

# RACE

AND CLASSIFICATION



## The Case of Mexican America

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With a Preface by William B. Taylor

## 9

## Pose and Poseur

*The Racial Politics of Guillermo Gómez-Peña's Photo-Performances*

Jennifer González and Guillermo Gómez-Peña

*(In this conversation, an art theorist and a performance artist discuss race, hybridity, border culture, globalization-gone-wrong, and the politics of representation. This conversation took place during November 2005, via e-mail and phone.)*

JG: I'm interested in the way race, as a visual discourse appears in the works you call "photo-performances." These images create the conditions of a non-narrative yet highly iconographic interlace between performer and camera. The photo-performance can be seen as an extension of your earlier works, including what you call your first self-conscious performative gesture in the photograph *El vaquero pablito* (fig. 9.1) in which you pose as a young child astride a children's artificial horse wearing a toy gun and cowboy hat in Puebla, Mexico. Your body is clearly out of scale with the toy horse, and the hat you wear is perched ironically, but the image also evokes a melancholic or a nostalgic yearning for childhood innocence. How does this image encapsulate your interest in the role of the photographic pose? Is it possible to argue that the photo-performance is a new genre? Are there artistic precedents that shape this contemporary practice?

GP: Mexican culture has always been extremely performative. From the dramas of saints found in colonial churches and the *costo* paintings to the pop photographs of the early twentieth century depicting burlesque divas, not to mention the *calendarios* (*calendares*) of Hidalgo in the 1940s, Mexico has always been fascinated with the staging of extreme performance personas.



Figure 9.1. *El vaquero pablito*. Shot in Puebla by a street photographer, 1975. Photo Courtesy of La Pocha Nostra.

Sometimes these personas embody idealized or demonized identities; other times, they depict imaginary identities codified in colonial fantasy. This performativity is in my DNA. My own family has developed a rich iconographic history of staged photography, which definitely influenced my sensibility. In fact, I've been working on a long-term project selecting and digitizing my family photos that go back to the late 1800s. With the help of some relatives I've archived more than three hundred photos, spanning a century of family history. Many of these images are so self-consciously dramatic and stylized that they could easily compete in outrageousness with my photo-performance work. One day, I'd love to publish a book juxtaposing my family photos with my photo-performances.

Other influences in my performance work include Chicano/border pop and street culture, specially *lute rider* and "pinto" iconography, underground

comix, velvet painting, and rare border documentaries. I love this combination of high style and boldness. I'm also interested in the work of Mexican political activists like Superbarrio, Marcos, and Fray Tormenta, who utilize performance strategies and symbolic gestures to distribute ideas and generate public dialogue.

In terms of contemporary art, I feel a certain kinship with other performance artists who have ventured into photography as an extension of their performance work. Ana Mendota and Marina Abramovich come to mind; Ron Athey, and Franco Bui as well. . . . And of course, our conceptual grandfather *à la* Marcel Duchamp's "Rrose Sélavy" was perhaps the first avant-garde "photo-performance" ever.

JG: There is no spoken or written narrative in the photo-performance, yet each tableau produced by the participants suggests scenes or a sequence of "acts." The camera apparatus participates as the framing device for a series of elaborate poses on the part of the various players. Each series is comprised of a set of related images, with costume elements and props being recycled and shared by different actors so that there's a kind of identity slippage—across gender and ethnic lines—between the various imaginary characters portrayed. This sharing and recycling offers viewers a set of clues about the performance event itself. It's clear that the actors and the photographer play out their collaboration in real time. We're seeing images that are striking on their own, but that share with conceptual art an emphasis on the process of production as much as on the final result; the focus lies on the interface between the performers and the camera, on the act of posing *per se*, on the simultaneously intimate and public dialog that takes place in this relation of lens and body. How do you conceive of the relation between the kinds of pose your performances enact, and the idea of posing in general? How are these images both like and unlike portraiture?

GP: In my "photo-performance" projects (as in my video projects), my goal has been to attempt to find a more enlightened and complex "interface" between my live performance work and the camera, one beyond merely witnessing, illustrating, documenting, or even "interposing" performance. The main epistemological question infusing these projects has been: how to create a more surprising and "dialogical" relationship between the performance artist who creates both the concept and the implied narratives and offers his body/identity/magic/re-facto in sacrifice to the camera, and the photographer

who filters it, frames it and, in doing so, inevitably re-creates it. In this sense, I see the photographer not just as a technician but as an accomplice, and the camera as my implied audience. I constantly challenge them, and invite them to challenge me. I question their power to frame me, to "capture" me, to explicate me. I like to question the power relations inherent in the relationship that exists between the performance artist and the photographer.

More than looking for a pose that works for the camera, I write in advance some conceptual parameters and then, once in the studio, I invite my performance colleagues working with me to play within these parameters. I ask them to develop a sense of being in the space, a certain presence and an attitude, a way of relating to objects and costumes, of connecting symbolically to other bodies. It's like a jamming session indirectly coordinated by me. This is precisely where I feel that the originality of my photographic images lies. They come from a different place than traditional portraiture. They're generated by a different methodology. That's why for me it's extremely important to only work with people I know and like; with artists and photographers who are very familiar with my performance work and whom I trust.

Photo shoots have always helped me clarify my performance personas and have forced me to pay attention to every symbolic detail in my costume and to the political and cultural implications of the human body as a site for creation. In this sense, performance photos are like heightened excerpts of a live performance that never took place. That's precisely why I call them "photo-performances."

We can divide my photographic work into two main periods prior to 2010. I engaged in all kinds of experiments with the interaction of photography and performance; among others, I photographed my performance personas within the context of an installation. I took these same performance personas and inserted them in public spaces, in politically and historically charged sites and buildings. I juxtaposed them with "normal" people and with local eccentricities I came across during the performance "intervention." I also staged photo shoots in the middle of a live performance and allowed a photographer to shoot a portion of the piece as a performative action to be witnessed by a live audience. I invited fashion and socialite photographers to accompany me and my performance colleagues on public adventures, hitting all types of clubs in costume and staging impromptu tableaux vivants. We asked the photographers to go along with the fiction and behave as if they were part of a "celebrity" event. Once in New York we worked with real paparazzi and crashed

all the celebrity parties in our *Mexterminator* regalia. It was a very sad night because most people in those circles related to us in a very frivolous and at times humiliating manner—to them we were like experimental mariachis—but the photos were fantastic.

Then in 2002 my friend, the Spanish curator Orlando Britto, challenged me to begin to think of my photo-performances as art “objects” in themselves. He invited me to create portfolios strictly for the art world, to think of large formats and complete series; to professionalize my photographic process so to speak. He actually commissioned the first five portfolios.

**JG:** Although the images are clearly well planned and staged, “jamming” implies improvisation. How important is improvisation to this process? Can you say more about this in relation to your performances in general?

**GP:** The same methodology I utilize to create images in a live performance I tend to use in my photo shoots. Although our performance work is scripted and planned, there’s always space for improvisation. In the past few years, we’ve invited our audiences to co-create the performance with us, right there, as it’s taking place. We invite them to try out props and costumes and to develop a fictional identity. Once they’ve altered their identities in situ, we invite them to insert themselves inside our tableaux vivants and to alter the dynamics of the image and the fate of the performance. It’s exciting and dangerous. It can easily turn into bad art, but we take the risk, and most of the time, it works.

Now in the photo sessions it’s the same energy and locans. If we invite local eccentrics and non-artists to partake in our madness, and we often do, we treat them respectfully as collaborators and not just as models. We invite them to co-create images and play with costumes, props, symbols, nudity, body markings. Besides the core members of *La Pocha Nostra* (Michelle Caballos, Violeta Luna, Roberto Sifuentes, Emiko K. Lewis, Silvia Antolin Guerra, Orlando Britto, and Gabriela Salgado) and our artist associates in various cities and countries where the photo shoots have taken place, you can find in my photos all kinds of interesting people with performative personalities, including carterers, intellectuals, farm workers, sex radicals, activists, eccentric socialites . . . even lawyers (fig. 9.2). One of the main models in “Post-México en X-paña,” Luna, is a very prominent criminal lawyer in Madrid. In “Eihao-tehno,” the “neo-Victorian tourist” is Rebecca Schmit, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author.



**Figure 9.2.** *Talavosolo-egualada*. From the portfolio “Post-México en X-paña,” created in Madrid with Javier Caballero, 2005. Photo Courtesy of Orlando Britto-Duroño and Galena Artificio, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria.

**JG:** The settings for many of the images are very intimate spaces, small rooms, houses, or even just a simple backdrop. How does the scene in which the actors appear come into play when you’re thinking about the constructed universe of the personas? How important is the stage set?

**GP:** When I began to work more purposely with photographers to develop series for galleries and museums, my aesthetics shifted a bit. I began to place my performance personas in the limbo of a black box theater or against the white walls of a gallery, because I wanted the viewer to concentrate on the complexity of the performance personas. The adorned body, the intervened body, riddled with cultural and political implications was the subject matter. The “space” surrounding them was meant to be a “neutral zone” as opposed to culturally specific locations as in my prior work. In a few instances I’ve chosen to place these personas inside a house or a highly designed environment, but

these surroundings become more prosthetic extensions of the hyper-identity of the performance persona; the backdrop of the living diorama as to speak.

JG: To date you've conducted three photo-performances specifically for gallery exhibitions: one in Mexico called "Post-Mexicans" with photojournalist Miguel Velasco, one in San Francisco called "Ethno-Techno" with fashion photographer James McCaffrey, and the series "Post-México en X pólo" at the international art fair ARCO Madrid with photographer Javier Calduero.<sup>1</sup> I understand that two more projects are in the works and will appear in 2006. For each photo-performance you select a different kind of photographer and a different set of cultural issues that ground the work in its specific locale. Is the photo-performance always thematically linked to its geographical region? Is the photo-performance ultimately a kind of site-specific practice?

GP: As part of this new process, I've become much more specific in terms of my choice of the photographer, and the guest performers. All these decisions are carefully made, taking into consideration the geographic location and the subject matter I wish to explore. My most recent photographic project took place last month in the Gran Canaria (Canary Islands), one of the main entryways for African and Arab immigrants into Spain. Since I wanted to explore Spain's fear of immigration, I chose to work with a Canarian photographer who was familiar with the issue and with my work, and I invited immigrant artists to work with La Pocha. So you may say that there is a certain site-specificity in the new work, but at the same time I see all my photo-performances as part of a larger project which I'm in the process of articulating. The working title of the overall project is "The New Barbarians." Next year City Lights will publish a catalogue comprising the first five photo-performances.

JG: If theatricality presents the critical point of departure for you, it's not because it's something prized in either documentary or fine art photography—or in its critical reception. Michael Fried's recent essay "Barthes' Functum" revisits that author's negative discussion of theatricality in photographic production noting that "A further dimension of Barthes' antimaterialism emerges when we consider his engagement with the pose, the theatrical element in photography par excellence."<sup>2</sup> Fried points out that the theatricality Barthes rejects in photographic practice co-exists with his recognition that photography is, by nature, an inherently theatrical medium. This apparent contradiction is to be found in his discussion of the pose. Fried cites Barthes at length,

who writes: "Now, once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes. I instantly constitute myself in the process of 'posing,' I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image. This transformation is an active one: I feel that the Photograph creates my body or mortifies it, according to caprice."<sup>3</sup> He also writes, "In front of the lens, I am at the same time; the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art. In other words, a strange action: I do not stop imitating myself, and because of this, each time I am (or let myself be) photographed, I invariably suffer from a sensation of inauthenticity, sometimes of imposture (comparable to certain nightmares)."<sup>4</sup> In addition to revealing a productive intellectual paradox concerning photography's theatrical qualities, Barthes' articulation of the experience of the pose could also serve as a remarkably accurate description of the experience of being racially stereotyped: the body is made to perform, to become mortified as a racial type, to be self-imitative as a form of imposture, to live the nightmare of being little more than the projected image of others. How can we think of race as inextricably linked to costumes and the pose? Can you say more about race as a performance?

GP: As a performance artist I'm fully aware of the mechanisms of identity construction. Whether conscious or unconscious, for me, the constructions of race are always connected to the performativity of the racialized body, and in this sense costumes, props, make-up, body paint, cultural artifacts, and the symbolic positions we choose for the body are all part of it. Many "artists of color" are interested in the staging of authenticity; others in the debunking of authenticity. I'm more interested in the conscious staging of artificial authenticity, and in the questioning of this staging process, as it happens in front of an audience or in front of the camera.

JG: What do you see as the links, if any, between the theatricality of the photo-performance and the history of photography as it intersects with racial discourse?

GP: In the late 1980s and early 1990s I was part of that whole generation of artists (James Luna, Coco Fusco, Fred Wilson, etc.) who decided to engage in a dialogue with radical anthropologists such as Barbara Kirschmuller-Gomblett, James Clifford, Michael Taussig, and Boger Bartra. We were part of the larger project of challenging and deconstructing the colonial gaze of

anthropology, which we felt was analogous to the gaze of the "multi-cultural" art world of the time. I called our artistic project "reverse anthropology." The basic premise was for the performance artist to assume a fictional "center" and to push so-called mainstream culture to the margins, and treat it as exotic and unfamiliar. The idea was for us to question the exoticizing gaze of the viewer by placing a disturbing mirror between "us" (the insurrected "object" of contemplation or study) and "them." Instead of explaining our artificially constructed "Otherness" to the audience, we were making art in hopes of explaining America to itself through our own displaced sensibilities. To attain this, we placed the audience member/viewer in the position of a "foreigner" or a "minority" in our performance country. This major epistemological intervention took place from 1988 to 1993. "Border Brújula" and "The Couple in the Cage" were classic pieces of this period.

In 1992, during the heated Columbus debates, Coco Fusco and I decided to remind the United States and Europe of "the other history of intercultural performance": the sinister human exhibits, pseudo-ethnographic tableaux vivants, and living dioramas that were so popular in Europe from the seventeenth century up to the early twentieth century and that in the United States evolved into more vulgar versions at the turn of the century . . . the dime attractions, roadside museums, and freak shows. However, the premise was similar: "Authentic primitives" were exhibited as human artifacts and mythical specimens in cages, taverns, salons, and fairs, as well as in museums of "Ethnography" and Natural History, next to samples of their homeland's flora and fauna. Their costumes and ritual artifacts were designed by the impresario creative and had nothing to do with reality (fig. 9.3). This sinister practice contributed greatly to the mythologies that Europeans and Americans constructed to rationalize their impression of inhabitants of the New World as cannibals or noble savages. Sadly many of these misperceptions are still present in contemporary mass media and pop cultural depictions of the Latino "Other."

My main concerns have shifted since, but every now and then, my interest in the dark and racist corners of ethnography and anthropology reappears in some of my new images. I recently did a photo shoot in Oaxaca with Mexican photojournalist Antonio Tzuc, subcomandante Marcos's first photographer. We invited several local and international performance artists to be part of it. Most of the images we created ended up being a commentary on the Orientalist gaze of the North imposed on Oaxaca. I remember asking the indigenous Oaxacan artists working with us in the photo session about their deepest



Figure 9.3. British Casuar and Specimen. Shot in Liverpool by Arturo Vazco, 2003. Photo: Courtney La Pocha Nostra.

concerns. Inevitably all of them wanted to deal with the troubling fascination that foreigners have for the indigenous body, the highly decorated and folkloric body of indigenous Oaxacans. This colonial history never ceases to end.

JG: As you say, the depiction of non-whites as culturally or racially inferior has a long history in which photography plays a central role. Given this history, can you say more about why you chose photography as a medium? Can you articulate how your "living dioramas" are similar to and different from the dioramas and racial typologies of the eugenicists?

GP: They're structurally similar in the sense that they're meant to be seen from all sides and the audience can get really close to the performers/objects, but their content and conceptual strategies are the opposite. They're meant to question the assumptions of the audience about cultural otherness, to problematize what I call "the intercultural moment."

Race and gender have always been an intrinsic element in everything I do. My aesthetic praxis involves ethnic and gender bending, cultural transvestitism, and power inversion of sorts. In my troupe's universe, so-called "people of color," immigrants, women, and gays are in control of the image or the living diorama. It's a performance universe controlled by us. The control is not overt or declared. It's an implied narrative. We try not to be pedagogic or self-righteous in our politics. But it's always there.

This praxis permeates everything I do, my live performances, my videos, my performance texts and my photo-performances. In a sense my photo-performances are an extension of my living dioramas and tableaux vivants. These dioramas were originally inspired by the sinister history of eugenics and human exhibits, but we now use them to deal with more contemporary issues such as racism and sexism as it is expressed in global media, corporate multiculturalism, and tourist culture.

The idea is to brighten features of fear and desire in the dominant imagination and "spectacularize" our "vulnerable identities," with the clear understanding that these identities have already been distorted by the invisible surgery of global media. We pose in dioramas as "artificial savages" making ourselves available for the audience to "explore" us, change our costumes and props, and even replace us for a short period of time.

As I wrote in *Cultura in Extremis*, "As performance artists, we wish to understand our new role and place in this culture of extreme spectacle that has been forced upon us . . . In the process of detecting the exact placement of

the new borders of tolerance (especially since September 11), it becomes necessary to open up a sui generis communal space—a space where the audience may engage in anthropo-poetical inquiry and reflect on their new relationship with cultural, racial and political Otherness."

Our aesthetic universe is a kind of *Blade Runner* is a *Tijuana* type world, inhabited by cultural projections and artificial savages, a border zone where old broken myths overlap with brand new mythologies. This *Pocha Nostra* aesthetic is a pastiche of many things, Norteño and Tex Mex chic intertwined with "Chicano Sci-Fi," SBM, Catholic pop, Japanese anime, you name it. It's excessive. A Catalan art critic labeled it "robo-baroque."

JG: Explain what it means to be "pocha" or "pochó." How does the history of "pochó" culture and (its parallel) Chicano culture in the U.S. influence your work? Do you consider your work "Chicano"? How does the category or identity of the "Chicano" raise specific issues or dilemmas for race politics?

GP: "Pochó" was originally a derogative term coined by Mexicans to describe those who abandon national territory. We were seen as traitors, "bastardized" Mexicans, the forgotten orphans of the omnipotent Mexican nation-state. And us, when I crossed the border, I unwittingly became a *Pochó* . . . In the 1990s, many of us reclaimed the word and began to use it as a term of empowerment. Remember the legendary *Pochó* mine created by the Chicano Secret Service performance comedy troupe during those years? This is precisely what my troupe did thirteen years ago. We expropriated the term to baptize ourselves. The Spanish neologism "*Pocha Nostra*" translates as either "our impurities" or "the vessel of cultural bastards." We love this poetic ambiguity. It reveals an attitude towards art and society: "Cross-racial, poly-gendered, experimental, y qué!"

Regarding the highly contested term *Chicano*, my position is more complex. Depending on which definition we use, I can be a *Chicano* . . . or not. Robin Salazar, the legendary journalist from the *Los Angeles Times* who was killed by the police in 1970, created one of my favorite definitions. He used to say that a *Chicano* was any politicized Mexican American who didn't have an Anglo image of him/herself. Rubén Guevara, the *Chicano* ethnohistoriologist, took this definition even farther. He believes that *Chicanismo* is a cultural and spiritual state of mind, a way of being in the world. I'd add that this way of being in the world, this attitude implies a certain border crossing fluidity, a capability to embrace syncretism and hybridity. It entails a certain border

knowledge of how to operate between two or more cultures and languages. In this sense, Chicanoismo can be a very useful conceptual model to deal with the complexities of the post 9/11 era. . . . I also feel that Chicanoismo has become a worldwide phenomenon. The South is moving into the space of the North and redefining it. In a sense all the Arabs, Africans, and South Asians living in Europe are also Chicanos in the widest sense of the term.

JG: This process of redefinition is of course where the struggle for power, for rights, and for recognition takes place, as we can see in the recent youth uprisings in France. Immigrant populations can never simply become "assimilated" as their "host" countries imagine or desire. Instead, the history of colonialism and of economic rapaciousness can be read across the bodies of those it has disempowered. Only the ignorant are blind to this scene of cultural engagement and disjunction. Think of all the ideological work that goes into maintaining this ignorance on the part of the general population.

GP: The racist and sexist iconography of corporate multiculturalism and tourist culture and their hidden texts blows my mind. When confronted with these types of images, I'm always thinking to myself, why is it that first we repress and exterminate other cultures, and then we romanticize them and turn them into exotic icons of consumer desire? How are these images made? The North stereotypes the South. The South internalizes these stereotypes and either reflects them back, mimics them unconsciously to appeal to the consumer appetite of the North, or turns them into "official culture." Meanwhile, identity gets lost or rather "reinvested" in this ricocheting display of reflections and refractions of fear and desire. I'm interested in exploring the intercultural border zone of fear and desire, the realm of the unconscious and the mythical, what lies beneath the geology of First/Third World relations.

JG: Is it not also the case that the South stereotypes the North, both as a form of critical response and conscious emulation?

GP: The South stereotypes the North as a mechanism of self-defense. It does it unconsciously. It's easier to deal with the anguish generated by economic oppression and cultural colonialism this way. It's easier to deal with "dumb gringos" than with ubiquitous corporations. But unlike the North, the South doesn't have the power to broadcast or enforce these stereotypes in the North.

Another interesting phenomenon takes place at the same time. Mexican artists engage in a conscious process of expropriation of dominant cultural

forms imposed by the North. We take all the pop cultural garbage sent by the United States, reorganize it, resignify it and turn it into art. As part of this expropriation process, we take the stereotypes generated in the North and turn them inside out and upside down. In my work Superman becomes Supermujado, defendant of migrant worker's rights, and Conan the Barbarian becomes "Chi-conan El Bárbaro."

JG: Your work takes the stereotype as a prototype, and then elaborates it to the point of parody. How is the stereotype crucial to your work?

GP: The engineering process of constructing a performance persona is quite complex, in terms of cutting and pasting and sampling stereotypes, prototypes, archetypes, pop mythology, and social reality.

First comes the process of gathering the information. My collaborators and I are acute observers of both pop culture and social reality. We're like artistic vambles devouring everything we encounter on the way: Television, film, rock & roll, hip-hop, journalism, anthropology, pornography, religious imagery . . . and of course, the history of the visual and performing arts. We keep diaries. We write down all the ideas and images we come across in the research process, and then we test them in the rehearsal space. What we do as performance artists is to "embody" all this information, and re-interpret it for a live audience, refracting fetishized constructs of otherness through the spectacle of our "heightened" bodies on display. People have described our personas as "intercultural poltergeists."

Now, unlike the hybrids and cyborgs engendered by pop culture, we create our composite creatures with the following formula in mind: one-quarter stereotype, one-quarter audience projection, one-quarter social reality, and one-quarter aesthetic artifact—in the words of cyber-theorist Sandy Stone, we create "poly-cultural cyborgs." Mexican anthropologist Roger Bartra refers to them as "artificial savages."

Why do we do all this? In the American imagination, Mexicans (and by extension other Latinos) are allowed to occupy two different but strangely complementary niches. We're irrationally violent, hypersexual, and highly infectious, or innocent, "natural," and shamanic (fig. 9-4). Often, the political artist simply replaces a negative stereotype with a positive one, without realizing that both are equally colonizing. I hate this oversimplification in so-called "political art" owned by non-Anglos. Instead, our work deals with composite images and hybrid personas that embody a multiplicity of symbols, and elicit





Figure 8.4. Shavon Diverth. From the portfolio "Ethno Techs: Evil Others and Identity Thefts," shot in San Francisco with James McCaffrey, 2004. Photo: Courtesy of Ofiando Brito-Jiménez and Galería Artífices, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria

multiple readings. Performance art is a terrain of ambiguity. My audiences and viewers are always asking themselves: What's wrong with this picture or with this tableau vivant? Why is this supermodel wearing a Zapotec mask? Why are all these designer barbarians rebelling against the gaze of the audience or the photographer?

JG: In addition to asking, "What's wrong with this picture?" your audience may also be thinking "Where do these people exist? What world do they inhabit?"

GP: I want to believe that they inhabit a parallel universe that's both imaginary and "real," a universe that exists somewhere between the phenomenological and the poetic. I see them as complex portraits of an emerging international sub-trans-culture. They're the "new barbarians" invading the North, contaminating their racial purity and destroying their alleged cultural and social order. But they're also part of my psyche. These personas are heightened versions of the multiple selves contained inside my psyche and my body, the other "Others" within me. As a border artist I have multiple selves and voices, some of which are extremely dark and performative and express themselves in my dreams and in my art. Now, going back to your question, do they really exist? In a sense they do. Are they mere emblematic or metaphorical representations of my internal life as it intersects with social reality? I'm not sure.

In contemporary art there are well-defined borders between the sociological and the metaphorical realms . . . or between the documentary and the fictional in film, and literature. These borders are meaningless to me. I just don't see them. I'm a bastard child of magical realism and sci-fi, of poetry and activism. For me, realism is just an ideological construction and a mere artistic strategy. I feel a certain discomfort with the kind of social or psychological realism that pretends to capture "reality" in capitals, and assumes that other forms of art are imaginary or fantastic.

JG: Let's talk about how these questions get played out in some specific images. In your "Post Mexican" series, the image titled "Trio Macabro" raises some of the questions of a cultural or political conflict between Mexico and the U.S. (fig. 8.5). You're in the foreground with your hands in boxing gloves, you gaze at the camera, poised as if ready to fight. One glove is adorned with the U.S. flag, the other the Mexican flag, suggesting that the right hand might be battling the left, or that you are yourself a hybrid of U.S. and Mexican culture ready to defend your complex, mixed identity. You're flanked by a figure



Figure 9.5. Trio Alacates. From the performance "Post-Mexicana," shot in Mexico City with Miguel Velasco, 2007. Photo: Courtesy of Ofende Britto Iltorio and Galería Artífices, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria.

wearing leathers, as if from an indigenous tribe, and a woman carrying lilies reminiscent of Diego Rivera's paintings (a recurring motif in your images). They're also both wearing signs of Asian culture: the red sun of Japan tattooed on the arm of the man, and a theatrical Japanese mask on the woman. Finally, a kind of Punk aesthetic of spiked wire bands and metallic accessories gives them a tough exterior. Vaguely menacing, your trio also performs humorously: the man carries a fly swatter as if it were a weapon. Can you say more about how this image and the other images in the "Post-Mexicans" series address the question of bicultural life? Why is there an emphasis on "post" in "Post-Mexicans"?

GP: The "Post-Mexicans" are essentially the post-national Mexicans: the millions of uprooted peasants who are constantly crossing the border back and forth, and who are not part of either nation-state. We're an emerging nation, a floating nation, a conceptual country that demands a new cartography to contain us, and a brand-new aesthetic to portray us. As an artist I'm dutifully trying to do both, draft a more enlightened and inclusive poetic cartography and contribute to developing a new aesthetic.

Mestizaje is a thing of the past. Binary models are no longer operative (i.e., Spanish/Indian; North/South; Mexican/Chicano, etc.). The *mestizaje* model was originally created to try to grapple with the fusion between the Spanish and the indigenous. But what do you do with the Post-Mexicans? We're the product of several racial mixtures and many overlapping subcultures. What are we then? Post-mestizaje? Meta-mestizaje? We're an expression of a double process: the Chicanoization and Americanization of Mexico and the Mexicanoization of the United States. Our identities are in permanent flux. The next generation is a living example of what I'm talking about. More than mestizaje, our multiracial and multicultural kids are poly-cultural (and poly-gendered) cyborgs. Now, they're way beyond conventional notions of *mestizaje*. Take my son Guillermo and his wild multiracial circle of friends. They're all fluent in Spanish, English, Spanglish, *ebonics*, *Chonics*, and *cybertalk*—and they don't even reflect on this. It's a given to them. One day he told me: "Dad, what you theorize in your books, is everyday reality for me."

Is this good or bad. I don't know. All I can say is that as I tour from city to city and from country to country, I witness this phenomenon taking place everywhere I go: a grassroots transnational, transborder culture, which must not be confused with globalization. It's not an imposed phenomenon. It's not created by corporations. It comes from below. It has a different logic of resistance and contamination.

The entire world is experiencing both a profound crisis of national identity and the emergence of multiple repertoires of hybrid identities. We're all clumsily trying to understand what our new place and our new voice is in this hallucinatory cartography. The identities we've inherited all seem dysfunctional and somewhat useless. One of the lessons that performance art has taught me is that we can reinvent our identities; that we're not straight-jacketed by identity. As artists, we have the capability to pick and choose, to move vertically and horizontally, to pariche and sample from our multiple cultural selves and fragmented identities, in order to hopefully construct a better human being. That's what I'm trying to do in my art. That's what my photo-performances are trying to portray.

KG: In your "Ethno-Techne" series I'm intrigued by the "Geisha Apocalyptic" (Apocalyptic geisha) who stands in a sculptural pose that could have been rendered in marble in the nineteenth century, and whose white face, suggestive of the geisha's makeup, is also a kind of death mask or expression of



**Figure 9.6.** *Gráfica Apocalíptica*. From the portfolio "Eibon-Tzotzin: Did Others and Identity Theives," shot in San Francisco with James McCaffrey, 2004. Photo: Courtesy of Orlando Britto-Tzotzi and Galería Artificio, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria.

desire and identification with "white culture" (fig. 9.6). She stands to the side of a white cube on the floor, the canonical object of modernist expression and also a gallery pedestal. What does this signify for you? Why are the words "nunca regresamos" scrawled on her back? How does this image relate to the "Rito Neo-Azteca" (Neo-Aztec Ritual) image of the woman who has the words "United We Stand" written on her back? (fig. 9.7). In short, how does the woman's body come to be the mythic writing pad of resistance?

**GP:** In performance art, the human body, not the stage, is our true site for creation. It's our raw material, our empty canvas, and open book; our navigation chart and biographical map. It's the vessel for our ever-changing identities. In performance, our body must be marked, decorated, intervened with culturally, mapped out, chronicled, re-politicized, and re-captured or liberated



**Figure 9.7.** *Rito Neo-Azteca*. From the portfolio "Eibon-Tzotzin: Did Others and Identity Theives," shot in San Francisco with James McCaffrey, 2004. Photo: Courtesy of Orlando Britto-Tzotzi and Galería Artificio, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria.

by the camera. Our bodies are also occupied territories. The ultimate goal of performance, especially if one is a woman, gay, or a "person of color," is to decolonize one's body and make these decolonizing mechanisms apparent to the audience in the hope that they'll get inspired to do the same with their own.

When a text is written on the body of a performance artist documented by the camera, who is really talking? It's a very complex question. In the live performances, my collaborators have more leeway to decide which text to write on their bodies and how to write it. In the photo-performances the decision is clearly mine. It's my disembodied voice, but I don't expect the viewer to take it as such. My hope is that the total image/text functions as a sort of poetic logo, a conceptual statement that may even spill into the other photos of the series. You can read on the apocalyptic goddess's back "Nunca regresamos," which

translates to "We will never return." Where to? Essentialists? To the way our cultures used to be before we became immigrants and nomads? To the way things were before 9/11?

The phrase "United we stood" written on the back of Emiko is also a disembodied poetic statement, and as such it elicits a multiplicity of readings. Is it that she used to be "united," connected to the transvestite Aztec priest holding her scalped hair, and not anymore? Is it about the country, the United States, which is totally disunited under the Bush regime? Is it about the endemic lack of social fabric in multiracial America? Is the statement about "us," the darkest versus "them," those white Christian gays in power? Other readings are also welcome.

JG: I want to pursue the question of the powerful female personas that you have coconstructed in your photographs. Your image "Against Gauguin" depicts a beautiful woman in something resembling tropical attire who poses with a gun in one hand and one arm across her bare breasts (fig. 9.8). As a critical reprise of Gauguin's exotic and romantic depiction of women from Tahiti, it stands as a challenge to historical (and contemporary) images that sensualize cultural difference. At the same time, the image is strikingly similar to works by Hannah Wilke and Yvonne Rainer, whose self-portraits in the 1970s included half-clad poses that were simultaneously alluring and threatening. Despite their feminist stance, many thought Wilke and Rainer's work might simply attract the sexist gaze it claimed to critique. How do you see "Against Gauguin" and other images such as "Guerilla Supermodel," as part of your project to explore power relations as written across the woman's body?

GP: To answer this question I must discuss the specifics of that photo-shoot. Those images were generated during the "Tucuman-Chicana" project that took place in Argentina early this year, and strictly *artistic*, they're not part of my photo-performances. I'll explain why. Violeta [uma and I] conducted a performance workshop involving fifteen Argentine artists. Most participants (I'd say 70 percent) were women—very powerful rebel actresses, dancers, and intellectuals. What they shared in common was a dissatisfaction with their mono-disciplinary artistic practice and a desire to experiment beyond their routines and to collaborate with us. La Pocha Nostra provided the methodology and the conceptual framework, and each artist developed a couple of performance personas drawn from their own concerns. We invited this amazing young photographer, Ramón Torres, who had been recommended by my



Figure 9.8. *Against Gauguin*. From the portfolio "Tucuman-Chicana," shot in Argentina with Ramón Torres, 2005. Photo: Courtesy of La Pocha Nostra.

friend photographer Julio Zambora, to document the process, and he showed up with all these amazing backdrops to play with us. We set up an ephemeral photo studio in a room adjacent to the rehearsal space and every time someone would come up with a strong persona, he/she would go and play next door with Ramón for half an hour as the workshop continued. Since we all wanted to support Ramón's career, we decided to not claim authorship of the final portfolio.

Regarding the highly sexualized content of the images, it was a combination of factors: the personas developed by the participating artists themselves, La Pocha's contagious aesthetics, and Ramón's gaze. Perhaps in the current ambience of *desape* (liberation) in Argentina, these flamboyant and sexualized images of empowered warriorhood and cultural transvestites have different connotations from those being created by artists in the United States.

JG: How do your images unravel the coherence of racial performance? Can you give me your answer with reference to a specific image?

GP: In the late 1990s, my colleagues and I began to surrender our will to the audience in the process of determining the content of our work. For this purpose, we developed "confessional" websites in which we asked Internet users to suggest to us how we should dress as Mexicans and Chicanos, and what kind of performance actions and social rituals we should engage in. We would then carry out their suggestions in a live performance or in a photo shoot. The idea was to use performance as a Rorschach test for people to project their cultural fears and colonial desires, as a mirror for the audience to see the reflection of their own psychological chimeras. The results of our experiment in "reverse anthropology" turned out to be much stronger than anything we could've imagined on our own. In the mid-to-late 1990s, the "sleepy Mexican" had been banished from the colonial unconscious of contemporary America, deported back to Hollywood, along with Frida Bandita, Speedy González, the "greaser" bandit, and the suffering Frida Kahlo. They had been replaced by a new pantheon of mighty locos reflective of the political and media trends of the time, and the anti-immigration rhetoric of politicians. We were perceived to be unnecessarily violent, yet fashionably seductive, techno-literate, yet primal; politically strident yet gifted with inexplicable spiritual powers. We were contradictory, unpredictable, and at the same time, strangely familiar: a distorted image of the United States: its evil twin. These confessions led to the creation of the "El Mexicaminator" project. My techno-shaman persona and Roberto Sifuentes' cyber-vatos come out of that research. These images appear in my book *Dangerous Border Crossers*.<sup>4</sup>

JG: To what extent is your work in a conscious conversation with the history of art?

GP: As a young Mexican artist in a racist U.S. art world I soon realized that the official history of contemporary art was not going to welcome me right away. And I became interested in the other histories of art, the parallel and untold ones . . . My conversation with the history of art has always had a sarcastic and irreverent tone. It's a conversation between an outsider and a functionary. I remember when my work began to be recognized in the late 1980s, art critics were constantly comparing me with famous non-Mexican artists or with the few Mexican artists they were familiar with. They lacked the necessary cultural references and knowledge of Mexican and Chicano art to

understand me on my own terms. In their eyes I was always "the Mexican Spelling Guy" . . . or the postmodern grandchild of Diego Rivera. So I began to make fun of their shortsightedness. "Ni Diego Ni Frida" responds to that impulse. So does "El Macinarta Junior" posing as a rock celebrity and "The Ranchero Stelark."

I have also engaged in an unconscious conversation with historically based Catholic iconography. My Mexican sensibility is permeated with Catholic iconography gone wrong, with female Zapatista Christs, mariachi and low-rider Christs, with immigrant *pirata* and border *madonnas*. My job in this respect has been to problematize my placement in all that history. I see all these historically based images as interventions in the official history of contemporary art.

JG: I'd like to return to the question of race in relationship to the images we've been discussing. How much does the history of Mexico and Mexican conceptions of race figure in your work, and how much is framed by the U.S. context? Here I'm thinking of the recent controversy about the newly minted Mexican postage stamp that depicts Memín Pinguín, a racist cartoon caricature of a black boy. How does the performativity of race differ in the two countries, and how does this inform your work?

GP: I can't escape the fact that I was born and raised in Mexico City. But at the same time, my formative intellectual years took place in the U.S.-Mexico border area and Los Angeles. In this sense I'm a border artist, a *chico-largo* (half chileño and half Chicanos) with a bicultural sensibility, and a bi-local understanding of culture. Besides, I'm constantly returning to Mexico City, where I have a house and work on several ongoing art projects. It's weird. In a sense I've never left, and in another sense, I'm constantly returning to a place which no longer exists. This dilemma has positioned me in a somewhat strategic place in both countries. In my artwork and in my writings, I often interpret (and purposely misinterpret) Latin American culture for the United States, and U.S. culture for Mexico, and this includes notions of race and identity. Border artists often perform this dual role of vernacular diplomats and intellectual coyotes.

In the 1980s and 1990s, during the culture wars, while the United States was trying to sincerely deal with its multiracial complexities, Mexico was in complete denial. Identity in Mexico was a static construct, intricately connected to national territory and language. A Mexican was someone who lived in Mexico and who spoke Spanish . . . like a Mexican. Despite the fact that we

came in all shapes, colors, accents, and even races, *mezitaje* was the master narrative. Whether we liked it or not, we were the bastard children of Hernán Cortés and La Malinche—product of a colonial rape and a cultural osseman—generally condemned to come to terms with this historical trauma. The millions of *indios* or Indians, were portrayed as living in a parallel, and mythical time and space outside our history and society. As a result of these prevailing static constructs, Mexico saw with perplexity and mistrust all the debates on race and identity taking place in the United States. Now it's quite different.

I believe the change began in 1995 with the Zapatista insurrection. Zapatistas forced Mexico to reflect on its unspoken plural identities and multiple crises. The country's endemic economic distress and racial divides were framed by Marcos in the context of a call for democratic process for "a place at the table for all Mexicans," not just those affiliated with the oligarchic structure that had ruled the country for so long. The Zapatista lesson was clear: democracy in Mexico could only exist if we recognized and incorporated its diversity. In the words of Subcomandante Marcos, this diversity included not just indigenous peoples, but also women, gays, youth, urban subcultures of sorts, and even those on the other side of the border: the Chicanos and "undocumented" Mexicans. With the rise of the Zapatistas, many forgotten and forbidden Mexicos, including those beyond the border, were resurrected. In this sense Zapatistas introduced a national conversation about Mexican racism.

Then Mexico's main political party, the PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional), fell in 2000, and with it, all the political, social, and cultural structures sustaining national identity. The great paradox is that as Mexico becomes more open and learns to live with its new democratic complexities and demons, the United States becomes more of a closed society, an authoritarian society ruled by paranoid nationalism, political isolationism, Christian Puritanism and xenophobia, a place where ethnic profiling and censorship have become official policy. In Bush's America most debates on race were eclipsed by the mega-reality of "the war on terror"—that is until (Hurricane) Katrina in 2005 exposed the endemic and unacknowledged racism. Paradoxically, at the same time Mexico is very perplexed and even scared by all these changes. Mexicans know that the ever-expanding connotations of the term "terrorist" now include all brown people. The new enemy is the brown body, America's most wanted inner demon.

All these changes and paradoxes regarding race on both sides of the border express themselves in my work. It's inevitable. I'd say that the current membership of *La Pocha Nostra*, my performance troupe, is the most obvious

example of my conscious decision to deal with the new racial complexities: its members and associates are Mexicans, Chicanos, U.S. Latinos, Asians, Arabs, blacks, "subaltern" Europeans, and hybrids in between.

JG: It seems that the function of "vase" is different in both countries, yet your work seems to operate critically within both paradigms. Can you explain how your work is (differently) critical of Mexican race politics and U.S. race politics?

GP: My positionality vis-à-vis identity politics and race politics is essential and strategic. It shifts from one side of the border to the other, and from context to context. Often my job in Mexico is to question Mexican nationalism and centralism, to question Mexico's racism towards indigenous peoples, Chicanos, and everyone who is not part of the puzzle of national identity. When I go back to Mexico, I do it as a Chicano, and I always try to go back with other Chicano and U.S. Latino artists. It gives me extra moral grounds to overstate my Chicano voice, my hybridity, my otherness. Since Mexico is experiencing an acute process of Chicanoization, my voice now has a context. This process of Chicanoization is produced by the powerful influence of U.S. Latino/Chicano media and by the inevitable cultural influence of the millions of post-Mexicans who constantly return by will or by the force of the *sigua*. Mexico is finally trying to deal with this phenomenon. Immigration, border culture, *Chicanismo*, Spanglish, are now part of the national conversation and the pop imaginary. However, the intellectual and artistic class are still unwilling to open up.

In the United States my position regarding identity shifts all the time. In Chicano contexts my job is to question *Chicanismo* in capitals. I try to bring up issues that make Chicano nationalists uncomfortable such as multiple sexualities, experimental aesthetics, and cross-racial collaboration. In Anglo contexts it's different. If the place where I'm speaking or performing is conservative, then I tend to position myself as a hard core Chicano/Latino in order to question the intolerance of Latino otherness. In so-called progressive milieus, especially after 9/11, I either become a Latin American once again, and from the South I question American isolationism, or I assume a pan-ethnic/pan-gendered performance identity to shatter these simplistic views. You know, I'm a coyote, a performance trickster, a border-crosser.

When *La Pocha* goes to Europe to present work, things get logarithmically more complicated. In order not to be exoticized as the new "urban primitive" from the distant West or from "Mexico," we have to establish strategic

alliances with immigrant and deterritorialized groups in Europe; with communities who are experiencing similar processes of transculturation as those experienced by U.S. Latinas in the past. I'm talking about the British Pakistanis, the French Algerians, the Spanish Moroccans, the German Turks, etc. I'm also talking about the Eastern Europeans relocated in Western Europe. These groups are the new European "Chicanos" I was talking about earlier. Collaborating with artists from these communities helps us anchor the piece in a European reality.

JG: Earlier in our conversation you suggested "we can reinvent our identities" and "pick and choose from cultural selves." Yet, as Stuart Hall points out, we live in a world where this reinvention is not a simple matter. Our otherwise fluid identities are often constrained by the material conditions in which we live, both the physical form of our bodies and the economic support they receive. Most people would not choose to find themselves in a racist culture where their skin color or poverty places them in a subaltern position, yet this is a concrete condition for many. As a brown-skinned coyote, as a trikotero, as a border-crosser, and as an artist you move between cultural marginalization and economic privilege. For my last question I want to ask: How does class figure explicitly in your images and implicitly in their production? Is the reinvention of identity only an option for the bourgeoisie?

GP: True, there is a global elite that can easily cross borders of race, gender, and class without having to experience the physical, social, or political effects of those border crossings. Their "transcultural fluidity" tends to be superficial and temporary. They're flâneurs and cultural tourists in search of extreme otherness and unusual experiences. Subcultures, however, driven by survival and by impulses of resistance, engage in much more daring forms of border crossings. Low riders in Japan are in dialogue with Chicano low riders from the Southwest; DJs from Latin America and the Arab countries are currently making the music that the white youth dances to; urban tribes from Buenos Aires, São Paulo, or Mexico City are developing similar cultural hybrids as their peers in New York or London. Many of the underground railroads and routes that migrant workers utilize to crisscross the United States go through Indian reservations, Chicano barrios, and progressive white milieus. I'm interested in engaging in a dialogue with all these transnational communities, and I often find them much more open to the reinvention of identity than any some of my intellectual peers.

My project of reinvention of identity is clearly an art project. And most artistic projects are that, mere prototypes, models which attempt to articulate and chronicle the new complexities of the times. Sadly, we're not activists or politicians and our conceptual models unfortunately don't translate to the social realm, especially in a society, like the United States, which doesn't listen to the voice of its artists. But my audiences do pay attention to what I have to say, and I believe that my ideas have an impact in their lives. In this sense, the pedagogic dimension of performance is where the true political project lies. We always try to conduct workshops for the outsider communities living in the city where we're performing.

As touring artists who experience continuous upward and downward mobility . . . continuous geographical and cultural mobility, we have certain border-crossing privileges that other animals and migrants lack, and I'm fully aware of it. I only hope to utilize these privileges responsibly, ethically, and to help others to access them as well. *La Pocha Nostra* is like a Trojan horse: I get invited, and I show up with twenty others. My political project is also to open doors for young rebel artists.