

Gómez-Peña, Guillermo. Warrior for Gringostrolka
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DOCUMENTED / UNDOCUMENTED

I LIVE SMACK IN THE FISSURE between two worlds, in the infected wound: half a block from the end of Western civilization and four miles from the beginning of the Mexican/American border, the northernmost point of Latin America. In my fractured reality, but a reality nonetheless, there cohabit two histories, languages, cosmologies, artistic traditions, and political systems which are drastically counterposed. Many "deterritorialized" Latin American artists in Europe and the United States have opted for "internationalism" (a cultural identity based upon the "most advanced" of the ideas originating out of New York or Paris). I, on the other hand, opt for "borderness" and assume my role: my generation, the *chilango* (slang term for a Mexico City native), who came to "El Norte" fleeing the imminent ecological and social catastrophe of Mexico City, gradually integrated itself into otherness, in search of that other Mexico grafted onto the entrails of the et cetera . . . became Chicano-ized. We de-Mexicanized ourselves to Mexi-understand ourselves, some without wanting to, others on purpose. And one day, the border became our house, laboratory, and ministry of culture (or counterculture).

Today, eight years after my departure from Mexico, when they ask me for my nationality or ethnic identity, I can't respond with one word, since my "identity" now possesses multiple repertoires: I am Mexican but I am also Chicano and Latin American. At the border they call me *chilango* or *mexiquillo*; in Mexico City it's *pocho* or *norteño*; and in Europe it's *sudaca*. The Anglos call me "Hispanic" or "Latino," and the Germans have, on more than one occasion, confused me with Turks or Italians. I walk amid the rubble of the Tower of Babel of my American post-modernity.

The recapitulation of my personal and collective topography has become my cultural obsession since I arrived in the United States. I look for the traces of my generation, whose distance stretches not only from Mexico City to California, but also from the past to the future, from pre-Columbian America to high technology, and from Spanish to English, passing through "Spanglish."

As a result of this process I have become a cultural topographer, border-crosser, and hunter of myths. And it doesn't matter where I find myself, in Califas or Mexico City, in Barcelona or West

Berlin; I always have the sensation that I belong to the same species: the migrant tribe of fiery pupils.

My work, like that of many border artists, comes from two distinct traditions, and because of this has dual, or on occasion multiple, referential codes. One strain comes from Mexican popular culture, the Latin American literary "boom," and the Mexico City counterculture of the 1970s . . . the other comes directly from Fluxus (a late-1960s international art movement that explored alternative means of production and distribution), concrete poetry, conceptual art, and performance art. These two traditions converge in my border experience and they fuse together.

In my intellectual formation, Carlos Fuentes, Gabriel García Márquez, Oscar Chávez, Felipe Ehrenberg, José Agustín, and Augusto Boal were as important as William Burroughs, Michel Foucault, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Jacques Lacan, Vito Acconci, and Joseph Beuys.

My "artistic space" is the intersection where the new Mexican urban poetry and the colloquial Anglo poetry meet; the intermediate stage somewhere between Mexican street theatre and multimedia performance; the silence that snaps in between *corrido* and punk; the wall that divides "neográfica" (a 1970s Mexico City art movement involved in the production of low-budget book art and graphics) and graffiti; the highway that joins Mexico City and Los Angeles; and the mysterious thread of thought and action that puts Pan-Latin Americanism in touch with the Chicano movement, and both of these in touch with other international vanguards.

I am a child of crisis and cultural syncretism, half-hippie and half-punk. My generation grew up watching movies about *charrros* (Mexican cowboys) and science fiction, listening to *cumbias* and tunes from the Moody Blues, constructing altars and filming in Super-8, reading *El Corno Em-*

plumado and *Artforum*, traveling to Tepoztlán and San Francisco, creating and de-creating myths. We went to Cuba in search of political illumination, to Spain to visit the crazy grandmother, and to the United States in search of the instantaneous musico-sexual paradise. We found nothing. Our dreams wound up getting caught in the webs of the border.

Our generation belongs to the world's biggest floating population: the weary travelers, the dislocated, those of us who left because we didn't fit anymore, those of us who still haven't arrived because we don't know where to arrive at, or because we can't go back anymore.

Our deepest generational emotion is that of loss, which comes from our having left. Our loss is total and occurs at multiple levels: loss of our country (culture and national rituals) and our class (the "illustrious" middle class and upper-middle); progressive loss of language and literary culture in our native tongue (those of us who live in non-Spanish-speaking countries); loss of ideological meta-horizons (the repression against and division of the left) and of metaphysical certainty.

In exchange, what we won was a vision of a more experimental culture, that is to say, a multifocal and tolerant one.

Going beyond nationalism, we established cultural alliances with other places, and we won a true political conscience (declassicization and consequent politicization) as well as new options in social, sexual, spiritual, and aesthetic behavior.

Our artistic product presents hybrid realities and colliding visions within coalition. We practice the epistemology of multiplicity and a border semiotics. We share certain thematic interests, like the continual clash with cultural otherness, the crisis of identity, or, better said, access to trans- or multiculturalism, and the destruction of borders therefrom; the creation of alternative car-



tographies; a ferocious critique of the dominant culture of both countries; and, lastly, a proposal for new creative languages.

We witness the borderization of the world, by-product of the "deterritorialization" of vast human sectors. The borders either expand or are shot full of holes. Cultures and languages mutually invade one another. The South rises and melts, while the North descends dangerously with its economic and military pincers. The East moves west and vice versa. Europe and North America daily receive uncontainable migrations of human beings, a majority of whom are being displaced involuntarily. This phenomenon is the result of multiple factors: regional wars, unemployment, overpopulation, and especially the enormous disparity in North/South relations.

The demographic facts are staggering: the Middle East and Black Africa are already in Eu-

rope, and Latin America's heart now beats in the United States. New York and Paris increasingly resemble Mexico City and São Paulo. Cities like Tijuana and Los Angeles, once socio-urban aberrations, are becoming models of a new hybrid culture, full of uncertainty and vitality. And border youth—the fearsome "cholo-punks," children of the chasm that is opening between the "First" and the "Third" worlds, become the indisputable heirs to a new *mestizaje* (the fusion of the Amerindian and European races).

In this context, concepts like "high culture," "ethnic purity," "cultural identity," "beauty," and "fine arts" are absurdities and anachronisms. Like it or not, we are attending the funeral of modernity and the birth of a new culture.

In 1987, the unigeneric and monocultural vision of the world is insufficient. Syncretism, interdisciplinaryism, and multi-ethnicity are sine

qua nons of contemporary art. And the artist or intellectual who doesn't comprehend this will be banished and his or her work will not form part of the great cultural debates of the continent.

Art is conceptual territory where everything is possible, and by the same token there do not exist certainties or limitations within it. In 1987, all the creative possibilities have been explored, and therefore they are all within our reach.

Thanks to the discoveries and advancements of many artists over the last fifteen years, the concept of *métier* is so wide and the parameters of art so flexible that they include practically every imaginable alternative: art as political negotiation (Felipe Ehrenberg—Mexico), as social reform (Joseph Beuys—Germany), as an instrument of multicultural organization (Judy Baca—United States) . . . or as alternative communication (Post Arte—Mexico, Kit Galloway and Sherri Rabinowitz—United States). Others conceive of art as a strategy of intervention aimed at mass media, or as citizen-diplomacy, social chronicle, a popular semiotics, or personal anthropology.

In 1987, our artistic options in terms of the medium, methodology, system of communication, and channels of distribution for our ideas and images are greater and more diverse than ever. Not understanding and practicing this freedom implies operating outside of history, or, worse yet, blindly accepting the restrictions imposed by cultural bureaucracies.

Our experience as Latino border artists and intellectuals in the United States fluctuates between legality and illegality, between partial citizenship and full. For the Anglo community we are simply "an ethnic minority," a subculture, that is to say, some kind of pre-industrial tribe with a good consumerist appetite. For the art world, we are practitioners of distant languages that, in the best of cases, are perceived as exotic.

In general, we are perceived through the folk-

loric prisms of Hollywood, fad literature, and publicity; or through the ideological filters of mass media. For the average Anglo, we are nothing but "images," "symbols," "metaphors." We lack ontological existence and anthropological concreteness. We are perceived indiscriminately as magic creatures with shamanistic powers, happy bohemians with pretechnological sensibilities, or as romantic revolutionaries born in a Cuban poster from the 1970s. All this without mentioning the more ordinary myths, which link us with drugs, supersexuality, gratuitous violence, and terrorism; myths that serve to justify racism and disguise the fear of cultural otherness.

These mechanisms of mythification generate semantic interference and obstruct true intercultural dialogic. To make border art implies to reveal and subvert said mechanisms.

The term Hispanic, coined by techno-marketing experts and by the designers of political campaigns, homogenizes our cultural diversity (Chicanos, Cubans, and Puerto Ricans become indistinguishable), avoids our indigenous cultural heritage, and links us directly with Spain. Worse yet, it possesses connotations of upward mobility and political obedience.

The terms Third World culture, ethnic art, and minority art are openly ethnocentric and necessarily imply an axiological vision of the world at the service of Anglo-European culture. Confronted with them, one can't avoid asking the following questions: Besides possessing more money and arms, is the "First World" qualitatively better in any other way than our "underdeveloped" countries? Aren't the Anglos themselves also an "ethnic group," one of the most violent and antisocial tribes on this planet? Aren't the 500 million Latin American mestizos that inhabit the Americas a "minority"?

Among Chicanos, Mexicans, and Anglos, there is a heritage of relations poisoned by distrust and

resentment. For this reason, my cultural work (especially in the camps of performance art, radio art, and journalism) has concentrated upon the destruction of the myths and the stereotypes that each group has invented to rationalize the other two.

With the dismantling of this mythology, I look, if not to create an instantaneous space for intercultural communication, at least to contribute to the creation of the groundwork and theoretical principles for a future dialogue that is capable of transcending the profound historical resentments that exist between the communities on either side of the border.

Within the framework of the false amnesty of the Immigration Reform and Control Act and the growing influence of the North American ultraright, which seeks to close (militarize) the border because of supposed motives of "national security," the collaboration among Chicano, Mexican, and Anglo artists has become indispensable.

Anglo artists can contribute their technical ability, their comprehension of the new media of expression and information (video and audio), and their altruist/internationalist tendencies. In turn, Latinos (whether Mexican, Chicano, Caribbean, Central or South American) can contribute the originality of their cultural models,

their spiritual strength, and their political understanding of the world.

Together, we can collaborate in surprising cultural projects without forgetting that both should retain control of the product, from the planning stages up through distribution. If this doesn't occur, then intercultural collaboration isn't authentic. We shouldn't confuse true collaboration with political paternalism, cultural vampirism, voyeurism, economic opportunism, and demagogic multiculturalism.

We should clear up this matter once and for all:

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.

For this "intermediate space" to open, first there has to be a pact of mutual cultural understanding and acceptance, and it is precisely to this that the border artist can contribute. In this very delicate historical moment, Mexican artists and intellectuals as well as Chicanos and Anglos should try to "recontextualize" ourselves, that is to say, search for a "common cultural territory," and within it put into practice new models of communication and association.

Translated by Rubén Martínez

**CHOOSE YOUR LABEL CAREFULLY
WHEN CROSSING THE BORDER.**

- Mexica
- Xicano
- Ex -
- Nahua
- Mestizo
- Español
- Mexicano
- Chicano
- Chicano
- Hispano
- Hispanic
- Nahual
- Mex-Tizo
- Ex-Pan-Ole
- Me-X-Cannou
- Shic-Annou
- Chispeno
- His Plano
- His Panic
- Hisputnik
- Expanding
- Next-T.S.O.
- Spa...No
- Pos-Colombino
- Sin Chispa
- Hiss-P&O
- Ix-Pan-Itch
- Panam
- Expanded
- Pan - Americano
- North - Americano
- Latino - Americano
- Americano
- Americano
- Americano
- Ham-Errican-Ou
- Ah-Me-Rich-Annus
- America No!!!

© The Other Labels

Mowing Leaves of Grass

I am the as yet written vengeance of Elvira Valdez
The best laid plans of Modesta
The reckoning of Santa Cruz
San Ysidro
Bisbee
Chandler
Porvenir
The blood sweat and tears
Of all that I refuse to forget
I am that unpaid debt
No sidekick
No subplot
No mascot
No ethnic study
The universe I embody
The ground above me
The sky beneath my feet
Marching las calles
Y las estrellas
Through circular calendars
Sleep dealing
Siqueiros y Rivera
Past the past
The future
In the present
In Lak'ech

All at once
'Cause in this moment
I am you
And you are me
And we
Are two clenched fists
That still lit fire
Sacred kept
The final breath
Of the so-called
Last fighting Aztec
Laughing in the face of death
The blade of el pachuco
Guarding the temple steps
The strength of memory
The promise of tomorrow
Yo soy Chicano
Y Chicano soy
Y adonde me llevas
El Chicano voy
They want you to think this is important
Critical
To your rehabilitation
For the way in which you entered this world
Read Thomas Jefferson
Or else you'll get pregnant
Standards and practices
Curriculum and instruction
And you the product

Of public education
Do not interrupt
Or you'll be led cuffed
Face-first
Into pavement
Like
Your father
Your grandfather
Your mother
Your nina
Your tios
Til you learn your lesson
It's not personal
It's all you people
So don't get mad
Don't be hurt
And don't make this political
This is economic
Objective
The law of self-interest
If we let you in
What will become
Of the canon
The classics, Alexander and Napoleon
Who will shelve
The wit and wisdom
Of Ben Franklin
Shelly
Shakespeare

Chaucer
Walt Whitman
From the
Paumanok
Starting
What has
Miserable
Inefficient Mexico
To do with the great mission
The new world
The noble race
You fought
You lost
You don't get to define this
This isn't racism
It's providence
Progress
And god willing
You filthy mongrels
It is just the way it is
I look at you
And I don't see color
I see labor
I see law and order
Cops and robbers
Guards and convicts
Institutions of correction
Schools that look like prisons
Caged apartments

Where the cost of living
The cost of being
Brown
Is as high
As wage theft
And the rent
Forget
Your savage tongue
I will teach you
This robust
American love
Spoon feed you spics
Freedom of speech
Til you learn
To take a joke
And speak to authority
I will show you
Who you are
In a book
And you will believe it
'Cause I said it
And now you read it
And who are you
To question
The canon the classics
Lowry
Kerouac
Walk out
On the great white brilliance

Of Wilson
Garfield
Roosevelt
Lincoln
Now listen 'cause
'Cause this is important
The universe
Is a muralist
The cosmos
Our self-portrait
Starring
A curandera
A danzante
A poet laureate
A stylist
A mechanic
The barrio dandy
Cruising the rings of Saturn
To the travel tips of Torres
Carrasco tearing
Down the curtain
On union station
Joaquin returning
Triumphant
Marching
Through the halls of Tucson
Mowing down leaves of grass
Fuck Walt Whitman
This is

An Art Laboe
Dedication
To
Frida
Selena
Cantinflas
Luis Rodriguez
Valdez
The Mighty Quinn
Sandra
Sor Juana
Anzaldúa
To all that we are
And all we have been
Through lifelines
And timelines
Galaxies and dimensions
Of pain pride and resistance
And gothic
Are the solar showers
In the days of living music
When the people of the sun
Are dancing to the tune of Valenzuela
And la luna
Was a calvera
As the ancestors
Welcomed in the future
Through circular calendars
Where I am you

And you are me
Sitting at a desk
Looking to the stars
Searching for the end
To a poem
That never began
That always was
And forever shall be

To live in the Borderlands means you

are neither *bispana india negra española*
ni gabacha, eres mestiza, mulata, half-breed
caught in the crossfire between camps
while carrying all five races on your back
not knowing which side to turn to, run from;

To live in the Borderlands means knowing
that the *india* in you, betrayed for 500 years,
is no longer speaking to you,
that *mexicanas* call you *rajetas*,
that denying the Anglo inside you
is as bad as having denied the Indian or Black;

Cuando vives en la frontera
people walk through you, the wind steals your voice,
you're a *burra, buey*, scapegoat,
forerunner of a new race,
half and half—both woman and man, neither—
a new gender;

To live in the Borderlands means to
put *cbile* in the borscht,
eat whole wheat *tortillas*,
speak Tex-Mex with a Brooklyn accent;
be stopped by *la migra* at the border checkpoints;

Living in the Borderlands means you fight hard to
resist the gold elixir beckoning from the bottle,
the pull of the gun barrel,
the rope crushing the hollow of your throat;

In the Borderlands
you are the battleground
where enemies are kin to each other;
you are at home, a stranger,
the border disputes have been settled
the volley of shots have shattered the truce
you are wounded, lost in action
dead, fighting back;

To live in the Borderlands means
the mill with the razor white teeth wants to shred off
your olive-red skin, crush out the kernel, your heart
pound you pinch you roll you out
smelling like white bread but dead;

To survive the Borderlands
you must live *sin fronteras*]
be a crossroads.

gabacha—a Chicano term for a white woman

rajetas—literally, "split," that is, having betrayed your word

burra—donkey

buey—oxen

sin fronteras—without borders

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