

Guillermo Gómez-Peña's Barriopunk Performance and Postcolonial Cyborg Invasion

ASHLEIGH DEOSARAN
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

In 1978, performance artist, Guillermo Gómez-Peña crossed the Tijuana-San Diego border on foot to attend the California Institute of the Arts. In the mid-1990s, the artist described his experience as an immigrant in the U.S. as being trapped in a “disnarrative science-fiction film.” Outlining the plot of this uncanny reality, he wrote: “The Cold War ends as the U.S. drug war begins. The South replaces the East as the new threatening otherness...The Berlin wall is abolished exactly when the United States begins to militarize its border with Mexico...Central America and Mexico move to the right...the United States invades Panama.”¹ These events characterized the surreal era during which Gómez-Peña migrated from Mexico to the United States. His border crossing also aligned with key political, economic, and techno-scientific developments within and between both nations. Increasingly contentious North-South American relations were concurrent with breakthroughs in computing technology and the genesis of the World Wide Web. The rhetoric of “openness” that defined late twentieth-century global trade liberalization seemed to seep into the promotion of these new technologies, which were branded as free from identity, politics, geographic borders, and bodily limitations. However, the new cyber frontier was inaccessible for many in the global south who were kept out by national, technological, and political barriers.

In the early 1980s, many Latin American countries including Chile and Mexico, encountered a period of precipitous economic decline referred to as the “lost decade.” As the Mexican economy stagnated and national debt grew, workers were under pressure to immigrate to North America. This rapid defection from South to North galvanized anti-immigration attitudes in U.S. culture and society, as well as politics.² Gómez-Peña’s father, concerned with Mexico’s financial instability, advised that he, “stay in Southern California and wait for better times.”³ The artist complied and settled north of the U.S.-Mexico border, where he would witness the cultural and political backlash against South American immigrants that came to define the 1990s.

In order to confront the influx of Mexican immigrants and reinforce its economic foothold in Latin America, the U.S. signed the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) with Mexico and Canada in 1992. Gómez-Peña responded with performances that mapped both junctures—the dawn of the digital age and the resurgence of racialized anti-immigrant sentiment—onto one site: the body. Along with collaborators and his still-active performance collective, “La Pocha Nostra,” he ventured into temporal and virtual borderlands, appropriating and re-politicizing cyberculture and media through performances of ‘ethno-cyborg’ personae. Together,

the members of “La Pocha Nostra” built worlds and birthed characters as a mechanism through which to confront the new, developments in technology and geo-politics that were emerging towards the end of the millennium. Gómez-Peña upended the utopian and dystopian ideologies found in U.S. and European science fiction, commandeering its tropes to critique the misrepresentation of Mexican migrants in pop culture and political discourse.

Early Performances and Postcolonial Science Fiction

In his early performances throughout the 1980s, Gómez-Peña addressed issues surrounding immigration through various performative interventions at the border between the U.S. and Mexico. However, Gómez-Peña’s practice evolved from site-specific to temporal, confronting contemporary intercultural antagonism by exploring its roots in colonial history. He was particularly critical of the 1992 Quincentenary ‘celebrations’ of Columbus’s arrival in the “New World,” and joined the subsequent outbreak of counter-demonstrations through performance art. Gómez-Peña and Cuban-American artist, Coco Fusco, collaborated on a series of performances collectively known as, *The Year of the White Bear*, which centered on appropriating and satirizing the whitewashed history of the Americas to counter hegemonic accounts of the 500-year history of colonialism in the region. Among the first of the artists’ Quincentennial performances was, *Norte-Sur* (1990), which is documented in the publication, *Dangerous Border Crossers: The Artist Talks Back* (2000).⁴ In a series of photo-performances, Fusco and Gómez-Peña smile while holding bottles of Coca Cola and a box of microwavable pizza, as a self-explanatory caption reads: “Authentic Cuban Santera (i.e. Coco Fusco) and El Aztec High-Tech (i.e. Guillermo Gómez-Peña) welcome Columbus with Ritual Offerings.” Their sardonic gifts of commercial goods sought to upend colonial readings of indigeneity as inherently primal or savage. This rupture was literally embodied by “El Aztec High-Tech,” who wore a kitschy costume based on traditional Aztec attire, including a gold chest plate, arm and leg cuffs, a headdress and loincloth, black sunglasses, and boots.⁵ The outfit was a fusion of customary garments and “modern” accessories that created what Fusco referred to twenty years later as a, “guttural mix of Náhuatl phonemes and global brand names” that conflated ostensibly incongruous temporal signifiers.⁶ Arguably a blueprint for future ethno-techno performance personae, “El Aztec High-Tech” also explored the legacies, contemporary manifestations, and futures of European and U.S. imperialism in Mexico as a time travelling storyteller. In the 1994 collection of performance documentation and texts, *Warrior for Gringostroiika*, Gómez-Peña explained that “El Aztec High-Tech” was able to, “zigzag from past to future and from the personal to the historical,” sharing stories from various perspectives and times.⁷

These performances critiqued what John Rieder, author of *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* (2008), described as, “the idea of development as linear, cumulative and unlimited,” dating back to nineteenth-century colonial expansion.⁸

During this era of imperialism, “the anachronistic structure of anthropological difference,” that is, a reading of non-Western cultures as earlier, inferior versions of the colonizer’s society, was a core concept of coloniality, techno-scientific thought, and the fictions they inspired.⁹ Gómez-Peña and Fusco overturned this anachronistic reading throughout *The Year of the White Bear*, culminating in their well-known collaboration, *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West* (1992–1994), which drew attention to the exhibition, objectification, and fetishization of non-Western cultures and bodies throughout history. Touring around the world from the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History in Washington D.C. (1992), to the Columbus Plaza in Madrid, Spain (1992), and the Whitney Biennial in New York (1993), they performed stereotypes of an ‘authentic,’ ‘primal,’ Other. *Two Undiscovered Amerindians* was largely based on the history of colonial-anthropological displays created to satisfy European audiences’ voyeuristic impulses toward the Other, inaugurated by Columbus’ exhibition of an Arawak person from the Caribbean in Spanish Court 500 years earlier.¹⁰ From within a golden cage, the artists satirized the objectification and fetishization of non-Western cultures and bodies by performing as members of an “undiscovered” indigenous culture from the fictional island of “Guatinaui.” Gómez-Peña and Fusco enacted colonial fantasies of control and cultural purity as they arrived in leashes held by white, uniformed guards, entered the cage, and performed for viewers by singing, dancing, and telling stories in their fictional language. However, their use of contemporary media throughout the performance quickly ruptured the fantasy: Fusco danced for the crowds but she did so while playing rap music and wearing Converse sneakers. In a joint interview with Anna Johnson in 1993, Fusco described this as an attempt to defy the desire for “authentic” cultures that are assumed to come from, “a time and place that is completely untouched by Western civilization.”¹¹ In response, Gómez-Peña elaborated on the fetishization of authenticity, noting:

Authenticity is an obsession of Western anthropologists...when I am in the United States, North Americans are constantly making this artificial division between what is an “authentic” Chicano, an “authentic” Mexican, an “authentic” Native American in order to fulfill their own desires. Generally speaking, this authentic Other has to be pre-industrial, has to be more tuned with their past, has to be less tainted by post-modernity, has to be more innocent and must not live with contemporary technology.¹²

The artists subverted this colonial-anthropological desire with their intermittent use of laptops, televisions, and other techno-artifacts in *Two Undiscovered Amerindians*. For those who believed their performance was an actual display of indigenous people from faraway lands, the use of electronic media were violations of the fetishistic desire for cultural purity. Along with the performers’ inclusion of contemporary

commercial products in *Norte-Sur* and “El Aztec High-Tech’s” sartorial temporal bricolage, their work subverted the ethnocentric narratives of indigeneity that were foundational to early science fiction stories.

The Barriopunk Uprising

The Year of the White Bear was an important antecedent to the cyberpunk-rooted performances that Gómez-Peña produced in the years that followed. He settled in California in the mid-1990s, after touring internationally with Fusco, by which time the personal computer and the internet had become promising tools for accessing information, improving interconnectivity, and defying physical barriers in cyberspace. The virtual world was designated as an apolitical, post-identity, post-corporeal, digital utopia. A corollary symbol of techno-utopian disembodiment, the hero-cyborg became a popular premise in stories wherein, according to Adam Bostic, a New York-based artist and writer, “the hero’s transformation through technology into a new, improved whole” proceeds from their embracement of, “fragmentation as an element of an enhanced cyborgian body and self.”¹³ The popularization of computers not only reinvigorated a cultural fascination with science fiction but also became a useful tool for filmmakers to realize their futurist visions onscreen. The groundbreaking computer-generated adventure *Tron* (1982), released during Gómez-Peña’s time at the California Institute of the Arts, epitomized the budding pop cultural fascination with cyberculture and technology’s role in rendering futurist fantasies on the silver screen.

When Gómez-Peña graduated from Cal Arts in 1983, the personal computer had been named *Time Magazine’s* first and, thus far, only machine of the year, heralding an era of new hopes and anxieties about technology’s potential displacement of human beings.¹⁴ The latter sentiment was fomented in popular culture a decade later with the science fiction sub-genre, known as cyberpunk. Introducing their collection of critical writings on cyber culture, *Cyberspace/Cyberbodies/Cyberpunk: Cultures of Technological Embodiment* (1996), Featherstone and Burrows defined cyberpunk as an exploration of, “the twin themes of technological body modification and the notion of cyberspace.”¹⁵ They cited cyberpunk films, including Ridley Scott’s near-future fiction, *Blade Runner* (1982) and James Cameron’s action adventure, *The Terminator* (1984), as rejoinders to early cyborg heroism that take a grimmer stance on techno-mediated disembodiment. Both films, Featherstone and Burrows noted, are set in “implosion ‘communities’ of Los Angeles,” and both envisioned, “the intersecting of the digital domain with the technology of the street” in which “a complex continuum of human-machine fusions” began to supersede optimistic cyborg heroism.¹⁶ Cyberpunk proposed futures wherein our understanding of and control over the machines we were yet to build had already been lost. Inverting the fantasy of cyberspace and cyborgs as empowerment through technology, U.S. cyberpunk envisioned the use of machines to exploit humanity’s vulnerabilities.

Gómez-Peña's first engagement with cyberpunk can be seen in an early iteration of his series of living dioramas, *Ethno-Cyberpunk Trading Post & Curio Shop on the Electronic Frontier* (1994–1995). The living dioramas were complex installations that served as backdrops to interactive performances featuring props, costumes, and sets made from objects and materials that evoked racial-ethnic stereotypes of Latin Americans. Audiences navigated these mysterious, often chaotic environments, in which offensive tropes and absurd caricatures had materialized alongside then-reified technologies. The *Trading Post* diorama featured the performances of Gómez-Peña and long-time collaborators, “La Pocha Nostra” members, Roberto Sifuentes and James Luna. The following year, Gómez-Peña published, *Temple of Confessions: Mexican Beasts and Living Santos* (1996), in which he detailed the anthropological roots of the display and described the performers as, “exotic specimens.”

“La Pocha Nostra” opted to create a website for the *Trading Post* so that audiences could provide feedback by answering an anonymous ethnographic questionnaire that probed their unbridled feelings towards, and opinions about, Mexicans and Native Americans. Viewers’ intercultural confessions served as a unique, if not disturbing, source of inspiration for some of Gómez-Peña’s most well-known, later performances. In his 2001 essay, “Chicano Interneta: The Search for Intelligent Life in Cyberspace,” the artist notes that his early ambivalence toward technology was superseded by a desire to, “work against it, to question it, expose it, subvert it, and/or imbue it with humor, radical politics, and *linguas polutas*.”¹⁷ “La Pocha Nostra’s” inaugural use of nascent computer technology in their performances self-reflexively critiqued the utopian, apolitical discourse surrounding commercial cyberspace.

In 1993, Gómez-Peña explained the impetus for mining U.S. media for appropriable elements, which included not only pop cultural tropes, stereotypes, and fictions, but also the communication technologies through which they were propagated.¹⁸ He described this as an act of *rasquachismo*, the “political practice” of repurposing “everything the United States sends to Latin America” through the humorous and irreverent appropriation of its images and materials to produce, “voluntary kitsch... an altar from hubcaps, a temple from plastic, a decoration for the house from cereal boxes.”¹⁹ Four years prior, the influential art historian, Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, theorized *rasquache* as a creative problem-solving process, listing Gómez-Peña as one of many artists engaging with a mode of Chicana cultural production and resistance rooted in appropriation, reversal, and inversion.²⁰ This “bicultural lived reality” and “working class sensibility” encompassed the everyday strategy of splicing of multiple sources, objects or ideas—including the ostensibly incongruous, low or kitsch, discarded, disreputable, etc.—as a form of survival, resistance, and subversion.²¹ By 2000, Gómez-Peña dubbed the online elements of his ethno-techno performances as “techno-rasquache art,” which fused, “performance art, epic rap poetry, interactive television, experimental radio, and computer art, but with a Chicano-centric perspective and a sleazoid bent.”²² By employing the ethnographic online survey in *Trading Post*, he

reversed the notion of cyberspace as an escapist utopia by turning it into a site of racial revelations. Describing himself as a “newly arrived cyber-immigrant,” “Web-back,” and “el nuevo virus virtual,” he sought to combine viewers’ prejudices and undisclosed fetishes with cyberspace to politicize technology, to “brownify” and “infect” it.²³

Additionally, *Trading Post* featured a performance by Robert Sifuentes as an ethno-techno called “El Cyber Vato,” described as an inner-city Chicano youth, “wanted by MTV and the Los Angeles Police department,” who is tech-savvy, addicted to drugs, and a, “survivor of innumerable cultural drive-by shootings,” as indicated by his streetwear, which is riddled with bullet holes.²⁴ (Figure 1) In 2010, Lysa Rivera, scholar of Chicana and African American literature and culture, analyzed the details of this persona’s hybrid body, which invokes the metaphor of the cyborg to, “symbolize and literally embody the constructive ‘nature’ of Chicano media stereotypes” that takes place through, “language, social practices, and regimes of knowledge and power.”²⁵ However, “El Cyber Vato’s” satirizing of media constructions does not stop at racial-ethnic or national stereotypes but extends more broadly to the good/evil or hero/villain binaries that pervaded U.S. science fiction narratives and their ostensibly-nuanced iterations in cyberpunk.



Figure 1.
Cyber Vato Prototype from El Mexterminator Project Series
 1997
 Roberto Siguentes
 Photo-performance.
 Photo © Eugenio Castro
 Courtesy of the La Pocha
 Nostra Archive, San
 Francisco

Gómez-Peña and Sifuentes incorporated the conventional traits of science fiction protagonists, who benefit from and are praised for their radicality and anti-authoritarianism, into the ethno-technos' backstories. In his 2016 book, *Biopunk Dystopias*, Lars Schmeink argued that despite the discursive distance between cyber-heroes and cyberpunks, the humanist ideals of the former are also embedded in the latter's, "outcast heroes, the lowlifes, drifters, drug users, and petty criminals" who are characterized by an "aggressive rejection of authority... as well as on the disillusionment with the established order of late capitalism." Even machines in cyberpunk science fiction are capable of—and celebrated for—resisting control through rugged individualism. As historian Walter McDougall noted in 1985:

Americans delight in such futuristic epics as *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* precisely because the human qualities of a Captain Kirk or Han Solo are always victorious over the very technological mega-systems that make their adventures possible. We want to believe that we can subsume our individualism into the rationality of systems yet retain our humanity still.²⁷

The same could be said of cyberspace heroes and their later cyberpunk anti-hero counterparts that push against, but do not dismantle, the systems around them. Schmeink notes that U.S. cyberpunk's critical and revolutionary potential is severely limited, as its protagonists, "easily navigate the multinational capitalist world and find their own way of survival rather than trying to incite social changes."²⁸ "La Pocha Nostra's" ethno-technos, on the other hand, directly address issues of race, gender, and nationality, and collectively seek liberation. A core irony of "El Cyber Vato's" *Matrix*-esque hacking skills, indestructibility, and criminal past is that his traits align more closely to North America's cyber-heroes and anti-heroes than to its villains.

In racializing cyberpunk concerns, "La Pocha's" ethno-technos can be readily placed within the context of Mexican and Chicana science fiction literature and cinema. South of the U.S. border, Mexican science fiction reflected skepticism of NAFTA and its proponents' assurances that a new era of economic prosperity would be ushered in at the turn of the century. Pepe Rojo noted in 2015 that, in response to increasingly urgent issues of financial turmoil and anti-immigrant hostility, Mexican science fiction tends to frame, "science and technology...as the mechanisms through which neo-liberalism encroaches and embeds itself in the body in order to produce wealth, and not as liberating devices."²⁹ Storytellers' focus on physical labor, restricted transnational movement, and economic production complicates the issues of corporeality, corporate greed, and urban decay that U.S. cyberpunk has only begun to explore; consequently, their particular engagement with the genre can be categorized as *rasquache*. By hybridizing generic cyberpunk with specific, pressing, cultural concerns, Mexican and Chicana appropriations were more politically-attuned to

issues of labor, capital exchange, neoliberalism, and techno-scientific threats, as well as more equipped to overtly confront them.

As such, Border and Chicana futurisms from the 1990s, along with “La Pocha Nostra’s” ethno-techno performances, might be referred to more specifically as “Barriopunk,” to borrow a term from Matt Martínez, guitarist of the Chicano punk band, *Over the Counter Intelligence*.³⁰ Categorically associated with, but distinct from cyberpunk science fiction, “Barriopunk” can encompass borderland cyber-stories that take U.S. cyberpunk’s mise-en-scène as a launchpad for more radical speculative futurisms that address not only the potentially fraught co-existence of humans and machines in future urban society, but also the intersecting concerns of geo-politics, neoliberal capitalism, immigration, race, ethnicity, (bi)nationality, and class. “Barriopunk” subverts and complicates cyberculture by re-orientating its motifs towards the barrios between and within the U.S. and Mexico.

Invading Mass Media

Responses from the *Trading Post* online questionnaire continued to pour in throughout the run of the exhibition, prompting Gómez-Peña and Sifuentes to keep the website running. They embedded/integrated viewers’ anti-immigration confessions into their newest projects, resulting in mechanical, gender-bending, culturally-spurious chimaeras built to invade, both, the fantasies and nightmares of cyberspace and cyborgs in U.S. popular culture. Through *techno-rascuache*, Gómez-Peña built ethno-technos from the fragments of U.S. cyberculture and Mexican/Chicana stereotypes that became progressively more overt and damaging in the midst of NAFTA negotiations between the U.S., Mexico, and Canada. Political rhetoric in California paralleled these negative media images. As stated by sociologist, Douglas Massey, although, “[U.S.] politicians have [continually] found it convenient to demonize immigrants during periods of social upheaval and economic insecurity... during the 1980s the symbolic portrayal of immigrants as a threat reached new heights.”³¹

Gómez-Peña’s “El Mexterminator” is a mashup of references from *Mad Max* (1980), *The Terminator* (1984), and viewer suggestions submitted through “La Pocha’s” online questionnaire. (Figure 2) In *Dangerous Border Crossers: The Artist Talks Back* (2000), Gómez-Peña describes “El Mexterminator,” also known as “El Mad Mex,” in detail. This ethno-techno crosses the border illegally in stilettos; he is a “jalapeño-pusher” and defender of immigrants’ rights; he is a fugitive from the FBI and the Smithsonian; he practices “narcoshamanism” and is, “sponsored by the Gulf Cartel and Zapatista movement.”³²

The Zapatista Liberation Army, a guerilla group from Chiapas, Mexico that rallied against the neo-liberal agenda of NAFTA in 1994, used the internet as a tool of



Figure 2
El Mexterminator Project
Series
1993
Photo: Monica Naranjo
Courtesy of the La Pocha
Nostra Archive, San
Francisco

communication and organization. Gómez-Peña references the Zapatista uprising, since the indigenous-led, internet-mediated protest exemplified the appropriation of technology as a tool for resistance. Inspired by their revolutionary re-orientation of computer technology, Gómez-Peña used viewer responses to build “El Mexterminator,” a persona derived from fictional images of infallible techno-villains in Western cinema spliced with real-world fears of invading Mexican immigrants. As the artist stated in an interview,

Since a majority of the [survey] responses... portrayed Mexicans and Chicanos as threatening Others, indestructible invaders, and public enemies of America’s fragile sense of coherent national identity, we titled our new performance project, Mexterminator, referencing the superhuman, robotic assassins of the Schwarzenegger movies.³³

Gómez-Peña used the audience’s feedback as inspiration to delve deeper into their

own nightmares about the future. The character is cyborgian in both costume and conceptualization, stitched together with viewers' anxiety and paranoia, and reborn to confront them as the Frankenstein of their own cultural misconceptions and futurist fictions.

The utopian narrative of openness in cyberspace fiction and marketing was paralleled by the North American Free Trade Agreement's promises of open migration and cross-cultural exchange between Mexico and the U.S. Concurrently, media-fueled hostility toward Mexican migrant workers reached a fever pitch, as distressed Californians voted to initiate Proposition 187, denying public services to approximately 1.3 million undocumented people.³⁴ As scholar and author Lysa Rivera noted, the "schizophrenic moment" of the mid-1990s, a time characterized by a disorienting flood of mixed messaging in mass media, from futurist visions of techno-mediated, borderless utopias, to racist, anti-immigration propaganda catering to white nationalist panic.³⁵ She gives examples of the incongruous messages one might have received watching broadcast television at the time. First, one might see a commercial for the now-defunct telecommunications company, MCI, naively declaring the internet to be a post-identity, post-corporeal, technological dreamscape: "There is no race. There is no gender. There is no age. There are no infirmities. There are only minds. Utopia? No, Internet."³⁶ The advertisement might then have been followed by the campaign advertisement of California governor and Prop 187 proponent Pete Wilson, in which throngs of immigrants storm over the southern U.S. border as a voiceover gravely warns, "They keep coming."³⁷ This was a significant moment for Gómez-Peña, who witnessed firsthand the, "schism between the transnationalist rhetoric of a new borderless society and the vitriolic anti-immigration rhetoric that dominated the airwaves and editorials."³⁸ In response, the artist organized a live television intervention called, *El Naftazteca: Cyber-Aztec TV for 2000 A.D.* (1994). It was the culmination of Gómez-Peña's post-NAFTA *techno-rasquache*. The broadcast—subsequently edited for distribution and screened internationally—was an interactive performance in which "Cyber-Aztec pirates" addressed television audiences, "from their underground vato-bunker."³⁹ "El Cyber Vato" (Roberto Sifuentes) from the *Trading Post* returned alongside "El Naftazteca" (Guillermo Gómez-Peña), who is described as an apocalyptic disc-jockey and cross-cultural salesman, also known as, the Information Superhighway Bandido. (Figure 3) El Naftazteca greets "Post-NAFTA America" from inside a set similar to La Pocha Nostra's living dioramas in its controlled chaos. Various electronic props are stacked on top of each other, including glitching black and white monitors, flashing bulbs, and machines covered in dials and buttons, which the characters intermittently use. Sombreros and traditional northern Mexican Saltillo blankets are hung on the walls and a fake chicken is suspended over El Naftazteca's news desk, which is laden with bright, kitschy sculptures of cacti and parrots, votive candles, alcohol, and more mechanical props, including a keyboard and two large dials.



Figure 3.

El Naftazteca: Cyber-Aztec TV for 2000 A.D.
1994.

El Naftazteca speaks to the viewers.

Video Still.

Border Art Clásicos (1990-2005) [Videorecording] : An Anthology of Collaborative Video Works. 2007. Chicago, ILL: Video Data Bank.

Like previous performances, the work featured technology-mediated interactivity; viewers were invited to respond to questions—about their real desired age, race and gender, their cultural fears, etc.—throughout the broadcast by telephone or the internet. The work was an assemblage of reality and fantasy, alternate histories and individual memories. Gómez-Peña's past works feature prominently, introduced by "El Naftazteca" as an archive of memory that traces the history of his performances through brief video clips. The first clip is from a performance featuring Gómez-Peña as the "Border Brujo" and Coco Fusco as "Miss Discovery" from their collaborations during *The Year of the White Bear*. Between clips of Gómez-Peña's past performances, callers chime in, and collaborators, including the director of "El Naftazteca," Adriene Jenik, wear Mexican wrestling masks and work in the background, typing on keyboards or holding video cameras. Soon, "El Naftazteca" introduces viewers to the main attraction, the *Technopal 2000*, a "Mexicano Memory Retrieval System." During a trial run of the virtual reality simulator, "El Cyber Vato" dons the VR headset and is immersed in a series of nightmares where memories and fears blur within cyberspace. His memories become fodder for the *Technopal 2000*'s personalized scenarios, which

includes the ethno-techno being arrested and assaulted.

In one scenario, called *Borderscape 2000*, he is transported to the U.S./Mexico border, which at first seems to “El Cyber Vato” to be peaceful and picturesque but descends into chaos as he suddenly realizes he is being hunted by immigration officers. The scenario is “way too real” according to “El Cyber Vato,” who begs for the program to be changed as he falls to the floor, doubled over in fear. From the back of a police vehicle to the fraught U.S./Mexico border, the virtual setting remains tethered to the physical body and spaces, which “El Cyber Vato” is unable to transcend, failing to achieve the freedom in cyberspace promised by commercial, political, and pop cultural testaments. This is a significant failure; unable to overcome technological oppression, “El Cyber Vato’s” suffering re-introduces the stakes of Gómez-Peña’s initial intervention. That *El Naftazteca* successfully aired might be construed as possible proof of technology’s role as a platform in which all messages and ideas, even an act of pirate television, can be freely expressed and shared. In her publication, *The Bodies That Were Not Ours: And Other Writings* (2013), Coco Fusco cautioned that, along with other successful subaltern appropriations of technology, this narrative might sterilize the self-reflexive criticality of similar appropriations and interventions, as they ultimately, “enhance rather than disrupt [technology’s] emancipatory script,” given that:

to focus solely on these apparent electronic victories misleadingly constructs the thrust of technological development as benevolent and economically disinterested. It also occludes the ways in which the industries that underpin the digital revolution contain information about their own undemocratic, if not inhumane practices.⁴⁰

Thus, it has become necessary to embed within these victories reminders of their ultimately provisional and finite potential. Despite their power and boldness, ethno-techno beings still face obstacles and quagmires, symbolized by the nightmare scenarios of the *Technopal 2000*, which continue to pervade the digital realm, including hate speech, threats of violence, white supremacist rhetoric, and other forms of cyber-racism. In *El Naftazteca*, “El Cyber Vato” remained imprisoned by the worldly limitations of his body, his nationality, and his own memory. Even in the midst of a successful cable broadcast takeover, the *Technopal 2000* reminds viewers that the borders used to keep “Barriopunks” at bay cannot be surmounted by any singular act of transgression and consequently, that the fight for a techno-revolution must continue.

Drafting a Postcolonial Future

In the 1995 article, “Postcolonial Cyborgs: Subjectivity in the Age of Cybernetic Reproduction,” published less than a year after *El Naftazteca* first aired, Joseba

Gabilondo defined cyberspace as an, “interface between the cyborg and the ghost/monster” in which, “everything left outside, repressed, comes back...as exterior ghosts/monsters that haunt the interior and its cyborgs: computer-hackers, gangs, drug dealers, serial killers, serial rapists, homeless armies, illegal immigrants, mad third-world leaders.”⁴¹ Gabilondo describes “two utopian paradoxes” that pervaded cyberspace in the 1980s and early 1990s: the cyber-world as, “a virtual democracy in which cultural differences become invisible and thus do not serve as bases for discrimination and oppression,” as in typical 90s cyberspace discourse, and the cyber-world as, “the final frontier for hacking, terrorism against the system, etc.,” as was the basis for cinematic cyberpunk stories.⁴² By way of Gómez-Peña’s *technorasquachismo*, both utopias are critiqued from the outside: the former, by the “exterior ghosts/monster” in the form of racialized ethno-technos, and the latter, by their rejection of what Fusco has referred to as, “a rather convenient masquerade of diversity” starring cyberpunk’s faux rebels and outcasts.⁴³ In his 2014 presentation at the *Platform Summit*, science fiction filmmaker, Alex Rivera, noted that Latinx immigrants who travel north of the U.S.-Mexico border, “are travelling a great distance, taking great risks,” and, as a result, are, “pursued and criminalized,” while, “[fictional] characters who were doing the same things—travelling great distances, taking great risks, doing something to pursue their dreams—were not being criminalized, those were our heroes.”⁴⁴ The ethno-techno ghosts/monsters of “La Pocha Nostra” problematized this ideological selectivity by haunting the ostensibly open utopias and revolutionary dystopias that cyberspace and cyberpunk represented in the United States toward the turn of the century. They critiqued and co-opted imperious and centralized techno-scientific developments, as well as their fictional derivatives in mass culture, to explore different but overlapping inter-American issues including, colonial legacies, neoliberalism, and economic exploitation. Gómez-Peña worked with and against the scientific and technological commodities, not just withheld from marginal communities, but actively deployed against them and often used to justify imperialism or foment fear and hostility.

Media and culture scholar John Rieder argues that science fiction can be a self-reflexive tool for exposing colonial frameworks and defying their logic since it, “pictures a possible future instead of the past.”⁴⁵ Gómez-Peña and “La Pocha Nostra” adopted strategies of imagining in defiance of technocratic colonial impulses in science fiction and its subgenres, critiquing its construction of history, as well as maintaining an invested critical engagement with the present. At the same time, as Malisa Kurtz noted in her 2016 dissertation, *Globalization, Postcolonialism, and Science Fiction: Nomadic Transgressions*, the postcolonial lens is attentive to the way a focus on future risks erases, “the historical context of the past and recurring cycles of violence that are perpetuated against specific groups of people,” thus problematizing farsightedness and what it, “reveals about contemporary fascinations with techno-utopian possibility.”⁴⁶ In “Barriopunk,” there exists neither the false

utopias of cyber-heroism nor the hollow rebellions of cyberpunk. Instead, *cyber-rasquache* “Barriopunk” invaders of the virtual frontier reject superficial cyber-cultural insurgencies and pollute, both, the digital utopias and dystopias popular in U.S. science fiction. Gómez-Peña’s appropriation of U.S. media from cyberculture to stereotyping constitutes the kind of radical futurity and fabulation that exemplify postcolonial science fiction practices.⁴⁷

Questions and visions for the future in science fiction and fantasy are often inspired by the imagined potential of science and technology; at the same time, science fiction in literature and cinema has inspired a myriad of technological developments. H.G. Wells’ writing alone, inspired both the submarine and the fission reactor that preceded the atomic bomb.⁴⁸ Radical imagining and speculation can catalyze the materialization of these visions, which in turn inspires new fantasies and aspirations for the future. As this cycle of fantasy and fabrication recurs, the erosion of political stability, indigenous knowledge and imagination, and migratory freedom throughout the Americas continues to be facilitated by techno-scientific media and culture. By tapping into the critical potential of science fiction, Gómez-Peña has been able to invent and re-tell stories that may be overlooked by, unimaginable within, or antithetical to hegemonic, politically-neutral narratives associated with technoscientific popular culture. Concluding his *Platform Summit* address, Alex Rivera posited that, “fiction is not an escape from reality, it’s the first draft of reality. The battle over real power tomorrow begins with the struggle over who gets to dream today.”⁴⁹ Gómez-Peña and “La Pocha Nostra” crafted visual stories that not only offered insights into the past and visions of alternative futures, but also exemplified the practice of radical imagining that today’s dreamers might use to draft tomorrow’s realities.

ASHLEIGH DEOSARAN (b.1992, Trinidad and Tobago) is a multidisciplinary artist, writer, and curator based in New York City, where she earned a B.A. in Fine Arts and Psychology from Pace University (2016), and an M.A. in Modern Art: Critical and Curatorial Studies at Columbia University (2019). She researches contemporary Latinx art with a focus on the archipelagic Caribbean, often through the lens of queer theory, post-colonialism, and cultural studies. Her current research project centers on futurity, science fiction, and technology in contemporary Latin American art.

NOTES

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- ¹⁰ Fusco provides a timeline with examples of ethnocentric anthropological display practices in Europe and the U.S. from 1943 to 1992, as well as her reflections on performing this work, in "The Other History of Intercultural Performance." *TDR (1988-)* 38, no. 1 (1994): 143–67.
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