsterdam, entirely devoured by his constitutive identity problems and exhibited/hidden in the specialized gallery “Camouflage” in Brussels. Admirably alone, to the point of becoming paranoid. (p. 344)

In this way, the migrant is the paradigm of a universal quest for references and self-definition. We thus observe how the concept of border is part of an epistemological process of subjectivation, which, in the contemporary field of cultural criticism and art, has served to make the (human) subject and their identity the new centre of the world, especially in its relational dynamics.

Going beyond the national perspective which is based on the reproduction of the same, the perspective we call transnational advocates *non-essentialism*, that is, the vision of an identity in construction, non-natural and in movement. The relationship of the artist to the origin is brought into discussion through a continuous negotiation of cultural identity, seen as a living and expanding organism. Caroline A. Jones (2010) refers to nationality as an obsolete attribute: “the ex-nationals and transnationals that are constantly moving through this global art world are subjects that demand non-essentialist thinking from us” (p. 135). If the claim of authenticity concerns the respect of traditions, inwardly, centripetal, the claim of non-essentialism addresses instead the freedom to be constituted by other identifications, outwardly, centrifugally. What position should the contemporary transnational artist then assume in order to try to be faithful to themselves and accepted by both the group of origin and the host group? What terms should be used to talk about this uncertainty and mixing?

Hybridity was a very useful notion for postcolonial theory in the 1990s, aiming to go beyond the opposition between acceptance and rejection of origin, to position itself in synthesis and syncretism. Nevertheless, hybridity had its immediate detractors,¹ accused of being a Western instrument aiming to encompass all non-Western artists ambiguously situated between modernity and tradition, and to bring the Other closer to the Self through *pastiche*. Does the gaze (including that of research) always imprison? Despite the fact that post-colonialism has promoted self-representation and the agency of subordinate subjects,² the ghost of racism – by generalisation and simplification – is still there, challenging research in this field and reminding us that all discourse is a site of power. If even the most emancipatory and anti-Eurocentric representations of postcolonial scholars can be

1 See for example the conversation in “The Seminars: Hybridity” (Elkins et al. 2010, pp. 51–62).

2 You can find more information about self-representation of diasporic artists in my article: Scafirimuto, 2020.

accused of coming from a neo-colonial and capitalist elite of privileged academics (Huddart, 2008, p. 16), then we see the extent to which the reflections raised here not only arise from, but also clash with, identity conflicts – of culture, race, gender, and class. Mistrust of the concepts mentioned, as well as of the more popular ones of cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism, is not limited to a difference in political ideology, but implies a critique of the system promoting these same ideologies. Multiculturalism may assume an advertising value, as a façade, while cosmopolitanism may appear as a hypocritical and elitist public image. Contrary to Appadurai's positive hopes, Bhabha (2007) links globalisation and cosmopolitanism as perceived through the prism of the dominant powers of international capitalism: "it is a cosmopolitanism of prosperity and relative privilege based on ideas of progress complicit in neo-liberal forms of governance and competing market forces" (pp. 13–14).

However, it seems to me that it is not relevant to accuse the cosmopolitan/transnational artists of belonging to an elite, because their work can only help to raise awareness of a multicultural society already in action and direct reflection towards the testimonies of lived experiences. In spite of the policies of closing borders, art can promote a real multicultural opening, even if in a limited space such as a room and for the duration of a projection or a performance, between the poetics and the politics of gesture. "Everything happens as if the artist is today in charge of realizing, for the community, a fantasy of omnipotence, the claim of a space of absolute freedom", argues Natalie Heinich (2005, p. 350). Torn by the great dialectic between individualism (the subject in its irreducible totality) and culturalism (the subject's need to weave links with their environments) the transnational artist cannot but inhabit their art. According to Abdelkébir Khatibi (2001), "To be a professional foreigner consists, in art, in inventing his work as a territory, as a portable memory" (p. 42). For migrant artists, the work becomes their land of asylum, their memory and identity space, their metaphorical shelter: "Art is their homeland", writes Khatibi (2001, p. 105). Without denying Western aesthetic and conceptual influences, artistic expression can today try to represent another type of universalism, unidentifiable with a precise culture or a precise territory. An art without borders; would it be one of the utopias Fredric Jameson (2010) wishes for our political future in order to shake the current inability to imagine real change (p. 19)? Or is this borderless and transnational expression a way of suggesting the surging voices of an Appadurian ethnoscape that is increasingly emerging from the margins?

The history of Western art has proceeded, starting from the avant-gardes, to "assimilate the creator to an outsider, whose place in society can only be oppositional, in a singularity that is inseparably aesthetic and social", as Nathalie Heinich

(Heinich, 2005, p. 169) explains. Heinich lucidly analyses what she calls the “permissive paradox” of the contemporary art world: the transgression of the marginal artist is legitimised and incited by the same institutions it is supposed to attack (pp. 342–343). We all know that the Western institutionalisation of arts and cultures provides, through a system of financing and support for the most controversial expressions, a “process of revitalization by the incorporation of the marginal”, recalls Donald Kuspit (1996, p. 19). The border between outsider and insider becomes less easy to recognise. As the artist in focus here, Gomez-Peña (2005a), asserts:

Expression is a kind of placebo or substitute for action. What matters here is the spectacle of participation [...]. Citizen participation is encouraged, but not in any significant decision-making process that can affect social change, just in the construction and staging of a spectacle: the great illusory spectacle of citizen participation. (p. 54)

This process is another facet of the dialectical ambiguity between the particular and the universal in the era of globalisation. It is a formulation of compromise that pushes the self-representation of minorities to be included in the regimes of representation of the dominant discourse, by a certain folklorisation and assimilation of other cultures.

THE “BORDER ART” OF GUILLERMO GOMEZ-PEÑA

The “border art” of Guillermo Gomez-Peña tries precisely to avoid this elitist trend of cosmopolitanism and globalisation, pushing his work outside the gallery, although not exclusively, and involving all kinds of subaltern and independent artists and performers as equal partners. Many contemporary artists, such as Alex Rivera, Katia Kameli, Zineb Sedira, Shahram Entekhabi and Ghazel, have constructed their career on the transnational dimension of their identity, involving the question of the border in their discourse, and speaking of bi-culture and bilingualism (Scafirmuto, 2019, pp. 255–266). However, Gomez-Peña stands out as having developed so many unique aspects that make his interpretation of the border so personal and at the same time so universal. The collective and collaborative dimension of his art contributes to reflections on the possibilities of resistance, of being both a rebellious outsider as well as a pedagogue, reaching people outside the gallery, and of living the border. In this part of the article, I will show how Gomez-Peña’s work perfectly embodies all the transnational elements that we have previ-

ously discussed – non-essentialism, hybridity, irony, idiosyncrasy, authenticity, variability and impossibility of self-definition – and return to this collective and collaborative dimension in the end.

Gomez-Peña, after studying linguistics and literature at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, and post studio art at the California Institute of Arts, immediately started a career as a performance artist. He became popular in the early 1990s, due partly to being awarded a MacArthur Fellowship – the first to be attributed to a Chicano artist. In those years he made international tours with the collective *La Pocha Nostra*, with his faithful collaborator Roberto Sifuentes, as well as with well-known artists such as Coco Fusco. With Fusco, Gomez-Peña presented a satirical performance in several museums and art festivals, in which the two artists performed locked in a cage and disguised as “authentic” Amerindians from a remote and undiscovered island of Mexico. Despite these acknowledgements and public attention (which is in any case diminished beyond the United States), freedom of expression and non-institutional independence are always cited by Gomez-Peña as essential values of his career: “The fact that I don’t depend on any educational or cultural institution grants me some extra freedoms which I always try to exercise to their fullest” (Gomez-Peña, 2000, p. xiii). Living the border, physically and metaphorically, means also following alternative and marginal routes, beyond cities like New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Mexico City: “the routes we travel belong to a different cartography than those outlined on the hegemonic maps of the chi-chi ‘international’ art world” (Gomez-Peña, 2000, p. 10). The target of art also changes according to its context, and we are faced with this main question: how does this marginal and moving cartography throughout the borders of many nations serve the interest of marginal and moving people?

In his work, Gomez-Peña takes into account all the dynamics of stereotyping, exoticisation and exhibition of the otherness. In order to find a new place of expression of transnationalism, he uses different kinds of media, such as video, radio and books. However, his main form of expression is performance art, in which he incorporates his surroundings – whether it be a theatre, a conference hall, a university, or a museum –, to highlight all the race, linguistic, gender, and immigrant issues of these local foreign communities. This type of performance-activism combines a unique aesthetic style, fully inserted into the grotesque collage of postmodernity, and with an explicit function of connecting global awareness to local agency which gives a pedagogical and militant value to his art. Gomez-Peña questions the role of the artist – especially one belonging to a minority – in a post 9/11 American society, dominated by xenophobia, militarisation of the borders, and neo-nationalism. The artist, therefore, as a “rebel” and a “radical pedagogue”

as Gomez-Peña likes to define himself (Gomez-Peña & Sifuentes, 2011), finds his function of transmission in his public activism: “you have to fight racism on a daily basis to remain a rebel artist”.³ His activism is rooted in a dialogue with local communities and institutions, starting from his contact with displaced collaborators and artists in all the places of his international tour, and trying to adapt and to expand the group and the performance to different elements of subaltern identities around the world. This kind of work raises different questions about our perception of otherness, about the categories considered “aliens” by the American society, offering a whole series of personifications of subalternity in a sort of “theatricalization of postcolonial theory”, as Eduardo Mendieta puts it (Gomez-Peña, 2005a). Through what he calls a “reverse anthropology”, Gomez-Peña and his collaborators imagine inversions and radically different contingencies in the cultural and political realities, for example, asking the audience during a performance to radically change the dominant point of view even for a moment: “what if Anglo-Americans were mere nomadic minorities?” (Gomez-Peña, 2005a, p. 246). The objective is “to push the dominant culture to the margins”, and, inversely, bring the margins to a “fictional central space”, created by the artistic expression (Gomez-Peña, 2005a, p. 246). By insisting on the resistance of diversity, the foreigner does not bend to the conformism of integration, to the only lingua franca, but the identity field on which he works is that of hybridity, transculturality, and juxtaposition. Gomez-Peña’s use of hybridity is then closer to that of Michael Hensen and Mike Petry; they point out how postcolonial thinkers introduced the concept of hybridity to reflect on a “productive difference”, looking at all cultures and identities as positive spaces of difference, solidarity and creation (Hensen & Petry, 2005a, p. 352).

The idea of border is then central to Gomez-Peña’s expression: the border represents the place of passage between two or more aesthetics, – in this case cultural and identity codes –, but also the idea of a margin, as a starting point for the expression of those who normally have no voice in public space. The border is a place for everyone, of inclusion and contact, ambiguity and transgression, of mixing and contrast. Lastly, it is more an idea than a specific place:

I make art about the misunderstandings that take place at the border zone. But for me, the border is no longer located at any fixed geopolitical site. I carry the border with me, and I find new borders wherever I go. (Gomez-Peña, 2002, p. 750)

3 In an interview with Maria Hijanosa, he talks about the time he was arrested for having “kidnapped his own child” in San Francisco, because of his Mexican appearance in contrast with the blondness of his child (O’Neill, 2016).

The transnational artists, condemned to the *double absence* mentioned by Abdelmalek Sayad (1999) regarding any migrant – to be no longer in the country of origin, but not even totally in the host country – cannot but live their art, as the only possible asylum (Khatibi, 2001). The definition of a possible form of *border art* is taken from his early work with the Border Arts Workshop (1984–1990), a “bina-tional collective of artists and activists which utilized the Tijuana/San Diego border region as ‘a laboratory of social and aesthetic experimentation’” (Gomez-Peña, 2000, p. 9), but also by his video anthology “Border Art Clasicos: An Anthology of Collaborative Works by Guillermo Gomez-Peña (1990–2005)”. He employs the word “border” extensively throughout his career, from his character (or persona) “Border Brujo” (a “migrant provocateur, an intercultural pirate, a ‘border brujo’”) (Gomez-Peña, 2000, p. 9), to his works *Borderstasis* (Gomez-Peña, 1998) and *Border Interrogation* (La Pocha Nostra, 2004a) and his book “Dangerous Border Crossers” (Gomez-Peña, 2010).

First, the border structures the relationship between Mexico and the United States, the founding theme of Gomez-Peña's works. As a Mexican who has emigrated to the States, he immediately questioned the violent connotation of this border: a space that often denotes the passage to a state of illegality, criminalisation, constant mistrust of the police, extreme visibility in the sense of displaying signs of otherness. While Mexicans continue to look at the United States as a land of hope for employment and for their future in general (but who also consider other emigrants who have come too close to the “Gringos” as at risk of losing their “Mexican-ness”), Americans perceive Mexicans as threatening “aliens”, as the symbol of danger at their doorstep. For Gomez-Peña, the act of emigration corresponds to a certain rite of passage, one of a perpetual metaphysical culpability: “The South is always an origin. And crossing the border is the original sin” (Gomez-Peña, 2009).⁴ The metaphor of the immigrant as an alien is omnipresent in Gomez-Peña's works, especially those created with La Pocha Nostra. For instance, the video *Border Interrogation* (La Pocha Nostra, 2004a) starts with a performer using a radar, and another one in the foreground, with a white-painted face and fake long, white hair, asking to the camera with an unintelligible and subtitled “alien” voice: “Any illegal immigrants out there?”, “What about people who married an illegal alien to help them get their green card?”. In *Evolucion Alienigena* (La Pocha Nostra, 2004b), a nude performer, presented in the subtitles as a “generic illegal alien”, takes off a green alien mask and is tortured by an invisible force in front of an indigenous hat, until he starts to give a Nazi salute and speech. Irreverent

4 From Guillermo Gomez-Peña's performance at the University of Chicago: “Chicano Cyber Punk”. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QoH9sBRrVr4>.

humor is always a political strategy for Gomez-Peña (2000), who argues: “I would go so far as to say that humour is a quintessential feature of Mexican and Chicano art and activism” (p. 179). In a recent performance at the Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibition in 2018, called *The Most (un)Documented Mexican Artist*, Gomez-Peña has entered the gallery with a nude woman covered in green paint and wearing an alien mask, shouting “Welcome to a world without Trump” to the crowd, and reading a letter to the President as two Pocha members – one dressed in an American flag body suit, the other in a Mexican flag – beat each other with foam bats. In 2001, Gomez-Peña, with the collaboration of the filmmaker Gustavo Vazquez, also created a mockumentary called *The Great Mojado Invasion* (Gomez-Peña, Gustavo Vazquez, 2001), in which he imagines a second Mexico/U.S war in which, this time, Mexico is victorious.

The border also resides in the very concept of performance: “For me, performance art is a conceptual territory with fluctuating weather and borders, a place where contradiction, ambiguity, and paradox are not only tolerated, but encouraged” (Gomez-Peña 2005a, p. 22). At the core of his medium of choice, there is the need of immediacy and present impact, something extremely related to the transnational idea of transformation and movement, and to the migrant status as the “illusion of the temporary” (*illusion du provisoire*) (Sayad, 2006, pp. 23–24). Gomez-Peña explains:

Performance as an artistic ‘genre’ is in a constant state of crisis, and is therefore an ideal medium for articulating a time of permanent crisis such as ours. (...) The act of creating and presenting a performance carries a sense of urgency and immediacy that does not exist in other artistic fields. (Gomez-Peña, 2000, p. 9)

Performance art allows him to integrate different disciplines – from writing and interpretation of texts to *mise en scène*, from theatre to video, from radio to exhibition located both in and out of the gallery. It also allows the integration of different types of participants: actors, dancers, poets, circus players, etc. Performance also creates a border between performers and their audience: the artists need to interact and adapt to different reception contexts, to the knowledge, and expectations, habits and interpretative abilities of the audience. In another collaboration with Gustavo Vazquez, *A Muerte (Segundo duelo)* (La Pocha Nostra, 2008), the artists experiment with “taking a risk” in a video: Gomez-Peña points the gun at the camera and obliges Vazquez, who is filming the scene, to turn the camera on himself. Like in a performance, the artist interacts with his environment and the people in front of him, the camera becomes a delicate border between the person who

is filmed and the person who is filming, the representation and the audience, the performer and the character he is playing.

When it comes to identity, clearly, the border is also a key concept. First, in the individual identity of the artist. Gomez-Peña defines himself as a “post-national” artist in permanent and fluid reinvention, as a “post-Mexican in racist USA, or as a ‘Chicanized’ Mexican in nationalist Mexico” (Gomez-Peña, 2000, p. 7). We saw how, in the debate about transnational subjects, national identity is not only multiplied in favour of other nationalities, but also seen often as something overpassed and not pertinent anymore (an evident reaction against neo-nationalism as well). One aspect linked to the identity border is certainly the language: transnationalism implicates bilingualism, and Gomez-Peña mixes English and Spanish for his performances (the typical Spanglish of the Chicano community), when he does not directly slide in made-up languages, such as his “Robo-Esperanto”. Identity pluralism is constantly exalted, as in the video *El Psycho-Linguist* (La Pocha Nostra, 2004c), where Gomez-Peña says, exclusively in Spanish, that “being Bi is better than being Mono”, and the subtitles do not translate his speech, only asking to “the monolingual English speakers to be patient”. Second, identity borders concern the fictional and recurrent “personae” invented for the performances. All Pocha Nostra’s characters, such as “El Postmodern Zorro”, “El Cultural Transvestite”, “El Natural Born Asesino”, “the Ethno-Cyborg”, “El Chicano Futurista”, embody an ironic, provocative and assembling image of the stereotypes, desires and fears of the audience regarding their relationship with immigrants and other marginal people.

This brings us to the border of the body, because, as in all performances, the presence, the exhibition and the action of the body is a necessary condition to make the work exist. In order to give life to all these “personae”, Gomez-Peña and his collaborators resort to a whole series of disguises, mutations and *mises en scène*. These mutant bodies, which seem to come from another world, are instead a symptom of the stratification of contemporary subjectivities, of a palimpsest identity that wants to be seen and recognized. The bodies of these characters represent the border between different cultural codes, mythologies and stereotypes, genders and sexualities, temporalities, imaginaries, materialities, races (the character can have a mixed look borrowing iconographies from drug cartels, mariachi, Aztec shaman, Western cowboy, transgender, seniorita, cyborg). For example, “El Mad Mex” is the union of a clan chef (Aztec costume), a gangster (a machine gun) and a ballerina (short skirt, red shoes). Gomez-Peña plays thus a lot on what Stuart Hall calls “regimes of representation” (Hall, 1997, p. 232) and on Shohat and Stam’s “tropes of representation” (e.g. eroticism, exoticism, wildness, criminality) (Stam & Shohat, 1994, p. 183). The theme of binationalism and biculturalism is also

emphasised in the treatment of the identity crisis of the transnational artist. For example, in the *Binational Boxer* (La Pocha Nostra, 1994) Gomez-Peña interprets the role of a boxer wearing one boxing glove with the American flag and the other boxing glove with the Mexican flag, who starts to punch himself in the face, showing that the inner cohabitation of two opponents can also lead to self-destruction.

Adopting his *reversed ethnography*, Gomez-Peña criticizes the notion of authenticity, and the Western voyeuristic and omniscient desire to be able to grasp the Other: by the absurdity and irony of their self-representations and auto-fictions, the transnational artists demonstrate that they can talk back. In *Welcome to the Third World* (La Pocha Nostra, 2004d), wearing his Aztec-Chicano cross-cultural costume and speaking with his Mexican accent with Mexican music, Gomez-Peña highlights what it means to be the object of an overly connoted, fetishized and commodified look:

To be an American is a complicated matter. You are in relation to the multiplicity of looks you are able to display. I am brown therefore I am underdeveloped. I wear a mustache therefore I am a Mexican. I gesticulate therefore I am Latino. I am horny therefore I am a sexist. I experiment therefore I am not authentic. I speak about politics therefore I am un-American. My art is undescribable therefore I am a performance artist. I talk therefore I am. Period.

This satirical display of visual and cultural Mexican stereotypes is also depicted in *Instant Identity Ritual* (La Pocha Nostra, 2007), in which Gomez-Peña, after drinking an entire bottle of his “favourite salsa picante”, puts on a ski-mask with EZLN (standing for Zapatista Army of National Liberation) written on it. Being a marked and visible body can be a constant burden for the subject himself, as the artist shows in the video *Living Museum of Fetishized Identities* (La Pocha Nostra, 2001) where he tries to remove his facial features – ears, nose, tongue, lips – with a pair of scissors. The idea of these “living museums” has been successful during his international tours in the early 2000s with La Pocha Nostra, creating anticolonial *tableaux vivants* of ethno-cyborg personae, sexualized, pseudo-indigenous and symbolic figures functioning as projections of the western public’s voyeurism. How is the imperial gaze still active in our exotic desires? In the abovementioned *Border Interrogation* (La Pocha Nostra, 2004a), Gomez-Peña intervenes at the end of the short video to ask the audience, taking up a theme developed in the performance *Temple of Confessions* (Gomez-Peña, Roberto Sifuentes, 1996), “Have any of you ever fantasized about being from another race or culture? Which one? Black, Indian, Mexican, Chinese? Write your interracial fantasies and deposit them inside the urn. Thank you for your sincerity”.

CONCLUSION

The transnational artist is a border crosser, politically and aesthetically. Especially for performance artists, travel and nomadic life are essential elements of their way of conceiving their position and action in the world. Identity is also part of the process of searching and moving, without any hope of finding a monolithic unity of the Self at the end of the journey. Gomez-Peña (2000), at least, is quite clear about it: "I wish to clarify: I don't aspire to find myself. I wholeheartedly accept my constant condition of loss. I embrace my multiple and incomplete identities, and celebrate all of them" (p. 10). He further explains:

I've spent almost twenty years traveling from South to North and back – from city to city, country to country, English to Spanish. I travel from myth to social reality, always returning to my origins (by now mythical as well), retracing the footprints of my biological family and revisiting the many overlapping communities of which I am a part: the diasporic Latin Americans, the deterritorialized citizens of everywhere and nowhere, the inhabitants of the so-called 'margins' and crevices, los vatos instersticiales, the hybrids, exiles, renegades. (Gomez-Peña, 2000, p. 9)

I therefore wish to conclude this brief introduction to Gomez-Peña's transnational and border issues highlighting that, finally, the cross-border dimension also concerns a sense of community belonging. Unlike diasporic artistic works in Europe, which focus more on the author's country of origin, American transnational artists question their belonging to a specific minority community inside the host country. In the case of our artist, the claimed community corresponds to the Chicano minority (Mexican-Americans). Gomez-Peña calls himself "a Mexican in the process of Chicanization" (Gomez-Peña, 2000, p. 12) because, having arrived in the United States, he saw in this community a political and cultural force capable of bringing together his militant activities. In this way, the focus shifted from the past to the present, from return to transformation:

I was no longer a nostalgic immigrant yearning to return to a mythical homeland. I learned the basic lesson of *el movimiento*: I began to live 'here' and 'now', to fully embrace my brand-new contradictions and incipient process of politicization as much-touted 'minority', – to 'reterritorialize' myself'. (Gomez-Peña, 2005a, p. 8)

Subsequently, this community is associated with artistic work of Gomez Peña. From 1984 to 1990, he created the Border Arts Workshop, and, since 1993, in Los Angeles and then moving to San Francisco, he has created La Pocha Nostra, a collective that combines performance artists from all over the American continent. In their website, you can find exhaustive and creative self-definitions, stressing all kinds of hybridity: “La Pocha Nostra is an intercultural poltergeist”, “Our place is located not only in the ‘Art World’ but in the world at large, in the patterns of everyday life”, “We have become the spectacle of our identities using our highly decorated bodies. In this sense we are physically culturally and technologically hybrid beings”; “La Pocha by nature is anti-nationalist and rejects all essentialisms”; “We are essentialists of hybridity”.⁵ As a “radical” and “rebel” pedagogue, Gomez-Peña and his group have also presented their workshops to anyone willing to practise a more conscious and political artistic performance. As the dancer and choreographer Jose L. Reynoso puts it:

La Pocha Nostra’s workshops offer that space and time in which people from very different racial, sexual, artistic, and cultural backgrounds can converge to experience and exercise the embodiment of what democracy can mean as participants engage in exercises that facilitate a process of decolonization – a decolonization of mind and body. (Gomez-Peña & Sifuentes, 2011, p. 24)

This link between art and community is then a major aspect of Gomez-Peña’s work, nourished by a civic part including local activities for the Chicano minorities, because “you have to give back”: “we have community responsibilities, and our community reminds us all the time of our civic duties” (Gomez-Peña, 2000, p. 174). But travelling around the world means for Gomez-Peña not only to adapt to different contexts – fine art museums, community centres, rural communities, universities – but also to different local minorities and ethnic issues. In many places where he performs, there are no Chicanos, and different cultural codes shift the perception and the understanding of his symbolic work. Choosing the medium of the performance is then a way of connecting different local, political and subaltern issues, with a contextualised and site-specific work. This desire to gather forces in one group, to bring together different communities of individuals who do not feel they belong to the dominant culture, can bring Gomez-Peña’s project closer to Appadurai’s concept of *affective communities*. A postcolonial and collective memory is shared for the time of the performance, crossing the borders of all differences, from one nation to another, from one community to another, through

5 See their website <http://www.pochanostra.com/>.

a critical communal consciousness. The border art mobilised by Gomez-Peña is then an artistic project that has a wider political and identity resonance, highlighting not only the subversive dimension of the action of transnational artists, but also the collaborative one. One that proposes an alternative expression of belonging, starting from the margins. The first text of his performance *A Declaration of Poetic Disobedience from the New Border* (Gomez-Peña, 2005b) perfectly expresses this choral voice:

To the Masterminds of Paranoid Nationalism

I say, we say:

“We”, the Other people

We, the migrants, exiles, nomads & wetbacks

In permanent process of voluntary deportation

We, the transient orphans of dying nation-states

la otra America; l'autre Europe y anexas

We, the citizens of the outer limits and crevasses
of “Western civilization”

We, who have no government;

no flag or national anthem

We, fingerprinted, imprisoned, under surveillance

We, evicted from your gardens & beaches

We, interracial lovers,

children of interracial lovers, ad infinitum

We, who defy your fraudulent polls & statistics

We, in constant flux,

from Patagonia to Alaska,

from Juarez to Ramalia,

We millions abound,

We continue to talk back...continue, continue.

(Gomez-Peña, 2005b)

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