

**ON PEDAGOGY, POLITICS, AND
PERFORMANCE:
PRAXIS AS THEORY IN EDGAR CHÍAS'
TERNURA SUITE, ANGÉLICA LIDDELL'S
Y LOS PECES SALIERON A COMBATIR
CONTRA LOS HOMBRES, AND GUILLERMO
GÓMEZ-PEÑA'S BORDER BRUJO**

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Within the field of contemporary performing arts, few artists surpass Gregorio Gómez-Peña for the scope, coherence, and persistence of his reflections on the topic of borders in today's world or for his perceived impact on his audiences. Critics in their assessment of the artist's flamboyant style often imply just that. His "searing" and "raving" (Benavidez) embodiments of a "mosaic of parodic [borderland] characters," projected as "abrupt collisions among various 'subject positions,'" are evaluated in terms of the artist's success at achieving his stipulated goals: namely, to dislodge his spectators from their ideological comfort zone by forcing them "to perform a similar kind of 'border crossing'" (Fox 233-34) of their own. His effectiveness is seen as pivoting on his "irreverent" (Benavidez) encounter with an implied spectator who is demarcated in contradictory terms. He speaks, on the one hand, to an ideologically complicitous community of "enlightened habitués"; on the other, to "homophobic, white men," the "mythical father conjured up out of the artist's imagination to be shouted at, attacked, radicalized, or otherwise transformed by the work of the performance" (Kester 14).

His spectator is implied, that is, in accordance with paradoxical internal borders that the artist prods us all to cross.

So too is the artistic self construed paradoxically and in terms of fundamental internal divisions. Through a reference to his own father, Gómez-Peña invokes in *Border Brujo* his rebellion against his own personal past as exemplary of all that he means to teach through his performance.

the day I was born
 September 23 of 1955
 eternity died
 & the border wound became infected
 the day my father died
 February 17 of 1989
 my last tentacle with México broke
 & I finally became a Chicano. ("*Border Brujo*" 54)¹

In relation to the rampant iconoclasm that characterizes *Border Brujo*, one might easily see the artist taking aim at a broad range of social conventions and political ideologies defined in terms of a *father*, both mythical and real, who inhabits a spectatorship that transcends both space and history. The metaphors of disease, death, and renewal through which the artist's attacks are funneled relate to both a personal and cultural (collective) heritage, to questions of identity and transmission. This symbolic projection of the father and/as past may not be the main target of the artist's rantings, but he clearly represents a *point-against-which*, a disavowed fixity that contrasts with the fluid *ambi-ness* that the artist embraces in the present. To state the obvious, the father is invoked to establish a point of inflection, where tentacles break and an acute sense of our own ephemerality emerges.

Something clearly different is suggested through the subtler yet equally telling feature of the work's epigraph. Gómez-Peña uses this purely textual device (no mention of it is made in the video recording of his performance)² to dedicate this work to his own son in the following terms:

San Diego/Tijuana 1989

I dedicate this piece to my son, Guillermo Emiliano, hoping that when he grows up, most of these words will be outdated and unnecessary. (49)

Those familiar with Gómez-Peña's writings on the border will recall the indignities he describes having experienced on different occasions during the early 1990s at the hands of "racist civilian vigilantes" and law enforcement officials who believed that a man of his appearance (read: the brown Gómez-Peña) in the company of a young Anglo-looking boy (read: Gómez-Peña's blond son) could only be a common criminal (Gómez-Peña, "Real Life" and "The Dangers"). The experiences and consequences he describes, real and potential, are dramatic to say the least and relate to the many "demons" Gómez-Peña sets out to "exorcise" (Benavidez; Fox 232) through his performance. In terms of the theoretical framework we seek to elaborate here, what bears noting are the implications of his reportage for the theme of fatherhood, something that he returns to in concluding a piece published a few years later:

As parents of interracial kids in the 90s, it is unrealistic to think that we can protect them from these kinds of experiences. Perhaps all we can do is to provide them with lots of *love*, some survival skills, and eventually a political understanding of the world. ("The Dangers" 194; my emphasis)

In both cases, Gómez-Peña brings his border concerns squarely within the spectrum of a genealogical flow: of continuity, that is, in the face of ephemerality. The virgule ("/") that he adopts in the paragraph—"San Diego/Tijuana"—stands as a powerful reminder of the artist's self-proclaimed hybridity, signaled of course by the title and developed in myriad ways throughout the work. Standing as it does in juxtaposition to the son, it signals several key points. To begin with, it speaks to us through the voice of a father who offers up the example of his own experience in hopes of creating a better future for his son. By focusing on the artist's selfhood, it highlights the element of immediacy that is essential to

performance art: what is being represented is happening here and now and it involves the spectators as much as the artist. We are reminded, that is, that the motivations driving this exemplary and ongoing self-exposure are both pedagogical and political, based as they are in the idea of performance as a tool for constructing a better future. The images of rupture, disease, difference and temporality associated with the artist as son—his own birth and father's death—yield to his "hopes" for a certain permanence that is inscribed doubly in his text. The epigraph as such, an essentially commemorative device, plus what he states there both inscribe against time the artist's abiding faith in Eros against Thanatos, in the redemptive power of performance as a pedagogy rooted in love.

In the interest of historical perspective, it bears noting the degree to which such principles, basic as they are to recent and contemporary avant-garde performing arts, are anticipated by the theories and practices of the historical avant-gardes. Because of its title, Miguel de Unamuno's *Amor y pedagogía* points perhaps most conspicuously to threads that pervade Spanish and European modernism generally and that prove to be relevant: the supremacy of the act of representation or of the narrative utterance in and of itself over all things represented, implied or alluded; the triumph of a type of playfulness—irony, satire, farce—that exploits visual and verbal forms of expression for the drama that pulsates within the gap separating signifier and signified; and finally, the creation of a reader, spectator or—figuratively speaking—student-centered learning environment that anticipates the reception or reader-response theories of the 1970s during what Josep Maria Castellet would term "la hora del lector." The idea that Alexander Calder's implied spectators—his "students," as it were—would share with their artist/teachers the responsibility of co-creating Calder's symbolic mobiles by arranging them in accordance with their own needs and desires echoes Unamuno's allegorical refutation of social positivism in his 1902 novel, where freedom of choice triumphs ultimately over the efforts of fathers and mothers to over-determine or engineer their children's values and habits. Models from our past serve to kindle, foster, or spur pupils on to in-

dependent judgments and creative actions, to “perturb” them, as Unamuno indicates *playfully* in his *nivola* via an especially suggestive allusion to his own fictionalized self: “[El autor] parece fatalmente arrastrado por el funesto prurito de *perturbar al lector* más que de divertirlo y sobre todo de *burlarse* de los que no comprenden la *burla*” (8; my emphasis).

Unamuno thus bridges aesthetics and ethics through a playful and powerful interdisciplinary model of thinking (or apprehending) and doing (interacting) that resonates in the “performance as radical pedagogy” model that Gómez-Peña has promoted throughout his career, most notably through the “transdisciplinary arts organization” that he helped found in 1993 under the name of La Pocha Nostra (“Manifiesto”; “Teaching Modules”). As members of this initiative have indicated, this pedagogy promotes a type of project-based learning, in today’s terms, that trains students to innovate and that gives them the “freedom”—time, space, and guidance—to do so: “We often conduct cross-cultural, cross-disciplinary and cross-generational workshops to establish a temporary utopian space for aesthetic freedom and cross-cultural dialogue and alternately to seek a new aesthetic that truly reflects our new communities, the spirit and tribulations of our times” (Singer and Vazquez). It is based on the understanding that only when unharnessed from the unnecessarily heavy hand of the past or of the master will new generations of pupils manage to bring artistic expression into line with their own taste and needs. In the case of La Pocha Nostra, this involves taking modernist selfhood and immediacy to the postmodern extreme of an aesthetic that privileges the body and not location as the “ephemeral stage,” the “ultimate site” where an “ever changing tableau of images” emerge and disappear, where artists “constantly exercise—somatize—their performance intelligence *in situ*” as the ultimate expression of the self and her/his circumstances. It involves “[grooming] emerging artists and cultural leaders” by “[sharpening] their *performance* and *analytical* skills”: teaching them, that is, that in performance, creativity, critique and analysis form an organic whole, that they should aim to demonstrate this very idea, and that they should do so mo-

tivated by a sense of their own ethical responsibility vis-à-vis their communities.

Our common denominator is our desire to challenge, cross, and erase dangerous borders between art and politics, practice and theory, artist and spectator, mentor and apprentice, body and cultural nightmares. We strive to eradicate myths of purity and dissolve borders surrounding culture, ethnicity, gender, language, power, and *métier*. (“Manifesto”)

To us, the artist is a social thinker, an experimental pedagogue, an intercultural diplomat, a reverse anthropologist, and above all, a responsible citizen immersed in the great debates of our times. (Singer and Vazquez)

It goes without saying that the legacy of modernism in the postmodern era is a hotly debated and complex topic.³ Yet the allegory by which Unamuno came to problematize the relationship between present and past, between representation and reality, and between distinct disciplinary modes of inquiry, based as that allegory is on the interrelatedness of pedagogy and love, offers an especially interesting point of departure for showing where those threads have lead today, when performance itself is being touted by its adepts as the supreme expression of knowledge. For such a historical perspective reveals how performance artists such as Gómez-Peña illuminate as dynamic forces the pedagogies and politics that heretofore remained more or less latent in the texts and teachings of the past. They exercise the “cultural leadership” referred to above by sensitizing us to the pedagogical and political implications of our very own performances in our many venues of (inter)action. In short, they demonstrate that performance in and of itself is the marker of a historical difference, the artistic emblem, in a sense, of our age.

This is, in sum, the theoretical and historical framework within which we situate this analysis of three contemporary stage artists, Edgar Chías, Angélica Liddell and Guillermo Gómez-Peña, who pose with unique acuity some of today’s most pressing questions: what are the crucial lessons to be taught/learned concerning intercultural relations in our age

of mass migration? What pedagogies are needed if we are to achieve the type of social “decency” that philosophers such as Avishai Margalit describe? By comparing the contributions of a Mexican playwright (Chías) and Spanish and Chicano performance artists (Liddell, Gómez-Peña) we mean to pay homage to the global parameters of this debate. Our aim is to honor cultural practitioners from around the world who have mined this topic in myriad ways and who, in their collectivity, have taught us to see the global scope of their concerns and the need for globally concerted answers and solutions, through humanistic and artistic endeavor and not just in courts and congress. The alignment of these analyses aims to mimic the progression toward an intensely *postdramatic* (Lehmann) stage craft, one that prioritizes the artist’s body here and now not merely for representing passively the “great debates of our times,” but rather to actively “perturb,” in Unamuno’s terms, so as to effect the type of “collisions” that compel us into border crossings of our own, as Gómez-Peña would say. Each of these works exposes itself to be inherently pedagogical through the theoretical models that it assimilates, restructures, and teaches: through its distinct way of compelling us, that is, to participate fully in the debate and thereby confront the causes and consequences of our own received and, too often, unexamined ways of perceiving, thinking, and knowing.

On borders and hospitality: Edgar Chías’s Ternura Suite

Nowhere in his 2011 two-part *Ternura Suite* does Edgar Chías refer explicitly to the topic of mobility and displacement. Yet the names of the play’s two anonymous characters, *Anfitrión* (Host) and *Visitante* (Visitor), are but the first of many telling indications of the Mexican playwright’s plans to strike at the heart of the problem while circumventing a more straight-forward approach. His characters emerge not as individuals but rather in terms of the roles they execute and represent. They direct our thoughts to a cosmos of social relations whose meaning as a unit, like *Ternura Suite*’s, is essentially oppositional. On and off Chías’s very loosely defined stage, types make sense mostly in tandem or as part of a

broader pattern: male versus female, rich versus poor, native against foreign, dominant and subordinate. These intersections are dramatized in *Ternura Suite* within the framework of our “época virtual,” where conventional notions of identity are blurred, emerging as it does from the fluid and fragmented interaction and understanding that virtuality foments. *Ternura Suite* is, in essence, a drama about the complexities of selfhood understood as a gestalt within an all-encompassing field of power relations. It portrays a world situated antagonistically along borders where those relations and their corresponding identities, both individual and collective, are sharply profiled. *Ternura Suite* is, in short, a drama about borders in their dual function of separating and conjoining.

These notions are allegorized broadly in a dramatic action enveloped from the start by *Ternura Suite*'s aura of the uncanny. Visitor claims to have been lead to this encounter by his instinct, from afar, having arrived undocumented and in need of help, yet he claims also to be her neighbor. He identifies himself by different names; she shifts between “tú” and “usted.” The uncertainty we experience watching characters who know and/or do not know one another is augmented by the unreliability of a dialogue that flaunts its disregard for the basic rules of felicity in social discourse.

Cognitive dissonance is one thing that is certain, paradoxically, along with the Hitchcockian suspense paradigm that it fuels. The plot spirals downwards from situations that spark Host's—and our—initial discomfort toward fear and ultimate horror, along a chain of interlocking moments of tense emotional exchange rooted in acts of perception. Host attempts to extricate herself from her intruder, awkwardly. Her mounting anxiety seems to ignite in Visitor an aggression that is initially verbal, ultimately physical. As the characters begin to mirror each other psychologically we witness an emerging symbiosis that is inscribed in the text, insofar as her emotions and impressions of him are filtered through his speech. This process culminates at the play's midpoint when Visitor coerces Host to ventriloquize his requests for erotic satisfaction while sodomizing her. Yet symbiosis yields suddenly to inversion as the play's core paradigm at the start of round

two, as Host, with a kick to the groin and aerosol in hand, seizes control of the situation so as to return the favor of Visitor's sadistic violation. She does so by perforating him with a drill, in a blood-and-flesh splattered/cell-like space, but not before the subjugated Visitor, with background support from the bolero "Sabor a mí," glosses the scene's deeper meaning. Locked in a fatal embrace, intertwined through a concatenation of actions and reactions, the two individuals seem to allegorize an appalling portrait of the hybridity of the various polarities they represent—victim and culprit, native and foreign, self and other—on some Goyesque or Dantesque psycho-mythical plane of meaning.

Dante's portrayal of the punishment of thievery as an unending cycle of metamorphoses may in fact hold special relevance for what it reveals about aggressive behavior as portrayed by Chías. In *Inferno* XXIV, penitent thieves run naked in the woods tormented by hideous serpents who are themselves the transformed victims of other serpent thieves. The process of becoming each other's other is initiated as serpents transfix the bodies of their victims with their own pungent tail. Through their mortal sting, they convert individuals to ashes that recover their humanly shape, only to be subjected again and again to more of the same. Thieves are forced to see themselves, as if in a gallery of proliferating mirrors, as the embodiment of the violations they have inflicted, having robbed their victim of their identity by altering or "interrupting it," as Jacques Derrida would say. They dramatize a grotesque act of poetic justice by *performing*, in short, the problematic of selfhood that is fundamental in Chías's play and that has preoccupied Derrida, Maurice Blanchot, and Emmanuel Levinas, philosophers whose "turn to ethics," as Sara Ahmed has stated, is "bound up with the figure of 'the other'" (138).

The cognitive processes by which the power dynamics of alterity is mapped, as an exercise in spatial relations, are as central to Ahmed's reading of these thinkers as they are fundamental for understanding *Ternura Suite*. Visitor's perceptions of Host's reaction to his arrival in the opening lines set in motion a Host-Guest dynamic that is suggested paradoxically

cally by her failure—perhaps refusal—to recognize him as her neighbor. She unwittingly bestows upon him the status of the *stranger among us* and continues to do so in her insistence on their location, especially when she takes command of the situation at the beginning of part two. Her seemingly gratuitous reminder that they are in her home foregrounds what we have come to understand implicitly. They know each other according to the place-specific roles upon which the pact of hospitality is predicated. Host's home can be equated, in short, to a figurative atrium or control station along any of the numerous borders that transect our network of social interactions, where native and guest, self and other, host and visitor negotiate differences, identify mutual needs and engage in exchange—or fail to do so—as prescribed by the laws of ethics, whether “conditional” or “unconditional.”

That Host and Visitor fail utterly to uphold the most basic tenets of this pact goes without saying. Their toxic intercourse can only be understood as a perversion in light of the positive model that they invoke, and not just by negative example or implication. Aiming above and beyond the law, at what Derrida terms “unconditional hospitality,” Visitor appeals to Host's sense of moral duty by reminding her of the essential vulnerability of individuals rendered invisible within the power structures of receiving nations. He refers to the luxury of knowledge that appears to segregate yet actually intertwines insofar as it includes her knowledge of him: of his needs, of the penurious circumstances that condition his behavior, of his potential and hopes for redemption through material well-being and education, and, most importantly, of his rights within a legal code of ethics. They are indeed enmeshed by this code, legal or moral, via the consequences of their behavior, a fact that they both use as a defense and that they both recognize at the play's end: [Visitante] “Tú sueño es mío. Tu vida es mía. [...] Siempre vas a tenerme dentro de tu cabeza gritándote: Recuérdame. [...] [L]levas ya sabor a mí...” (51).

In short, Chías dramatizes the border as an interpersonal contact zone that is, above all, cognitive and ideological. His approach to this topic mirrors the arguments of social scien-

tists, such as Saskia Sassen and Wendy Brown, who invite us to view borders as “selectively permeable” realities, ubiquitous events, and embodied experiences, increasingly so within our geopolitical framework. Within the field of Spanish and Latin American performing arts, Chías is not unique nor is he a pioneer in using the stage to address the ethical challenges of mobility in today’s world. What sets him apart, however, is the way he inverts the Host-Visitor roles and thereby mirrors Derrida’s etymologically based deconstruction of the “guest-master” compound that is inherent in the Indo-European root of the term *host* and in its derivatives. As Derrida and Chías both claim, this compound is predicated on a pact that challenges our conventional notions of place, belonging, and sovereignty, and corresponding ideas regarding selfhood. By opening up their home, hosts relinquish sovereignty to the point of becoming a recipient of the very hospitality they offer. Their “selfhood” is “interrupted” as they slip back and forth across the threshold separating guest and master, an interruption that Chías reflects as if through the concave mirrors of an *esperpento*: to show the pact as having gone grotesquely awry.

It goes without saying that place is a critical element for dramatists, based as their craft is on live bodies in real spaces, and this is especially true for Chías. The play’s stage directions along with the characters’ interventions directed frequently to the audience carry the process of erasure to another level, by smearing the boundary between spectator and spectacle and highlighting thereby the immediacy of a drama—our drama—unfolding here and now. This is bolstered by the complicity that Chías invokes at the play’s end, where Host solicits the audience’s judgement regarding her final determination: “¿Termino? ¿Termina él? [...] ¿Qué, qué se hace en estos casos?” (58-59). Through this final gesture not only does Chías defy further our preconceived notions concerning sovereignty and selfhood in relation to our own others. He anticipates what Angélica Liddell and Guillermo Gómez-Peña exploit fully in the various multidimensional bridges that they construct through performance.

On social decency: Angélica Liddell's Y los peces salieron a combatir contra los hombres

In the introductory voiceover that precedes this three-part performance, “Angélica” (the name accorded to this voice in the written text) surveys what will prove to be the piece’s constituent and unifying elements. First and foremost is the acutely self-referential framework linked to the performance-as-process basis for such pieces and signaled in the work’s first line: “¿Cómo empiezo?” (1).⁴ Liddell foregrounds her performative self as the prism through which this work’s main theme, the humanitarian crisis spawned by mass migration, is experienced and *taught*. She self-presents as “es-pasmódica Angélica, una puta hablando con el señor Puta” (3), that is, as a self split between the two voices that comprise the text: on the one hand, the voice of an invisible *Angélica* or outer consciousness that envelopes the production; on the other, the demons that torment her conscience and that are enacted by *La Puta*, whose monologue is directed throughout to an imaginary *señor Puta*. The former (“Angélica”) serves as the audience’s reassuring albeit latent point of moral reference intended to rationalize, perhaps exorcize, all the absurdly chaotic and despicable thoughts contained within her prodigious and traumatized imagination. The latter emerges as the mordantly farcical embodiment of those very images and of their corresponding impulses and habits. In short, Angélica functions as our anchor in a symbiosis not unlike the Chías’ host-visitor construct. Through her grotesquely *wonderlandish* imagination (Liddell’s name derives from the Alice Liddell who inspired Lewis Carroll’s masterpiece), she *hosts* a prismatic array of experiences that cohere around this piece’s pivotal image, anthropomorphized fish whose eyes result from the many immigrants they have devoured and who threaten to devour, in turn, racist Spaniards vacationing along the nation’s sun-drenched southern shores. The “peces con ojos” become Liddell’s warning concerning the apocalyptic upheaval she envisions as unfolding in today’s world, a war between nature and humanity similar to what Shakespeare prophesized in *Macbeth*: “Y los caballos de

Duncan [...] rebeldes a obediencia, como si declarasen la guerra al hombre" (3).

On its most basic level, our journey through Angélica's dystopian soul may in fact be understood to represent a singularly cohesive and highly nuanced lesson concerning intercultural conflict along national borders. The prominence of the Spanish flag within the work's satirical patchwork of images and ideas serves as a constant reminder of the many perfidious, antihumanitarian things ordained in the defense of nationhood, nationalism, national identities and borders. Initial references to coastal tourism anticipate the constant ridicule of Spain's bourgeoisie, of its fetish for "belleza," "justicia," and "riqueza" and of its hypocritical religiosity. Such references convey Liddell's searing condemnation of inhumane corporate capitalism. Maps devoid of detail point to broader systems of representation that, like cartography, portray the dangerously limited frontiers of our global knowledge. Most importantly, maps become weapons by which educational systems propagate and legitimize such ignorance. All in all, these lessons outline implicitly basic principals of social decency by demonstrating with absurdly indecent examples the dehumanizing and humiliating practices of treating individuals not *as* objects but, much worse, *as if* they were objects.

This distinction is pivotal for social decency as analyzed by Avishai Margalit in "Tratar a los seres humanos como si fuesen no humanos,"⁵ and his observations bear consideration for the light they shed on Liddell's work. The point of departure for Margalit's discussion is the deceptively simple yet fundamental problem of perception. How we *see* others predetermines the way we treat them. For the sake of social decency, our charge is to neutralize our socially conditioned impulses of *seeing* physical attributes—an individual's color, contours, size, shape—by retraining our eyes to *see* instead into the human soul ("el aspecto humano de un ser humano" [Margalit 83]). Liddell openly ridicules "indecent" processes of perceiving, most notably in La Puta's account of having witnessed an African woman emerge from the sea like a "lombriz enorme y negra"—"no la vimos llegar"—dragging

herself along the sand—“se arrastraba como un reptil”—and dragging behind her the umbilical cord of the child she was bearing—“lo llevaba como un colgajo entre las piernas”—only to give birth and ultimately die “a nuestros pies.” “Estábamos allí, sentados, *mirando, mirándolo* todo,” La Puta insists in a defiant defense of her own, unexamined way of seeing: “Se lo aseguro, señor Puta, no nos movimos de nuestras tumbonas, así que lo pudimos *ver* todo muy bien” (5-7; emphasis mine).

La Puta’s difficulty *seeing* this African woman in relation to any universally human condition—“los negros no sufren como nosotros”—anticipates her quandary regarding the humanitarian make-up of poor people in general—“los pobres no tienen alma” (22)—and Africans in particular: “Porque los negros también son hombres, ¿verdad señor Puta? / Eso nadie lo niega” (16). To be clear, these questions form part of a debate that La Puta sustains with her imaginary interlocutor, one that is prompted by a vexing problem—“Escuche lo que dicen, señor Puta [...]. Descubrieron que el cadáver no presentaba signos exteriores de violencia”—that she sets out to resolve with what tools of deductive analysis she manages to mobilize. In its darkly humorous overtones, her debate echoes early modern disputations concerning the human nature of new world subjects while it strikes at the core of the very “as if” problem posed by Margalit in his own philosophical disquisition. As the Israeli philosopher affirms, the power to humiliate, a supremely *indecent* gesture, is contingent upon our acknowledgement of the human nature of our victims: “La humillación presupone, por definición, la humanidad del humillado” (Margalit 95). His concluding remarks concerning Holocaust victims is especially pertinent to Liddell’s portrayal of degradation as one of contemporary society’s primary ills:

La especial crueldad hacia las víctimas en los campos de trabajos forzados y en los campos de exterminio y, especialmente, las humillaciones que tuvieron lugar en ellos, sucedió en la forma en que lo hizo *porque los implicados eran seres humanos*. Los animales no hubieran recibido

el mismo trato. Ellos no tienen una *mirada acusadora*.
(Margalit 97; my emphasis)

In the end, the gaze that Magarlit posits in and of itself as uniting victim and victimizer—guest and host, in Chías' terms—may be related to the vicious cycle of aggression portrayed in *Y los peces*, involving third-world “peces con ojos de hombres” and the first-world predators they threaten. Liddell makes this connection herself with characteristic irony (through La Puta's voice), where degrading ways of seeing each other become a double-sided mirror, a boundary that bonds:

Por eso se ahogan al pie de nuestras tumbonas,
porque no saben que ya son hombres
y quieren ser hombres como nosotros.
Resentidos, señor Puta,
para humillarnos, señor Puta.
Como si nosotros no fuéramos hombres como ellos. (19;
my emphasis)

Dwelling on the bo(a)rders of the self

The idea of the border as a *place* and not a *space*, as a site “from which something begins its presencing” and not “from which it stops,”⁶ is pivotal for Homi Bhabha's portrayal of turn-of-the-century culture as a “moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion.”⁷ Given the unique value accorded to space and location by performing arts, it is especially telling that Bhabha should channel his discussion of contemporary culture through the image of the dwelling. He focuses in particular on liminal dwellings inhabited by subaltern folks, the “recesses of domestic space” that Nadine Gordimer and Toni Morrison transform, symbolically, into “sites for history's most intricate invasions” (9). For Bhabha, such spaces stand at “the crossroads of history and literature, bridging the home and the world,” to become the “discursive ‘image’” of a new geopolitical order. They symbolize, more importantly, a

series of “confusions” that are equally fundamental for the performances in question here:

Uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other [...] the psyche and the social develop an interstitial intimacy. It is an intimacy that questions binary divisions through which such spheres of social experience are often spatially opposed. These spheres of life are linked through an in-between temporality that takes the measure of dwelling at home, while producing an image of the world of history [...]. And the inscription of this borderline existence inhabits a stillness of time and a strangeness of framing. (13)

Bhabha is unswerving in terms of the moral imperative that he sees as devolving from these conditions if we are to bring our creative practices and modes of inquiry into line with today’s cultural realities and exigencies. We must “think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities,” he insists, by focusing “on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences,” on the “strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself” (1-2).

With these ideas in mind and stepping back into Chías’ realm momentarily, one might see in the confining and non-descript arena where anonymous subjectivities collide the negative shadow of the very complicity that Bhabha outlines here. The silhouetted “discursive image” of the world that Chías develops in his decentered or “recessive” dwelling represents a singularly incisive portrayal of the binary paradigms of seeing, thinking and acting that Bhabha speaks of in his essay. Online images of the staging of this play (“Sótano foro,” “*Ternura Suite*”) demonstrate how stage crews have sought to *enclose* the spectators into a work that, as mentioned, paradoxically *opens* itself up to them. The confines of a claustrophobic performance space serve to realize Chías’ particular fusion of “inside and outside, inclusion and exclu-

sion" as a shared and experienced "image of the world of history."

Yet Chías' is a text-based piece of dramatic literature written by a playwright for the stage, an essential distinction to be made with regard to works that stage artists such as Liddell and Gómez-Peña craft from, for, through or within the performance itself.⁸ Whatever processual element might come into play in a drama such as *Ternura Suite*, the gap separating representation and reality remains inevitably intact. If it is true that his highly charged language begins to achieve a reality of its own, thanks to its "deslumbrantes cortocircuitos" (Villoro 9) that "violate" us (Flores), Chías in fact points to what is fully realized through performance, where representation becomes our reality and where drama's processual dimension is realized as immediate.

Liddell demonstrates this in her enactment of Angélica/La Puta, where the processual dimension is embedded first and foremost in a lyricism of words and their performance aimed at highlighting the reciprocity of orality and corporality.⁹ In her texts, for instance, Liddell exploits the gamut of phonetic resources—repetition, alliteration, and anaphora are the most obvious—to foreground her discourse in its full sonority, most significantly in the interest of jarring or paradoxical juxtapositions designed invariably to "perturb":

Habría que civilizar a los peces, señor Puta.

Habría que enseñar a los peces a reconocer la bandera, señor Puta.

Habría que dejar de comer peces, señor Puta.

Habría que envenenar a todos los peces antes de volver a comernos un solo pez, señor Puta. (18)

Like Dario Fo, known for his reappropriation of the *giullari* craft of yore, Liddell too bestows new meaning on the primordial techniques of a time-worn instructive buffoonery through what we might term a personalized and unorthodox *mester de juglaría*. In doing so, she exploits the text's potential for dissonance in order to maximize the auditory impact of her language on the audience. She modulates the tone, timbre, amplitude, and rhythm of her voice in extremis, emu-

lating the flow of a river whose changes of course and intensity shape our experience and structure the drama in unanticipated ways. Throughout much of the performance and certainly while in her most *putesco* (satirical) mode, she limits her movements on stage, preferring instead full frontal communication at the center of her self-defined agora, allowing her spectators to fathom fully the muscular meanings of her facial expression. The relative fixity of her body from the torso down; the stiffness of her taffeta gown whose sleeveless and ruffled red bodice and red and yellow full skirt, like her starched ruff, refer to the most rancid forms of nationalism; her long thin arms circling wildly around her head; indeed, even the blood-red lipstick that outlines her mouth most *Spanishly*: these and other techniques accentuate our sense of the carnivalesque while they frame the performer's face, drawing our focus to the most dynamic elements on the stage, namely, her expanding and contracting eyes and mouth, the instruments of her speaking, seeing, and knowing.¹⁰

In short, all that is hilariously disruptive is tied ultimately in *Y los peces* to the theme of discommunication, through an inherently dramatic language and an equally dramatic voice. It will not surprise, therefore, that Liddell should reflect openly in this piece on the theme of language and communication, nor that such reflections might become a measure of the performance's progression toward something of a denouement. Early on, in some of her darkly humorous ponderings, La Puta identifies language as the cornerstone to the power dynamics that define intercultural relations within the geopolitical sphere and in our age of mass migration. Hegemonies, as her questions suggest, have to do with our being "dentro" or "fuera del lenguaje" just as they also have to do with a host of identity markers—skin color, for instance—within the economies of social interaction ("los negros están fuera del lenguaje" [9]). As Liddell's performance approaches its finale, farce yields to introspective melancholy, irony collapses under the weight of unmediated denunciation, all in accordance with what is, for the writer/artist, the most trying question of all:

¿Cómo superar la información?
 ¿Cómo convertir la información en horror? [...]
 ¿Cómo escapar de la demagogia y de la estúpida responsabilidad mesiánica del escritor? (22)

All questions concerning language revert ultimately to the means and meanings of the performer's communication here and now and to the ethical basis of that communication vis-à-vis the cultural realities of today. By broaching her own authorial dilemma, Angélica closes the gap processually between herself and La Puta, between "her body and her cultural nightmares" (Gómez-Peña, "Manifesto"), to take up residence in the suspended or "interstitial intimacy" of a dwelling that straddles boundaries conjoining the "psyche and the social" (Bhabha 13), a dwelling that is comprised fully and solely by her own words.

Conclusion: From Gibraltar to Tijuana

Half way through *Border Brujo*, bedecked with sun glasses, a hot pink feather boa, and a tropical, trinket-laden necklace (bananas, bones, and animal-teeth), Gómez-Peña turns to ask his audience imploringly: "can anyone document me please? [...] can anyone be so kind as to authenticate my existence?" (58-59) In this one brief intervention the artist synthesizes some of the most meaningful contributions of playwrights and performance artists across the globe who treat the stage as a privileged site for contesting identities in the face of their erasure, walls in the face of humanitarian crises, authenticity in relation to hybridity. He reminds us, for instance, that documentation is a form of resistance that unfolds along the two-way road linking artists and their communities. It is a process effected through a language that, like Liddell, Gómez-Peña foregrounds through rhetorical strategies that magnify its sonority and resonance dramatically. In terms of the relationship between language and the power dynamics of interculturalism today, we are reminded here of the verbal acrobatics of an artist who dons, like costumes, diverse registers in order to mimic Tijuana barkers and U.S. tourists, Anglofied Spanish and Hispanized English,

Nahuatl, the pachuco and the hard-core political activist. He mixes and matches the languages and tones of both aggression and resistance, of minority entrenchment and hegemonic racism: of all that constitutes borderdom in its most trivial and tragic manifestations. Most importantly, he intertwines this profusion of voices, dialects and communicative registers into an extravagantly carnivalesque and kaleidoscopic image of his own prismatic Chilango-turned-Chicano identity, to produce the pulsating spectacle of a self that suffers for society's sins:

I'm here in prison
 right in the center of the wound
 right in the crack of the 2 countries
 I am a prisoner of thought
 a prisoner of art
 a prisoner of a media war. (65)

In the end, whether on the shores of Gibraltar or the streets of Tijuana, the image of artists haunted by their sense of their own social obligation reveals that moral dilemma to be, essentially, a question of performance itself. Gómez-Peña advances this idea in his own terms when posing what is one of today's most critical questions: where to "draw the line between curiosity & exploitation? / between dialog & entertainment? / between democratic participation & tokenism?" (57). With regard to today's cultural challenges, it is of paramount significance that he should pose these questions to the gods of modern knowledge and teaching: editors, curators, collectors, candidates, and anthropologists. It very well may be the case that, as a borderline performance artist, Gómez-Peña is uniquely empowered to speak to them on our behalf of the "otherness" that "keeps leaking into the country into [our] psyche," of the simple fact that "[our] relationship with otherness has reached a point of crisis" (61). Speaking on behalf of a generation of artists, he shows that performance has become a privileged means for processing—reconciling, resisting, or perhaps even extolling—the many borders that we embody. Speaking as a "responsible citizen," he teaches us that we in fact do just that as we engage in our daily social

interactions through performances that are inherently political and supremely pedagogical.

NOTAS

1. All further textual citations refer to this edition of *Border Brujo*'s published script.
2. I refer from here on to the video recording of *Border Brujo* available on disc 1 of the 4-disc *Border Art Clásicos*.
3. See Brooker and Foster for a useful overview.
4. I cite from the version of *Y los peces* available online through Artea's *Archivo virtual*.
5. See Margalit, chapter 6.
6. Bhabha (1) cites Martin Heidegger ("Building, Dwelling, Thinking"), in the epigraph to the first chapter of his essay, titled "Introduction: Locations of culture."
7. Tuan and Augé offer useful analyses of the notion of place in relation to space.
8. See Cornago for a full discussion of this topic.
9. Cornago (29) makes this point in the following terms: "A través de recursos como la repetición, el trabajo con la materialidad sonora de las palabras, de su comunicación íntima y cercana, de sus dimensiones sorpresivas y paradójicas, de su espectacularidad poética, la escena trata de hacer visible la palabra hasta convertirla en un acontecimiento."
10. My gratitude to the staff at Madrid's Centro de Documentación Teatral for making available the video recording of the April 15, 2004 performance of Liddell's piece.

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