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Speaking Within Subalternity: A Critical Analysis of Performance Artist Guillermo Gomez-Pena and the Use of Strategic Essentialism

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Speaking Within Subalternity: A Critical Analysis of Performance Artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña and the Use of Strategic Essentialism

By

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Capstone Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Cultural Studies

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Abstract: This project investigates the work of performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña through a postcolonial discourse. This project will be looking at three of the artist’s pieces and proposes that though seen as an abstract or avant-garde performer, Gómez-Peña’s these pieces provide a platform for the oppressed who cannot speak for themselves due to hegemony — the subaltern. In the context of Gómez-Peña’s performance art, this theory provides a postcolonial discourse on notions such as hybridity, borders, transculturalism, and other elements of identities found in *la frontera*. Ultimately, this project finds that though the subaltern cannot speak, it is through Gómez-Peña’s use of strategic essentialism that allows the subaltern to take back cultural stereotypes and turn them into agency.

Keywords: Guillermo Gómez-Peña; performance art; subaltern/subalternity; strategic essentialism; *la frontera*; essentialism; colonialism
“So don’t give me your tenets and your laws. Don’t give me your lukewarm gods. What I want is an accounting with all three cultures — white, Mexican, Indian. I want the freedom to carve and chisel my own face, to staunch the bleeding with ashes, to fashion my own gods out of my entrails. And if going home is denied me then I will have to stand and claim my space, masking a new culture — *una cultura mestiza* — with my own lumber, my own bricks and mortar and my own feminist architecture,”

— Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: La Frontera* (44).
**Introduction**

Guillermo Gómez-Peña is a Chicano performance artist, educator, and activist. His work also includes video, audio installation, journalism, poetry, cultural theory, and more. Gómez-Peña blends binary notions such as English and Spanish, comedy and politics, fact and myth in his art as part of his method to intertwine two elements that are typically in opposition to each other and makes them one. His performances, performed solo or with his art troupe La Pocha Nostra, provide a critique on identities in the Mexico and U.S. border. Originally from Mexico City and now based between Mexico City and San Francisco, his influences stem from notions of identity that exist in la frontera - the border of Northern Mexico and the Southwest United States. These notions include language, ethnicity, nationalism, space, geopolitical aspects, and more that exist in the border.

Gómez-Peña defines the purpose for his work with a self-reflexive quote:

"I wake up as a Mexican in U.S. Territory. With my Mexican psyche, my Mexican heart, and my Mexican body, I have to make intelligible art for American audiences that know very little about my culture. This is my daily dilemma. I have to force myself to cross a border, and there is very little reciprocity from the people on the other side." (Gómez Peña, 22)

The three performances I am using are, first, “Instant Identity Ritual” (2007), a performance of the artist chugging a bottle of salsa in roughly thirty seconds while heavy metal
music plays in the background. After he finishes the bottle of salsa, he puts on a ski mask. He then stares at the camera in silence for the rest of the video’s duration. The video is not shot in front of an audience, it is just the artist and the person holding the camera and recording. However, there is still an audience via the internet.

Next, “Thanks Pero No Thanksgiving” (2006) is a performance of Gómez-Peña repeatedly stabbing a cooked turkey with a knife while he wears indigenous-style clothing. Like “Instant Identity Ritual” there is no audience, it is only the artist, the camera, and the person holding the camera.

Finally, “Couple in The Cage: Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West” (1992-1993) was a collaboration performance art piece by Gómez-Peña and Cuban artist Coco Fusco. During these performances, the two were put in a cage on public display, claiming to be natives from an undiscovered land. Museum goers were not sure if it was a performance or if it was a real museum display of “early human beings.” The traveling performance art provides the relationship, or lack there of, between the discoverer and indigenous people during colonization times.

**Strategic Essentialism in Gómez-Peña’s Art**

A term created by Gayarti Chakravorty Spivak, Elisabeth Eide defines the concept of “strategic essentialism” in her essay “Strategic Essentialism and Ethnification”: 
“The very concept of strategic essentialism – which, by the way, even Spivak herself disputes – is a path that has been and continues to be explored as a minority strategy for influencing mainstream society. As I see it, strategic essentialism in this sense entails that members of groups, while being highly differentiated internally, may engage in an essentializing and to some extent a standardizing of their public image, thus advancing their group identity in a simplified, collectivized way to achieve certain objectives.” (Eide, 14)

Strategic essentialism is used as a tool by marginalized in order to disrupt the ideologies of the dominant society. It is a form of discourse, activism, and agency. The term provides a movement of agency because it deals with giving the primarily voiceless and essentialized group of people a platform. It serves as a strategy or a tool for minorities. Examining the artist’s work through a strategic essentialism lens, Guillermo Gómez-Peña uses this concept in order to give a voice\(^1\) to the identity of minorities, specifically brown and indigenous people along the border. Gómez-Peña uses stereotypes and ideological elements of Mexican and indigenous people in order to gain these essentialized notions of identity back as agency. In his performance pieces Gómez-Peña takes stereotypes and elements of Mexican culture such as the bottle of salsa in “Instant Identity Ritual” and uses it as part of a strategy to represent culturally, politically, geographically displaced a minority group. Gómez-Peña essentializes himself in these performances so that he can bring forward his identity to the public. In an article published by art publication Hyperallergic, Gómez-Peña says,

\(^1\) I use “voice” as a metaphor for attending to the subaltern, and I will examine the notion of the voice of the subaltern later in the essay.
“Identity is an open fluid system. I always try to occupy multiple identities in different contexts, and speak from different positionalities. That grants me special freedoms. I want to be a coyote, an intellectual coyote, a smuggler of ideas from north to south and vice versa” (Stromberg, hyperallergic.com).

Part of the strategic essentialism, Gómez-Peña uses Homi Bhabha’s concept of mimicry. “Mimicry is, thus the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which ‘approprites’ the Other as it visualizes power,” says Bhabha (Bhabha, 86). By Bhabha’s definition, mimicry is imitation of the colonizing culture as performed by the colonized. The artist uses colonial discourse as a mask to replicate the ideological view of the culture of the indigenous/minority group. Gómez-Peña takes notions of culture and turns them into a hyperbole of themselves as a strategy. The stereotypes of the cultures that Gómez-Peña uses in his art are turned into agency. Looking at Gómez-Peña through a post-colonial lens makes the notion of strategic essentialism relevant because the mimicry used is the imitation of the indigenous culture, so it authorizes or naturalizes the ideals of the privileged and constitutes a fixed identity onto the minority through the manipulation of culture by creating hyperboles of itself.

In The Location of Culture, Homi K. Bhabha uses Frantz Fanon’s idea of a “moving” culture. There is a physical, active movement in culture as it needs to recognize the history. You cannot completely destroy a culture, but you can manipulate/ neglect it especially if the history is forgotten - in terms of indigenous/minority group culture in colonialism. Fanon’s concept of a
“Third Space” recognizes the history and the present - hence the hybridity he describes. In Bhabha’s “Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences,” Bhabha says, “For Fanon, the liberator ‘people’ who initiate the productive instability of revolutionary cultural changes are themselves the bearers of a hybrid identity. They are caught in the discontinuous time of translation and negotiation,” (Bhabha, 157). So, it is not about cultural difference but of a “negotiation,” as he says, between the two. This ties into Gómez-Peña creating a space and infrastructure where the subaltern can uphold somewhat of an authority above the discovered or the audience/the observer witnessing the performance art.

Subalternity and the Border Subject

The term “subaltern” was coined by historian Ranajit Guha who was influenced by Antonio Gramsci’s concept of the subordinate subject under social hierarchies. Guha broadly defines the subaltern as “anyone who is subordinated ‘in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way,’” (Mallon, 1476). The subaltern is a subject that is othered and voiceless because of groups of people that hold hierarchies, therefore dominate their marginalized identity. “The act of rectification sprang from the conviction that the elites had exercised dominance, not hegemony, in Gramsci’s sense, over the subalterns” (Prakash 1477). Primarily pertaining to South Asian historiography, subaltern studies is applied to Latin American studies as well. The notion of a subaltern identity is being unable to have your voice

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2 Here, hegemony does not act as a noun but as the physical action of creating dominance over a social group.
while other people, typically of a more dominant race, class, gender, etc., speaking for you. The concept of the subaltern is prevalent in the representation of border identities.

The excessive marginalization of groups without a “voice” in society is always prevalent in the notion of subalternity. The subaltern subject is unable to achieve any kind of visibility for their identity. In contrast to the subaltern, the border subject undergoes an excess of visibility. In contemporary times, we constantly see this with Mexican stereotypes in mainstream popular culture. Voiceless due to oppressive powers, border identities are then spoken for by people outside of the marginalized group and from a more privileged background. This misrepresentation of Mexican people from the border gives the once subaltern subject too much of a voice that is not theirs and represents an inaccurate or essentialized identity. Gómez-Peña’s work provides a balance between the subaltern subject and the border subject. There is a hybridity that Gómez-Peña creates when he uses the identity of himself and of other Chicanos or Latinos in his performance art. His performance art is used as a kind of language in which he uses the identity of the border subject and articulates the identity in a political and theoretical way that does not misrepresent or overrepresent this specific group of people.

Gómez-Peña uses strategic essentialism to give voice and agency to the subaltern. The essentialization of border identity that is excessively represented in mainstream media is manipulated and turned into agency through the artist’s performances. Not only does Gómez-Peña change the meaning of Mexican stereotypes, he also disrupts the “flow” so to say of speaking monolingual. The artist uses hybrid derivatives in order to articulate his identity the way he most accessibly understands. By making English foreign to itself, the artist helps imagine
"Instant Identity Ritual" (2007) depicts the artist drinking an entire bottle of salsa in roughly thirty seconds while heavy metal music plays in the background. After he finishes the bottle of salsa, he puts on a ski mask with the initials "EZLN" written on it as he stares at the camera in silence. The audience can see his face covered by the heat of the salsa. Before consuming the salsa, Gómez-Peña says it's his favorite brand of salsa in a quiet, raspy voice — almost whispering — as he holds the bottle next to his face and caresses it. He then takes a small swallow from the bottle of salsa, he holds the bottle in his hand, his face covered in salsa, and he stares intently at the camera. His eyes wide, he opens the bottle of salsa, he begins to drink the entirety of its extremely hot substance with almost agility, and he opens the bottle to drinking the entirety of its extremely hot substance with a kiss. However, this is much more than a commercial. He then shares directly at the camera, commercial-like showcasing of the bottle as Gómez-Peña stares at the bottle in admiration and almost whispering — as he holds the bottle next to his face and caresses it. He caresses a consummating the salsa, Gómez-Peña says it's his favorite brand of salsa in a quiet, raspy voice — before the camera in silence, the audience can see his eyes covered by the heat of the salsa. Before consuming the salsa, the artist drinks an entire bottle of salsa in Chiapas, Mexico, which is an anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, and anti-globalization revolutionary political group formed in 1994. EZLN stands for Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional or Zapatista Army of National Liberation which is an anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, and anti-globalization revolutionary political group formed in Chiapas, Mexico.

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The initial reaction to this video can be quite confusing — why is this man doing such an odd, absurd thing? We can tell that he is portraying certain kinds of issues of identity. This bizarre and extreme behavior can be seen as something Gómez-Peña calls “culturizes-in-extremis.” In “Performing Against the Cultural Backdrop of the Mainstream Bizarre,” Gómez-Peña discusses his thoughts on reality television and popular culture. In the essay he writes,

“The mainstream bizarre has effectively blurred the borders between pop culture, performance, and ‘reality,’ between audience and performer, between the surface and the underground, between marginal identities and fashionable trends. Where do we stand vis a vis this new cartography? It’s unclear, just like the placement of the new borders,” he says (Gómez-Peña, PochaNostra.com).

He believes popular culture blurs our understanding of what reality is, and this makes people want for more and more outrageous content from television, film, radio shows, etc. He is making a parody of the myth that is the “mainstream bizarre” that distorts reality and are easily consumable via face value only. “Independent filmmakers and video artists now must contend with TV ads and rock videos whose aesthetic strategies are directly appropriated from independent film and experimental video but with a few small differences: they are twice as technically complex and their budgets are logarithmically bigger,” he says (Gómez-Peña, PochaNostra.com). He is using this extreme identity and creates a video that would seem to be a purpose of shock value and critiques the “mainstream bizarre” while doing do.
Within this performance, he is commenting on the stereotypes of Mexican identity that mainstream media portrays. He is giving the audience of mainstream popular culture what it wants — a Mexican man doing something as strange and exaggerated as kissing a bottle of salsa before drinking the entire bottle. Because this is a video and not a live performance, Gómez-Peña’s intentions behind this act cannot be determined by people viewing Mexican culture from an outsider’s perspective. The audience must use a critical thinking analysis to comprehend what he is trying to comment on.

He is using the concept of the “mainstream bizarre” and creates a video that imitates the substance-less, hyperbolic realm of ideological reality that is mainstream media. Mainstream media veils our understanding of Mexican identities by creating exaggerated versions of itself using popular stereotypes when it is represented, so Gómez-Peña takes that exaggerated version of the Mexican identity and forms a strategic essentialist notion through the culturally referenced commodity that is the bottle of salsa as he enacts a commercial mainstream of the Mexican man.

Gómez-Peña says he performs the other as a “freak” in order to grab the attention from people outside of that identity whose only understanding and experience with Mexican culture is the stereotypes portrayed in mainstream media. “The idea is to heighten features of fear and desire in the Anglo imagination, and ‘spectacularize’ our ‘extreme identities’ so to speak, with the clear understanding that these identities have already been affected by the surgery of global media,” (Gómez-Peña, thisisliveart.co.uk). He doesn’t state his ethnicity in the performance, but the audience can still determine that he is a Mexican man by drawing from stereotypes like the bottle of salsa, his mustache, the Spanish being spoken, the mariachi-like jacket he wears, and the masculinity he performs throughout the video. These details are intensified in front of the
white backdrop that is behind him during this performance. Before he even begins to interact with the bottle of salsa or to speak Spanish, the audience has already placed his identity in a certain ethnicity because of their own stereotypes they perpetuate. He becomes the subaltern because of the way people view his physical appearance. They have determined his identity before doing any of the acts he performs in the video, and in this case, he is voiceless. However, he takes this notion of his identity being manipulated as an essentialized version of himself and creates a parody of it. Subalternity is present in the beginning of this performance, but he turns this around through the parody he creates. The subaltern can only speak to a certain extent in this case, but Gómez-Peña can still remain voiceless if the audience cannot determine that this is a parody of stereotypes. This can pertain to the Spivak’s concept of the subaltern speaking but “cannot be heard or read” (Spivak, 90-91). What we see is the importance of listening to the subaltern so that there is a better understanding of this marginalized group of people. “Instant Identity Ritual” is a critique on the excessiveness of false, ideological representation of Mexican culture is. This “otherness” he personifies within himself is a spectacle for the audience viewing this, considering they are predominantly white. He is de-exoticizing the brown body by using exoticization as a strategic essentialist tool.

**Thanks Pero No Thanksgiving**

“Thanks Pero No Thanksgiving” (2006) is another one of Gómez-Peña’s pieces performed through a video camera. In the two minute video, Gómez-Peña is seen wearing traditional Native American wardrobe like a headdress while also sporting leather wristbands.
Across his eyes is a strip of black makeup. The frame zooms out of his face, and the audience views the rest of the landscape (the table, a turkey, the artist standing behind a white backdrop) as he speaks for 20 seconds in some form of tongues. Holding a fork in one hand and a knife in the other, he stares caringly at the turkey in a calm manner. He then holds his arm in the air and freezes in that stance for a few seconds before he starts cutting the turkey in a stabbing motion. He lets out a loud grunt while he lets one out a loud grunt. The stabbing continues for almost one minute before he stops. The camera zooms back to his face and he lets out one last exhale.

I am using this performance piece because despite it does not necessarily relate to Latinx people in terms of tradition or custom like "Instant Identity Ritual" does, the piece does still have the deconstruction of binaries like "American" versus the "other" in place. The notion of people in terms of tradition or customs like "Instant Identity Ritual" does, the piece does still

I am using this performance piece because despite it does not necessarily relate to Latinx people in terms of tradition or custom like "Instant Identity Ritual" does, the piece does still have the deconstruction of binaries like "American" versus the "other" in place. The notion of
nationalism and the ideology of "being American" in the border is a complex concept that Gómez-Peña explores in this piece. In Edwina Barvosa-Carter's essay "Multiple Identity and Coalition Building: How Identity Differences Within Us Enable Radical Alliances Among Us," Barvosa-Carter says, "Multiple identity has several implications for coalition building and the mobilization of radical alliances. Multiple identity provides people with a range of actual or potential affiliations to social groups... The potential for politicization and mobilization of these groups for social justice goals is always present" (Barvosa-Carter, 12). There are similarities in oppression that marginalized group of people face in the U.S., and for other marginalized groups of people to acknowledge oppression faced by others, then a stronger connection and understanding of each other can be created. This performance of deconstructing the myth of Thanksgiving can challenge the audience to re-construct the paradigms of the neocolonial dialectic that dominates ideologies in the U.S.

Similar to "Instant Identity Ritual" in style, the message behind this performance can be unclear and puzzling to the audience. The title, "Thanks Pero No Thanksgiving," the turkey, and Gómez-Peña's assemble offer an idea that the piece is alluding to the American celebration of Thanksgiving. Given the context of these details, the purpose or main idea of this performance is a commentary on this celebration, and the action of stabbing the turkey repeatedly alludes to the notion of being "thankful" for a time in history that has been dehistoricized and given a false, ideological meaning attached to it.

In Janet Siskind's essay "The Invention of Thanksgiving: A Ritual of American Nationality," Siskind writes,
“The stuffed turkey represents Native Americans, sacrificed and consumed in order to bring civilization into the New World. It is a model of and a model for the ‘other,’ and in this national communion its ingestion connects proper Americans to their spiritual ancestors, the pilgrims” (Siskind, 42).

The concept of Thanksgiving enforces ideological notions of unity within American society which does not factor in the history behind the holiday. This idea of togetherness and gratefulness is a veil that hides the murder of indigenous people and the pilgrims’ mission to “civilize” a group of people that have been othered due to the lack of Eurocentric customs and phenotypes.

In Roland Barthes’s “Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption,” Barthes explains how people use food as signifiers to mark a special occasion or celebration. It is not just a physical substance but a system of communications as well. The turkey is treated as a sign for situations and “means for way of life that is emphasized by it” (Barthes, 21). It is not essential that the food is healthy or nutritional because the meaning of the food, in this case the turkey, is what makes the celebration or holiday all the more special. The turkey has been put in place as the signifier of a holiday in American culture due to its concept of patriotism and nationalism intertwined with unity and togetherness in this particular celebration making the holiday a myth. In what appears to be a trivial performance of relentlessly stabbing a turkey, “Thanks, Pero No Thanksgiving” deconstructs the myth surrounding Americans and Thanksgiving.

What the audience can take away from this is the fact that Gómez-Peña urges the viewer of this performance to think about the notion of Thanksgiving and it gruesome, murderous
history that is hidden beneath American discussing what they are grateful for while eating a wholesome meal. The acknowledgment of Thanksgiving as a myth must be taken into account because if one only acts upon the face value of the holiday, then this part of history is dehistoricized and essentialized. The artist provides his own commentary towards the subject matter throughout the video through clothing, props, and movement, and his own voice. Perhaps being unable to translate what he is saying in the video is the point, and this shifts the viewer’s attention to his body language which signifies discontent towards this holiday. Gómez-Peña’s piece uses the stabbing of the turkey while dressed in a certain kind of indigenous clothing as a strategic essentialist tool in order to reject the normalization and acceptance of a celebration based on a massacre of indigenous people. This performance adds to the consideration that the celebration of Thanksgiving is myth. We can connect the body language found in this performance to the artist’s own words outside of this piece. In *The New World Border*, Gómez-Peña writes,

“Here/there, the indigenous and the immigrant share the same space but are foreigners to each other. Here/there we are all potential border-crossers and cultural exiles. We have all been uprooted to different degrees, and for different reasons, but not everyone is aware of it. Here/there, homelessness, border culture, and deterritorialization are the dominant experience, not just fancy academic theories.” (Gómez-Peña, 6)

Marginalized communities are constantly being displaced physically and culturally. Just like the normalized acceptance for the myth of Thanksgiving, marginalized people assimilate to
that ideology as well because their culture has been stripped away or modified in order to be found as more accepted throughout communities in the U.S. In order to not be seen as the “other,” one must assimilate into the dominant culture and form a hybrid of this culture and their own. It is a survival tactic. Gómez-Peña says, “These forms of benign colonialism must be discussed openly, but without accusing anyone. The objective is to replace these problematic relationships with more enlightened ones, not to scare or punish potential allies” (Gómez-Peña, 10). Through this performance, the artist urges the deconstruction of colonial-related subject matters such as Thanksgiving in order to see this ideological expression of gratitude and act of feasting as a gruesome part of U.S. history that has been dehistoricized and mythicized in order to transform it into another consumerism-based day. As Siskind says, it is an “invented tradition” that created an “imagined community” (Siskind, 42); however, Thanksgiving actually pushes the history of indigenous people out and inserts empowered nationalist identity. The idea that this day has undertones of a “homecoming” celebration is what Gómez-Peña is trying to dismantle within his performance.

Within the myth of Thanksgiving, Eurocentric rhetoric becomes appropriated into the “norm” of American society. It is a nationalist notion that there is a sense of patriotic obligation to celebrate this day at face value, and indigenous people are almost always completely left out of the conversation.

“More than just part of the wilderness that has been civilized, the Thanksgiving turkey powerfully symbolizes the Indians. It is a symbol of a symbol, since the concept of “Indian” is
already a reduction of all the varied individuals and nations of Native Americans into a homogenous 'other,'” says Siskind (Siskind, 48).

Gómez-Peña perhaps is dressed in this kind of indigenous style not only just to bring light to the fact that many Native Americans were killed during the discovery of the New World, but he may in fact also be commenting on the generalization of indigenous people in both side of the border. The dominant culture has created a problematic myth within the concept of the “indian” that also factors into the essentialization of Thanksgiving. The part in history of Native Americans is either generalized or completely forgotten which is what the artist is trying to bring forth as he deliberately stabs a turkey while wearing a headdress. He is not trying to accurately portray the late-eighteenth century century dress of the Wampanoag indians of Massachusetts, rather he is creating a character inspired by say a 50s Western film. He is using these well-known signs of headdresses, speaking in tongues, and makeup as a strategic essentialist tool to critique how Western culture views the history of the U.S. and Native Americans.

**Couple in the Cage: Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West (1992-1993)**

“Couple in the Cage: Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West” is a performance piece by Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Coco Fusco. The performance had been displayed in popular museums in the United States, Europe, and Australia for roughly a year. The year 1992 marked 500 years since Christopher Columbus allegedly discovered the New World. “Couple in
The Cage” is meant to be a critique of the colonization of indigenous people, and how people read this kind of representation.

The Couple in the Cage: Guatinaui Odyssey (2005) is the video documentation that depicts the performance, the audiences’ reactions to the performance, and commentary from Gómez-Peña and Fusco. In the piece, Gómez-Peña and Fusco wore garments that would typically be read as indigenous clothing such as a hula skirt that looks straight from a Halloween costume store, a mask, feathers, leather s, sunglasses, and Converse sneakers. They also wore pieces read as modern clothing such as a mask, feathers, a hula skirt that looks straight from a Halloween costume store, sunglasses, and Converse sneakers. The video documentation from the performance depicts the performance, the audiences’ reactions to the performance, and commentary from Gómez-Peña and Fusco who assert this kind of representation.

The Cage” is meant to be a critique of the colonization of indigenous people, and how people read...
The two were displayed in a cage all day, and the museum visitors could watch them for as long as they wished. If they wanted to interact with the Guantinaui people then they could pay a dollar to feed them a piece of fruit. The visitors were also allowed to pay a dollar if they wished to see the woman, Fusco, dance, and the man, Gómez-Peña, would tell of his native homeland. The indigenous characters did not speak English nor did they understand the language, so Gómez-Peña would tell this false narrative speaking in “tongues.”

All of the elements that the artist perform to the museum goers represent notions of the “other” or the “native” in ways that society’s dominant ideology towards nonwhite people is seen. In Edward Said’s book Orientalism, Said says,

“The Orient is an integral part of European material civilization and culture. Orientalism expresses and represents that part culturally and even ideologically as a mode of discourse with supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles,” (Said, 25).

In other words, the Orient or, in this context the Other, represents the creation of a binary ideology of what Western civilization is and what it is not.

For the artists, there was no ideal reaction that was expected from the audience. The main purpose of this performance was to position the artists as the other by presenting the audience, typically white middle class families, with a colonial ideological subject that are the Guantinaui people. Through this circus-like representation of a fake “undiscovered” group of people, the performance uses strategic essentialism to invoke the colonial ideals that are commonly
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represented through anthropology, history, film, television shows, and other fields and mediums. By embodying these dehumanizing, stereotypical notions portrayed by colonialism, the cage confronts the viewers with a violent and degrading representation of non-Western civilization. In the documentary, there are mixed reactions to the performance. The observers were at times disgusted and fascinated with the display. Some understood that it was a joke or a critique on Christopher Columbus and colonialism, and others believed that they were indeed witnessing two undiscovered Amerindians. "The point of the performance was to highlight, rather than normalize, the theatricality of colonialism, Fusco and Gómez-Peña parodied Western stereotypes of what 'primitive' people do," says Diana Taylor (Taylor, 167). The performance of a sideshow is used as a spectacle of the "indigenous subject." The artists use strategic essentialism in order to convey the notion that the subaltern can never necessarily speak, but rather that the subaltern has always already been spoken for. Their
role has already been decided for by the hegemonic class, and that role is to be a spectacle for them as entertainment for Western civilization and fascination towards the other. Aimé Césaire says,

“The fact is that the so-called European civilization — ‘Western’ civilization — as it has been shaped by two centuries of bourgeois rule, is incapable of solving the two major problems to which its existence has given rise; the problem of the proletariat and the colonial problem; that Europe is unable to justify itself either before the bar of ‘reason’ or before the bar of ‘conscience.’” (Césaire, 173)

This imperial conscience is seen in some reactions from the viewers that believed the authenticity of the performance. One woman said it was interesting watching a “culture with people unlike [her] own.” A man noticed that Fusco did not appear to have any leg hair and said, “Her legs are shaved, do they do that in their homeland?” Then he proceeded to think of how the indigenous woman did not have leg hair and assumed the tribe pulls each hair follicle out. It is important to note that the reactions from the people who do believe the performance is a real is because of not only a lack of conscience but because of the space the act is being performed in. The space of the museum gives authenticity to the act which makes people easily believe that this is a real exhibit with real people from a real undiscovered tribe. The artists use the space’s authenticity as they incarnate essentialist aspects of the indigenous by using essentialist notions in a space where these aspects of the Other are shown in an exploitative art form.
Methodology and The Importance of Gómez-Peña's Performance Art

Chela Sandoval's book *Methodology of the Oppressed* takes semiotics and methodology and dismantles the colonial ideological objectives surrounding these notions by forming a "methodology of the oppressed." There are many similarities between her words and Gómez-Peña's art. Sandoval says that "ideology deprives material and historicized forms of their meanings... that a new methodology for emancipating consciousness must be founded" (Sandoval, 113). If a sign becomes essentialized or normalized constantly, there must be a new reading and analysis of this sign. The text of her analysis is theorist Roland Barthes — whose essays on myth and mythologies use a semiological analysis on modern cultural texts and stresses the purpose of deconstructing myth and ideologies — empties these layered meanings that society places into cultural artifacts. Gómez-Peña puts meaning into the bottle of salsa, the headdress, the turkey, the cage by using it as a tool to portray the image of the oppressed that is ideologically used in the media and throughout culture.

Like Sandoval, Gómez-Peña takes signs that contain Western imposed perspectives and brings back the history, consciousness, and reality of these signs. Subordinate people, like Gómez-Peña, are already aware of how ideology and society works, but through performance art, he creates a consciousness in the oppressor. He uses postcolonial theory and turns the methodology into something more than academic texts by creating dialogue around notions of oppression, ideology, colonialism, class and race and creates a praxis around these concepts through performance art. This is his survival tactic, his agency.

In *Methodology of the Oppressed*, Sandoval states,
“the citizen-subject can learn to identify, develop, and control the means of ideology, that is, marshal the knowledge necessary to ‘break with ideology’ while at the same time also speaking in, and from within, ideology, is an idea that lays the philosophical foundations enabling us to make the vital connections between the seemingly disparate social and political aims that drive, yet ultimately divide, social movements from within.” (Sandoval, 61)

Sandoval proposes a “science” for oppositional ideology that ignites the conversation of oppression, colonialism, race and class difference, etc. outside of an academic discourse and into the “real world” — the real lives of oppressed and marginalized people. Through performance art, whether in a museum, book, or even a video on YouTube, Gómez-Peña uses this as a tool of survival in coping with the complexities of multiculturalism, hybridity, and transnationalism within the border. He provides the audience with what can be primarily seen as hyperbolic representations of Latinx and/or indigenous people, but throughout these performances, he imposes questions about identity and borders and the ideologies that exist within this space.

Gómez-Peña’s art provides activism, political expression, and a foundation of empowerment for marginalized groups of people in the border. In *The New World Border*, he writes, “Though no one needs a passport to enter my performance continent, the audience is asked to swallow their fears and to question any ethnocentric assumptions they might have about otherness...” (Gómez-Peña, 7). His performance art pieces provide a different perspective on this discussion of identity and borders because though it is visual, there must be an in-depth analysis of his work, and the questions he imposes through his art provides the audience (who, in this context, is the “other”) an understanding, a knowledge. Gómez-Peña’s actions — such as body
language, props, wardrobe, etc. — are signs of awareness during times of cultural turmoil thus gives agency to his art. It provides an understanding of how marginalized groups survive through oppression. Hybridity, for Gómez-Peña, becomes the dominant culture. The primary hegemonic culture is the other in this context because the dominant culture that makes up the audience are not the subjects in his art.

**Conclusion**

The medium of performance art is an important method to show a representation of a group of people without making it into a generalized representation. Through the physicality that performance art uses, Gómez-Peña can offer a sense of identity that is displaced and essentialized and turns it into something the audience cannot look away from. His usage of space and video makes his performances open to any kind of critique or thoughts. The use of strategic essentialism is important in spaces such as the museum because it gives the essentialist aspects a false authenticity. It fools the audience that it is not meant for. It is not his role to translate the methodology of the oppressed displayed in his art, and it may not be every audience member’s role to understand why he chugs the bottle of salsa, stabs a turkey, or entertains museum goers while displayed in a cage because this performance is not for them. Gómez-Peña uses his body and essentializes it for the purpose of displaying the pain of colonization that then becomes a healing process post-colonization. His role is not the translator but the voice for the subaltern.
Through performance art, Gómez-Peña is still the subaltern, however, he obtains the power of creating an infrastructure where his voice is heard and, most importantly, seen through strategic essentialism. He essentializes notions of his identity in order to disconnect the audience from their hegemonic ideologies and re-present the marginalized identities within the border. The videocamera and cage are used as a platform to mediate the audience and the bodies of the artists being used in the performance or Gómez-Peña himself. With Gómez-Peña's satirical yet political way of imitating notions of Mexican and/or American culture in the border within his work, we can reach a better understanding of the complexities of identity in this geographical space, and we can also deconstruct the binary notion of borders and the aspects of culture that exist within this space.

Throughout this project, we can establish a new understanding of the kinetic energy that is found within identities of la frontera and the multiplicities found in these identities. These layers of identities are always becoming and they are always going where they are not supposed to be going. It is not the duty of the oppressed to be the role of the translator, but rather give voice to their subalternity for people who will understand and who their work is meant for.
Works Cited


