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## BOOK REVIEWS

**Gómez-Peña, Guillermo (1993).**  
*Warrior for Gringostroika: Essays, Performance Texts, and Poetry*  
Saint Paul, MN: GRAYWOLF PRESS. 176 pages.  
19 B/W Performance Clips. ISBN 1-55597-199-7  
(paper) \$14.00

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Connie M. Landis

Usually I doubt the back cover affidavits (always positive in nature) found on most books and I eagerly read the book to ascertain whether my suspicions are warranted. The five "praise-songs" in this case, some written for his solo performances and others for the book itself, however, are on the mark. Now having critically consumed the book, I am convinced that this is a "must read" for anyone interested in the social, political, and psychological aspects of the contemporary art scene as related to the new internationalism.

Gómez-Peña's original ideas—finding shape in such diverse forms as manifestoes, conceptual postcards, letters, posters, critical, performance and poetical texts, among other formats—retain strong impact in this written and illustrated book. The spirit and angst of his words and actions originally performed in space and time for twenty years are convincingly captured as

he graphically crosses and recrosses the borders of Mexico and the United States. It is indeed a borderless world in which "geographic borders have collapsed and language barriers have been disintegrated by gringostroika" as Laura Jamison (*Mother Jones*, back cover of book) writes.

Border crossing becomes to Gómez-Peña a way of life, ever-present fodder for conscious and unconscious thought to be transformed into the visual and literary arts. He is known through his writing in Mexico where apparently writers are respected. In the United States "where writers are marginalized," writing gives way to performance art which is, according to Gómez-Peña, "above all a strategy of social communication and an exercise in cultural translation" (p. 16). Writing and performance art, at least as far as a book format can carry the idea and spirit of performance art, are synthesized in this book. Synthesized in the philosophical deductive reasoning process of particular parts creating a complex whole, from principles to applications in living, from causes to effects and consequences gleaned from Gómez-Peña's experiences.

A perusal of the "Contents" pages indicates four main divisions to the book: Critical Texts, Performance Texts, Performance Chronology, and Sin (or without)/Translation. Indicative of the insightful and piercing nature found throughout this book, the bottom border of the Contents pages reads in all caps, "I AM THEREFORE I CROSS." Immediately below this statement is a two-page blazing red border proclaiming "MY RATIONALE FOR CROSSING IS SIMPLE: SURVIVAL + DIGNITY = MIGRATION - MEMORY GRAFFITI (SAN DIEGO, 1983)." This formulated expression at the book's beginning informs the reader immediately that something provocative and value-testing is between the covers.

Sub-topics under the four divisions are arranged as the author explains in "a somewhat chronological manner" (p. 15). In what serves as the book's introduction (ingeniously titled "1991-A Binational Performance Pilgrimage"), Gómez-Peña states:

this text chronicles two decades of projects, trips, and social and cultural phenomena that shaped the consciousness and sensibility of my generation. ... the reader must keep in mind that some of the projects I talk about took place simultaneously and were related conceptually to other projects that were also taking place at the same time in different cities of the Southwest and the East Coast of the U. S. A. (p. 15)

Over 35 illustrated pages, mostly photographic excerpts from performance works and rubber-stamped images from unknown sources, suggest in an unnerving way the unusual perspectives that Gómez-Peña offers to the reader. Having heard and seen Gómez-Peña give a slide presentation about his various artworks before reading the book, I was surprised how the book's selected and understandably limited images managed to capture the main issues of his life and artwork to this point. Primary red accents were adroitly scattered among the book's black and white images: this reminded me of the importance that red played in the slides taken during performance pieces. And although it may seem frivolous to set up connections between photos in slide form from his performance art pieces, along with black and white book images, and an actual performance piece, the links were there imaginatively for this reader.

Born in Mexico City in 1955 and now living in New York and California, Gómez-Peña has always lived between ever-changing multiple communities in geographic space, time contexts, and cultural values. And with what he describes as "my Mexican psyche, my Mexican heart, and my Mexican body" (p. 15), he transports himself across these borders in his cultural commentaries delivered through performance art pieces or expressed more theoretically through his written pieces. He describes his self-selected multidimensional perspectives in these statements:

I crisscross from the past to the present, from the fictional to the biographical. I fuse prose and poetry,

sound and text, art and literature, political activism and art experimentation. As a result I find myself working with hybrid genres and interdisciplinary formats. My works are simultaneously essays and manifestoes, performances and social chronicles, bilingual poems and radio or video pieces. In them I try to exercise all the freedom that my countries have denied me. (p. 16)

With a chameleon-like identity befitting his place at the moment and claimed by a strong sense of where he originated and how he evolved, he addresses topics most of us deny or set aside for when-there-is-more-time-and-energy for considering. For many, these opportunities never materialize and major prejudices—racial, occupational, religious, among others—as well as predilections based on personal backgrounds are seldom addressed. Even partialities favoring certain objects, methods or thoughts drift in and out without close examination. In the book Gómez-Peña forces the reader to examine and reexamine individual choices and perspectives, whatever the involvement or topic of the moment. He invites the reader into culture-making that includes his vision along with that of others. He very clearly states what he seeks and doesn't seek:

We (Latinos in the United States) don't want to be a mere ingredient of the melting pot. What we want is to participate actively in a humanistic, pluralistic, and politicized dialogue, continuous and not sporadic, and we want this to occur between equals who enjoy the same power of negotiation. (p. 41)

And trite as it may seem, the experiences are individually rewarding as societal fissures, cavities, and real and imagined boundaries are probed and poked from different perspectives instigated by Gómez-Peña throughout *Warrior for Gringostroika*.

In summary I highly recommend this book for Social Theory Caucus members and others interested in social, political and multicultural issues surrounding marginalized individuals and groups. In a classroom situation—probably graduate level—I

predict discussions, papers, projects and other selected undertakings will take unanticipated turns and twists which should be what art educators search for and all too seldom find. In private reading, an interior dialogue will undoubtedly begin which can't be ignored, whatever one's life focus. I would even suggest that a more socially and politically defined engagement in our professional and personal life will result.

AFTER THOUGHT: One poem near the end of the book has been selected to capture your imagination. The original spacing and type has been retained as much as possible:

PUNCTURED TIRE  
(HIGHWAY 5, CALIFORNIA, 1988)

I am stuck in the middle of the journey  
a highway without human activity  
a text without visible structure  
life on this side of the border  
on your side . . .  
I no longer know who I am  
but I like it

Diagonally underneath the poem on the same page are half inch upper case words stamped and framed in red ink: "WOUNDED BY THE MAINSTREAM" (p. 167).