

Performance Activism at the *Borderlands*: Minutemen, Anzaldúa, Gómez-Peña

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Resumen

Las tierras fronterizas compartidas por los Estados Unidos y México son un depósito de signos de diversas culturas que han pasado por ellas: Indígena, española, mexicana y anglosajona. Tres tipos de activismo político o artístico se apropian selectivamente de algunos de esos signos para proclamar identidades propias. Mediante acciones de patrullaje fronterizo, los Minutemen salvaguardan la pureza del proyecto de identidad nativista basado en la doctrina de Destino Manifiesto. Anzaldúa (ensayo) y Gómez-Peña (arte de acción), en cambio, estimulan la proliferación de combinaciones de signos que dan lugar a nuevas identidades y mestizajes.

Palabras clave: Frontera, Identidad, Destino Manifiesto, Minutemen, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Gloria Anzaldúa

Abstract

The borderlands shared by the United States and Mexico are a deposit of signs of diverse cultures that have crossed through them: Native, Spanish, Mexican and Anglo-Saxon. Three types of political or artistic activism take control selectively of some of those signs to proclaim own identities. By means of the action of border patrolling, the Minutemen safeguard the purity of the project of nativist identity based on the doctrine of Manifest Destiny. Anzaldúa (test) and Gómez-Peña (action art), however, stimulate the proliferation of combinations of signs that give rise to new identities and mestizations.

Keywords: Frontier, Identity, Manifest Destiny, Minutemen, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Gloria Anzaldúa

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TOPOS TOPOI, SITE AND TOPICS

Once again, the vast unitary ecological system known as the borderlands of the Río Grande and the Sonoran and Chihuahuan Deserts constitute a privileged *topos* (as site and topic) for activist performances. The area has been symbolically charged since the early 1800s, when U.S. settlers performatively put a stake on Mexican territory, eliciting the defensive performances of Mexico's government and transforming what had been the free movement of people into codified discourses and policies regulating migration. A short list of noteworthy performances of the last two decades may include the performance writing of Gloria Anzaldúa, the showdown of Minutemen at the border, the "Temple of Confessions" of two Mexican (?), American (?) men of questionable legal and identity status, and the distribution of designer sneakers to facilitate the desert dash of "illegal" border crossers.¹ Rather than attempting to split hairs in defining the *differentia specifica* dividing performance art from highly symbolical political activism, I will focus on these performances as acts aimed at producing effects in their audience by dramatizing certain features of a given historical context in a given physical site. Thus, it is the "performative" nature of these acts that will be the common denominator of this otherwise disparate collection of political activists (the Minutemen) and political artists (Anzaldúa, Gómez-Peña).

Before plunging into an analysis of the differences among these performance activists, I will briefly reflect on the border as a collection of signs that the performances articulate in their aesthetic messages. I will argue that the border with Mexico has played a defining role in constituting the foundational myth of the people of the U.S. conceived as the people of Manifest Destiny. I will claim, furthermore, that the national project that gives rise to U.S. American identity is a profoundly nativist one, one in which the fear of the excluded Other is not merely entrenched but even constitutive and vital.

According to John Austin, performative speech acts are those that, by virtue of the very words uttered, accomplish an action rather than merely reporting information: a priest declaring a couple husband and wife. In looking at these actions as performative, I will focus on what these acts accomplish as effects in the world. I contend that what gives coherence to these actions is a kind of aesthetic "signature," a way of interpreting and making sense of the world centered around objects or identities that they hold up as beautiful and worthy. Furthermore, since these performative actions quite openly aim at

¹ I will refer to the performance action of Argentinian artist Judi Wertheim only in passing.

influencing the world by producing effects in it, the repertoire of signs that they make use of may be seen as a toolbox of rhetorical instruments aiming to convince their audiences of the coherence between the aesthetic sign regime from which they originate and the social and political moment in which the act is performed. In bringing these disparate practices (art and politics) together, I will be deemphasizing the unspoken expectation that art should accurately represent reality. Although they are not representational, these acts aim to reveal some aspect of the world. In focusing on their effects, I will be bringing art down to earth from lofty abstraction, on the one hand, while on the other, emphasizing some aesthetic aspects of political activist performances.

Hanna Arendt said about storytelling that it “reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it.” Similarly, the effects of performances defy any ready translation into discourse or public policy, although their rhetorical effectiveness (their potential to convince) hinges on their capacity to poignantly speak to the situation in which they are performed, revealing a larger description of the “state of the world.” The three types of border performances I will be analyzing point to issues of personal identity. The “line” metaphor that the border entails is powerful and categorical. It asks the crucial question: Where do you stand, this side or that? For the answer will determine your legal status. It is different aspects of this very question that these performance actions seek to emphasize and around which they seek to elicit the public’s reactions.

But the borderlands are more than a place on this or that side of the dividing line, whether this line is understood as marker of political geography or as the marker that defines and segregates “kinds” of people. The borderlands constitute a territory in themselves, a sign regime with its own logic² imposing certain jurisdictional claims on the semiotic actors alive in their landscape. But since a landscape, like a territory, can express itself both in physical and virtual form, the borderlands can play themselves out in San Francisco, New York and the Sierra Mixteca of Oaxaca. The virtual collection of signs that constitute the borderlands can be actualized in the semiotic fields of distant physical territories. Thus, it is not a surprise that public attention periodically turns to the conflict prone area of the borderlands *shared* between Mexico and the United States, to find that the site has been chosen as a rich locale for activist performances. The place is teeming with signs that point to pre-conquest history, to relations between races and religions, to Manifest Destiny, to Freedom of the Market, to the historical transition from

² “Logic” is here loosely understood as “tendency” or “coherence,” and “semiotic,” after Peirce, as pertaining to a coherent regime of signs that participates in an endless process of interpretation, by which sense is made of these signs, resulting in new signs which are themselves subject to further, infinite interpretation.

traditional to industrial agriculture, to proletarianization and drug trafficking, to relations between the sexes...

The continuity of the landscape, the sponginess of the dry soil make the line physically impossible. Besides the Clinton-era fence along the California border, fences in urban areas constitute a minuscule exception in the three thousand kilometer-long open-range border, though there are legislative proposals currently calling for a concrete wall along the entire stretch.³ The border's virtual existence, nevertheless, is very much a reality: it is anchored in a jurisdiction, a system of legal conventions imposed with the moral force of Manifest Destiny, enforced through physical possession on a territory since the 1843 annexation of Texas and the 1847 war against Mexico. The force of conquest is echoed now by the militarized sentinels that dot the virtual perimeter of the virtual Southwestern territory of the United States. Alas! Virtual territories and their actual expressions (laws, law enforcement agents, checkpoints and fences) must contend with the layers of competing territorial claims: other sign regimes, equally virtual or actual, seeking to integrate physical space into the logic of their sign networks, such as watershed systems, agriculture and migration patterns.

Performance actions like the ones I will be focusing on also weave their semiotic web, a rhetoric strategy to convince the public of the pertinence of their "logic," the perspective from which to make sense of the situation, and influence it. For performance is a selective emphasizing of some of the semiotic materials (the constellation of signs) available on a historico-physical site to be deployed as rhetorical devices to convince others of the legitimacy of one's aesthetic position, of one's "vision of the world," of that which one holds to be worthy, beautiful or sacred. Whether or not these particular performances can be called art in any traditional sense, they are forms of activism that seek to add legitimacy to this or that political position by aestheticizing and dramatizing some of the fundamental features of that historic-physical context, even though its "message" defies any clear-cut translation into word messages. Even in its "purest" apolitical manifestations, if there were such a thing, performance may be politically interpreted. In other words, it is not a question here of deciding once and for all whether art in itself is political or normative, exhorting us to live this way or that. The present project will pay attention to the practical, and consequently political, effects of these performance actions, whether or not they can be called "artistic."

³ The Sensenbrenner Act was passed by the U.S. Congress in December 2005 and will be debated in the Senate early in 2006. It calls for a 700 mile-system of fences positioned in "problem areas."

THE LIMITS OF THE LAND OF THE FREE: GOOD FENCES MAKE GOOD NEIGHBORS

Decried as a spongy, porous stretch of surface exposing the U.S. to contamination, the United States – Mexico border, once again, serves the function of indispensable membrane to mark the outer limits of U.S. identity. This line in the sand interrupts a single, discrete geographical landscape spanning from the American Southwest to Central Mexico: this vast region encompasses a unitary ecological system with its logically woven network of water, vegetation, and mineral resources sustaining millenary migrations of animals and humans. But it would be a mistake to call this vast area a unified and “stable” territory, as if only one sign regime could lay claim to it and explain once and for all under whose territorial laws this land is to be measured, allocated, and managed. The *Borderlands* that Anzaldúa has grown up in is more than a place on this or that side of the dividing line, South Texas in her case, whether this line is understood as marker of political geography, or simply as the marker that defines and segregates “kinds” of people.

In spite of the Minutemen’s vehement interpretation, here is no unitary “essence” of a people, and especially not an essence of the hodgepodge of ethnic groups constituting the U.S. American people. This, however, does not preclude the popularity of essentializing discourses proclaiming the value of a group’s alleged essential attributes. What are these attributes, and what gives cohesion as common denominator to this particular “kind” of people? Influential Harvard political scientist Samuel Huntington (*Who are We?* 2004) acknowledges the fact that though the original founders belonged to a homogenous ethnic group, the Anglo-Saxons, to speak of ethnicity today as the bond of U.S. identity would be illogical in a country with such diverse ethnic backgrounds. Though he may be brushing aside the thorny question of what exactly defines an Anglo-Saxon, a name clouded in myth but essential for the invention of British nationhood, Huntington’s point is basically true: the original founders, as well as the core values, of what became the United States did come from Britain. Furthermore, he declares:

Throughout American history, people who were not white Anglo-Saxon Protestants have become Americans by adopting America’s Anglo-Protestant culture and political values. This benefited them and the country. American national identity and unity, as Benjamin C. Schwarz has said, derived ‘from the

ability and willingness of an Anglo elite to stamp its image on other peoples coming to this country. That elite's religious and political principles, its customs and social relations, its standards of taste and morality, were for 300 years, America's, and in basic ways they still, are –despite our celebration of “diversity.”⁴

Thus, the essential attribute of the U.S. American people that Huntington proposes is that of identification with and participation in a set of beliefs and practices that may be traced to a particular ethnic group: “The core of their identity is the culture that the settlers created, which generations of immigrants have absorbed, and which gave birth to the American Creed. At the heart of that culture has been Protestantism.”⁵ The American Creed may be summarized as a recognition of the inalienable dignity of the individual, the fundamental equality of humans, as well as the rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.⁶ The relevance of this Creed for a discussion of the border with Mexico becomes evident when one considers the sense of national mission that accompanies attempts to locate the origin of U.S. American identity. Not coincidentally, such attempts play with the notion of a chosen people as a particular ethnic group. The slippage from “creed” to ethnicity may not be altogether innocent, as the acknowledgment of the existence of an “elite” in this supposedly egalitarian nation points to, and given that the ethnic factor has played an important role in the construction of national identity. Is doing away with strict racial boundaries while celebrating the reigning values as inherent in a particular race not an example of wanting to keep one's cake while eating it too? The sense of a chosen people with a mission can be traced to the foundational myth of Manifest Destiny, in which the border with Mexico plays the central role of defining the limits of what the chosen people is not. Border and destiny are the central tropes of the three types of performance activism I will be discussing in what follows.

Though not coined until 1845, when the South was pushing for annexation of Texas and for the Westward extension of slavery, the concept of Manifest Destiny has been at the core of the national project from its inception in Jamestown to our days in Iraq. It has served as a definition of the twofold duties of a “God-chosen people.” Projected to the outside as foreign policy, Manifest Destiny calls for territorial expansion and extension of the area of influence. Projected inward, as domestic policy, Manifest

⁴ Samuel Huntington, *Who are We?* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 2004) 61.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 67.

Destiny is a nativist project that seeks to preserve the integrity of the “native” group responsible for “founding” civilization in the Americas: the white Anglo-Saxon Protestants and those who embrace the American Creed, buying into the values associated with a particular ethnic group.

John Higham defines nativism as “an intense opposition to an internal minority on the ground of its foreign (i.e. ‘un-American’) connections,”⁷ and he identifies three distinct nativist traditions in U.S. history: anti-Catholic, anti-radical and racial nativism. Now, neither all nativist projects are race-based nor all race-based projects are racist. For Omi and Winant, “A racial project can be defined as *racist* if and only if it *creates* or *reproduces structures of domination based on essentialist categories of race.*”⁸ The third kind of race-based *and* racist nativist policies is well established in U.S. history. A sampling of these policies could include the enslavement and segregation of Africans, the extermination of Native Americans, the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882); the segregation of Asians in public schools by the San Francisco Board of Education (1906); the exclusion of Asians from the so-called Asiatic Barred Zone (1917); immigration quotas depending on national origin based on previous immigration patterns (1929); the Mexican Repatriation Act (1930), by which approximately 500,000 persons of Mexican origin, many of whom U.S. citizens, were forcefully removed from California; the Japanese Internment by executive order claiming “military necessity” (1942), by which 110,000 Japanese-Americans were put in concentrations camps until 1946.⁹

Although since its founding the U.S. American national project has required waves of cheap labor to sustain its territorial or capitalist expansion, anti-foreign discourse has fulfilled two vital functions. On the one hand, it has helped define (negatively) the limits of U.S. American identity by virtue of the excluded Other who provides the necessary contrast. Similarly, in its quest to clarify the concept of the rational individual, European Enlightenment required the contrast of a backward, superstitious and body-driven savage. On the other hand, anti-foreign discourse has served the function of preserving or imposing a hierarchy, a semiotic pecking order by which the more established groups are able to curb the aspirations of new arrivals, to keep them “in their place” even as their labor is eagerly accepted.

⁷ John Higham, *Strangers in the Land* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1950) 4.

⁸ Michal Omi and Howard Winant, “Racial Formation,” *Oppression, Privilege, and Resistance*, eds. Lisa Heldke and Peg O’Connor (Boston: Mc Graw Hill, 2004): 131.

⁹ Alberto Hernández-Lemus, *Latinos and Latinas in US History and Culture: An Encyclopedia*, forthcoming.

The political economy regulating the intra-group relations of the hodgepodge of ethnic groups claiming the mantle of the people of Manifest Destiny could well be summed up in the words of U.S. poet Robert Frost, "good fences make good neighbors." Now hegemonically imposed in the so-called global world, liberalism is based on the preeminence of individuals, their rights and opportunities as laid down by Locke, Smith, Mill and Ricardo. Liberalism, as explanatory description of human "nature" and normative prescription of how to realize its potential, is first and foremost an adversarial political philosophy conceived as defensive system against the "natural" impulse of individuals to act out their desires in opposition to each other. Instead of the antagonisms expressed according to the law of the jungle as described by Hobbes, competition is to be well regulated, according to the loosely defined concept of "fair play" extended to those individuals whose essential attributes may qualify them to embrace the American Creed. In the process, several groups have been disqualified a priori as not possessing the necessary attributes to be worthy of receiving "fair play" treatment or capable of playing fair: Native Americans, Africans, Catholics, Germans, radicals, Chinese, Japanese, Mexicans. Thus, the border with Mexico stands as a levee holding back jungle savagery from the outside. The Minutemen's performances are vivid expressions of this nativist tradition.

In a land where the Jeffersonian formula "pursuit of happiness" is commonly interpreted according to a Protestant ethics that equates accumulation of actual or potential satisfaction with a state of grace, property is a sign of future salvation. It is of course not unique to the United States to desire to expand its area of influence. What is unique is the specific vocabulary with which the expansion of the U.S. has been justified, which is that of Manifest Destiny. A curious paradox implicit in the doctrine comes to the fore when this individualistic model is exported to more communitarian settings, a paradox that illustrates the untenable tension between the foreign and domestic policy implications of the doctrine. "Speak softly and carry a big stick," Roosevelt said as he endeavored to apply Monroe's doctrine, "America for Americans," not only to the Americas but even as far as the Philippines. The paradox is that expansion abroad is likely to result in immigration to the U.S. (through cultural and commercial ties), and that newcomers will be met with domestic nativist sentiment. An excellent example of this paradox is playing itself out at the border even as we speak, and is illustrated by the title of one of Gómez-Peña's books: *Dangerous Border Crossers, the artist talks back* (2000). Pressured by the U.S. through the International Monetary Fund and World Bank

to implement radical structural adjustments to gain admission in the Free Trade Agreement that existed between the U.S. and Canada since 1989, Mexico's Harvard-educated president Salinas pushed for the dismantling of two pillars of Mexican political economy since its revolution (1917): the *ejido* and agricultural subsidies. In so doing, Mexico's ruling elite decided to modernize Mexican farming by doing away with a form of communal landholding enshrined in the Mexican Constitution. The *ejido* guaranteed the bare survival of traditional farmers, since their land could not be sold or encumbered. As part of those concessions, and thanks to the huge asymmetry of power between the economies of these two neighbors, Mexico was barred from subsidizing its agriculture, while the U.S. pays billions to its farmers (though the lion's share goes to a handful of giant agro-industries). Cheap U.S. grain, as a result of the North American Free Trade Agreement, is being *legally* dumped in Mexico. Unable to compete against subsidized prices, Mexican farmers are selling their communal lands, often to those very same subsidized U.S. agricultural companies! Doing away with communal property rights opened the door to proletarianization of traditional farmers, a weeding out of "traditional" and "inefficient" players. Since 1994, when NAFTA went into effect, Mexican emigration to the U.S. has soared. This is the historic context of the place called the Borderlands.

THREE KINDS OF PERFORMANCE ACTIVISM IN THE BORDERLANDS

The selection is arbitrary. It could easily have included thousands of other actors doing performative actions, beginning with the thousands who will yearly take the chance of dying as they perform their *brinco* (jump) across the *línea* (border line) in the knowledge that about 350 jumpers will die every year (Wertheim's performance designer-sneakers equipped with a flashlight, a map and some aspirins are appropriately called *Brincos*). I have chosen these three performance types because of the playfulness with which they articulate their main trope, the border, as the image of a broken fence, letting in infection, in the case of the Minutemen, and cross-fertilizing artificial categories of identity in the other two cases.

THE MINUTEMEN

There is no question that the performance activism of the Minutemen is proving to be enormously successful, judging from the enthusiastic coverage it has been receiving in

the media since it began operations in April 2004. The conservative *Washington Times* reports:

More than 4,500 Minuteman volunteers participated in the 30-day vigil to protest what they consider the U.S. lax immigration policies, manning observation posts and conducting foot and horseback patrols along the Mexican border from Texas to California and in seven states on the Canadian border.¹⁰

In addition to these patrols on the U.S.-Mexico border to intercept undocumented aliens as they dash across the desert into the U.S., in October 2005 the Minutemen posted pickets in areas where day laborers are hired in Houston. The Minutemen are only one of the many “civil defense” groups actively patrolling the border. Like-minded “patriotic” civil defense groups have proliferated at an alarming rate. The Anti-Defamation League confirms the link among some of these organizations and white supremacist groups.¹¹

Though the name goes back to those mythological armed “patriots” of the 1700s fighting for independence from Britain, it has often faded and reappeared in several guises. The name “Minutemen” has been associated with vigilante traditions as varied as the Ku Klux Klan of the West (notably in California and Colorado), as well as with the Texas and California Rangers. Today’s Minutemen were founded in 2004 by the kind of character that Samuel Huntington sympathetically describes as the frustrated middle class American white male, “reacting to the losses, defeats, aggravations, and humiliations that he sees imposed on him by a multiethnic, multiracial, and multicultural society.”¹² The organization founded in California by retired accountant Chris Simcox has mushroomed and now has active chapters in two dozen states.

The Minutemen’s performances are reported and displayed on the organization’s official web site: images of huddled brown masses, handcuffed and squatting on the side of the road next to a Border Patrol SUV. Freshly caught aliens serve as photographic trophy for the Minutemen’s fine work in alerting the authorities about their illegal intrusion. These actions have won much praise from another performer, himself once an illegal alien, the governor of California, Arnold Schwarzenegger. Perhaps the most powerful sign these activists wield is as ostensible as it is concealed: the weapon. Part of the performance aspect of the Minutemen’s actions involves preparing public opinion in advance of their operations so as to elicit the appropriate interpretations concerning

¹⁰ *Washington Times*, November 8, 2005.

¹¹ Anti Defamation League, “Neo-Nazi Leads Recruitment Drive for New Border Militia” www.adl.org/PresRele/Militi_71/4563.71.

¹² *Ibid.*, 309.

the urgency of the situation at the border, and the legitimacy of their actions as a gesture of self-defense by “decent” everyday Americans pushed to the limit. A question mark hovers over their action: Are they are *armed* or not? The official line is that they do not carry weapons on their observation missions. The training guidelines on their website¹³ direct registered members not to engage the suspects in any way, and to limit their intervention to contact U.S. authorities. On the other hand, however, the organization routinely waves some membership fees for those new recruits who hold concealed-weapons permits, allegedly because permit holders do not require the expense of a background investigation. It is conceivable that in any given performance action, a good many Minutemen are “packing heat.”

Thus, the loaded sign “weapon” unleashes important semiotic associations in two separate directions, both equi-primordial in the U.S. “national character,” or at least in the constitution of its identity. These are two discrete, though intertwined, narratives demanding allegiance to their competing logics. On the one hand armed militias enjoy the legitimacy of the second amendment of the U.S. Constitution, which states that “A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.” Since the language regarding the regulation of militias leaves open to interpretation the official relationship between civilian armed groups and the government, the much debated amendment does not rule out the deputizing of “posses” by local authorities, nor the toleration of citizens’ groups taking the law into their own hands in cases where it is politically wiser for governments to conceal their participation in the implementation of controversial popular practices, such as lynching. On the other hand is the semiotic associative chain by which armed militias stand as a defiant criticism of a federal or local bureaucracy which they consider clumsy and fainthearted or even treacherous, invaded by enemies such as the much maligned “Zionists.” President Bush’s recent dismissal of the Minutemen as “vigilantes” may be inscribed in the second semiotic series: defiant citizens who are taking the law in their own hands. Bush is savvy enough a politician to acknowledge the power of American employers and their demand for cheap foreign labor, but also of the power of the fastest growing group of voters: Hispanics. Schwarzenegger’s endorsement belongs in the first, legitimating, series, as do the conversations between the nation’s only Hispanic governor, New Mexico’s Bill Richardson, and Mr. Chris Simcox. Both series intertwine in

¹³ The Official Minuteman Civil Defense Corps Volunteer Training Manual, Published by the *Tombstone Tumbleweed Newspaper*, www.minutemanhq.com/pdf_files/training_manual2.

the regime of signs that promotes the interpretation of a chaotic security crisis at the border, while pointing to the sanction of historical precedent as its legitimation. This semiotic regime immediately opens up to another one, equally legitimated by precedent: nativism. “Nativism is not to be confused with membership in a group that may be labeled ‘Native-American’ in the contemporary sense of the term. On the contrary, nativism refers to someone’s claim to membership in a group, which by virtue of its dominant power position *calls itself* ‘native’ of a given territory.”¹⁴

Nativist policies aimed at actual exclusion are rare: for the most part they constitute a form of pressure on newcomers or less-established residents in order to keep them in a subordinate position in the social pecking order. The unprecedented concentration of the world’s resources has created an insatiable demand for more goods and services. The decline of the Mexican worker’s purchasing power has been the result of the thorough restructuring and “liberalization” of Mexican agriculture, which has in turn lowered the price of undocumented labor. But in order for the price of undocumented labor to be kept low this labor must remain illegal in the territorial jurisdiction that benefits from the worker’s despair. This is where the Minutemen come in. Their performances tap a vast and venerable semiotic arsenal that enjoys the legitimacy of a foundational tradition, primordial to the settling of the original colonies, as well as to the colonizing of territories annexed from Mexico.

Much as Anzaldúa’s performative writing had demonstrated 17 years before the Minutemen’s performances, identification with a particular tradition largely means picking and choosing those semiotic elements capable of proliferating into associative chains pointing to an idealized and often mythological past. Thus, some outspoken politicians can endorse Minutemen’s actions without fear of contradiction, in spite of the fact that they belong to until-recently excluded groups. Such is the case of Arnold Schwarzenegger and of Colorado firebrand Representative in the U.S. Congress, Tom Tancredo. A son of Italian immigrants, Tancredo is responsible for founding the Immigration Reform Caucus, an anti-immigration group with 91 members. For, in evoking the signs “Manifest Destiny” and that “WASP American Creed” which Huntington advocates, the identity whose purity the Minutemen claim to be upholding proves to have flexible enough borders so as to include non-WASPs who embrace the American creed.

¹⁴ Alberto Hernández-Lemus, *ibid.*

If the measure of a performance's success is the public reaction it unleashes, the Minutemen must be recognized as greatly effective. Among their opponents are not only human rights organizations or the government of Mexico, but countervailing militia groups as well, such as the Brown Berets of California, a group with links to the militant Black Panthers of the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Indeed, in the words of Minuteman Carl Braun, an executive recruiter in San Diego and leader of the Minutemen Corps of California, whose 800 volunteer members patrol the border with Mexico, president George W. Bush's recent reversal on prior promises of immigrant amnesty programs in favor of "law and order" solutions to the "border problem" are a response to demands from within the Republican Party in places like California. According to Mr. Braun, "Bush did nothing" until a group like the Minutemen "screamed so loudly" that they were heard by Republicans.¹⁵

GLORIA ANZALDÚA: *BORDERLANDS/LA FRONTERA*¹⁶

I will take Anzaldúa's words at face value when she performatively decrees, with an author's authority, that her writing is a performance. Here I am considering the time-specific aspect of performance, that it puts the spotlight on a historical context in order to understand a moment's multi-layered composition. For a moment's historical nature is not limited to its sequential place between what came before and what comes after it. A thick reading of the layers of sign-systems that can be activated would reflect layers upon layers of planes of logical coherence crisscrossing the borderlands landscape in North, South and Western directions by migrating people leaving cultural traces of their passage. Migrants have followed auspicious signs, like when the Uto-Aztec Cochise left the Southwest to found in the Anahuac Plateau what became the Aztec empire. The auspicious signs today point Northwards, and this is acknowledged by Anzaldúa, as her literary persona travels north from South Texas to San Francisco and New York in the course of the book, and in so doing stretches her internalized borderlands beyond their strictly physical reaches.

Anzaldúa's writing can be considered performance because of its incantatory function, aimed at unleashing a semiotic process in which the reader is first made aware of the myriad signs laying dormant in the borderland's "soil." This unearthing of signs

¹⁵ Nina Bernstein, *New York Times*, November 29, 2005:16.

¹⁶ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987)

available in the layers of history for inclusion in the forging of a personal identity is a personal project undergone by Anzaldúa's autobiographical persona but one that she claims can be reenacted by the reader to forge what she terms a new Mestiza identity of her own.

My stories are acts encapsulated in time, "enacted" every time they are spoken aloud or read silently. I like to think of them as performances and not as inert and "dead" objects (as the aesthetics of Western culture think of art works). Instead, the work has an identity; it is a "who" or a "what" and contains the presences of persons, that is, incarnations of gods or ancestors or natural and cosmic powers. The work manifests the same needs as a person, it needs to be "fed," *la tengo que bañar y vestir* (89).

The autobiographical tone of Anzaldúa's writing is profoundly unstable, since the identity of the persona is very much a work in progress, an invention taking place before the reader's eyes. Furthermore, the protagonist's unfinished personality boils over its ambiguous limits as it pronounces itself to be a work that exists as an "event," as it is "enacted" in the writing but also as it is re-enacted by the reader. For here the appeal to the reader is not that of a traditional (Western) art object whose contemplation will complete the object-subject circuit of aesthetic appreciation. In reaching out to the reader and in eliciting her participation in the writing, Anzaldúa stresses the performative nature of the work: no longer an object produced by an artist-genius, but a communal, participatory event in which the construction of an identity is celebrated:

Some works exist forever invoked, always in performance. I'm thinking of totem poles, cave paintings. Invoked art is communal and speaks of everyday life. It is dedicated to the validation of humans: that is, it makes people hopeful, happy, secure, and it can have negative effects as well, which propel one towards a search for validation (89).

Anzaldúa's text performs the transformation of the autobiographical persona of this semi-academic writing and claims to effect the transformation of her audience by identifying with the shamanistic tradition: "The ability of story (prose and poetry) to transform the storyteller and the listener into something or someone else is shamanistic. The writer, as shape-changer, is a *nahual*, a shaman" (88).

Thus, focusing on the effects of Anzaldúa's performative writing one can observe the following types of transformations: a) at the level of personal identity, the protagonist or poetic-persona is shown undergoing a journey uncovering and rehearsing signs that she can claim as her own, choosing her cultural ancestry as Nahuatl, Mexican, Chicana, as woman and as a Lesbian. Such is the progressive, endless "new Mestiza" identity

project that she proclaims; b) at the level of literary genres, *Borderlands/La Frontera* plays with several generic traditions ranging from the academic to the autobiographical essay, with a sprinkling of poetry interspersed throughout the work; c) as a result of the previous two levels of ambivalence, the relationship between author and reader wavers. The authoritative scholarly tone softens at times to an intimate confessional mode or hardens to a militant proselytizing appeal, encouraging readers to undergo their own transformative searches.

Anzaldúa's work therefore qualifies as performative writing, a genre that Peggy Phelan describes as one which "enacts the death of the we that we think we are before we begin to write. A statement of allegiance to the radicality of unknowing who we are becoming, this writing pushes against the ideology of knowledge as a progressive movement forever approaching a completed end-point."¹⁷ Hence, the effect of this performance is to inaugurate a novel conception of identity, one that is transitional, unfinished and ultimately amounts to little more than a capricious sampling of identity markers that coherently fit into the evolving "logic" of our aesthetic semiotic system. She proposes a model of "ethnic" identification that pertains to a people that is yet to come, as Deleuze would refer to the fictionalized ethnic identity of exiles and nomads. That act of cobbling and its provisional product, Anzaldúa calls "the new Mestiza identity." "But I will not glorify those aspects of my culture which have injured me and which have injured me in the name of protecting me" (44). This choosing of cultural traits is not a mere tracing an ancestral heritage but rather an active reckoning, a critical "re-interpretation" in the Nietzschean sense:

So don't give me your tenets and your laws. Don't give me your lukewarm gods. What I want is an accounting with all three cultures – white, Mexican, Indian. I want the freedom to carve and chisel my own face, to staunch the bleeding with ashes, to fashion my own gods out of my entrails. And if going home is denied me then I will have to stand and claim my space, making a new culture....(44)

It is in the light of such passages that it is not a contradiction for Anzaldúa to suggest an essence of the new Mestiza identity, which she has systematically shown to be a piecing together of sampled traits. Essence becomes a sense of aesthetic allegiance, a sense of mission as something with which we individually identify, far from the essentialism of a once and for all, god-given creed: "I search for our essential dignity

¹⁷ Peggy Phelan, *Mourning Sex* (London: Routledge, 1997) 16.

as a people, a people with a sense of purpose -to belong and contribute to something greater than *our pueblo*" (110).

A cohesive element of the new Mestiza identity is the "tolerance for ambiguity that Chicanos-Mexicanos, people of mixed race, people who have Indian blood, people who cross cultures by necessity possess" (52). Thus, the internalized borderlands are much more than a physical territory straddling the two sides of a dividing line. They become a capacity, a perspective from which artificially bordered territories can be interpreted as porous and open: "Those who are pounced on the most have it [the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities] the strongest: the females, the homosexuals of all races, the darkskinned, the outcast, the persecuted, the marginalized, the foreign" (60).

The effects of literature on the world are hard to quantify. Literature seldom translates into public policy. Nevertheless, judging by the immense popularity of *Borderlands* in the academic community of the U.S., and the regularity with which the text is taught in university courses, one can surmise that it has contributed to a growing national debate surrounding purity at several levels: a) cultural identity issues, as expressed in the form of initiatives calling for the defense of the purity of the English language, such as the growing English-Only movement; b) sexual orientation issues, such as the controversy over gay marriage; c) the hotly debated issue of immigration reform.

For, as Anzaldúa declares, it is far from enough to condemn the discrimination that Chicanos and Mexicans must endure in the nativist U.S.: "Nothing happens in the 'real' world unless it first happens in the images in our heads" (109). Recognition must begin with self-recognition. In seeking "new images of identity, new beliefs about ourselves," Anzaldúa is saying to "white society: We need you to accept the fact that Chicanos are different, to acknowledge your rejection and negation of us. We need you to own the fact that you looked upon us as less than human, that you stole our lands, our personhood, our self-respect" (107,108).

GUILLERMO GÓMEZ-PEÑA: *TEMPLE OF CONFESSIONS*¹⁸

¹⁸ Guillermo Gómez-Peña *Temple of Confessions: Mexican beasts and living santos* (New York: Power House Books, 1996).

Gómez-Peña is a learned intellectual from Mexico City's Politechnical Institute posing as the embodiment of a long series of improbable transformations: now a mythologized Aztec shaman, now a mariachi, now an illegal alien, now a cyber-punk. "Since my early work with the Border Arts Workshop (1984-1990), I have defined myself as a migrant provocateur, an inter-cultural pirate, a border 'brujo,' a conceptual coyote, and more recently, a 'web-back,' zig-zagging the ever-fluctuating borders of the dying 'Western Civilization.'" As a "post-Mexican in racist USA, or as a 'chicanized' Mexican in nationalist Mexico," Gómez-Peña's performance art straddles the borders of national and ethnic identity, determined to make his morphing persona desired or despised by his U.S. American spectators.

In what follows, I will focus on one representative performance/installation of Gómez-Peña's (with Roberto Sifuentes), his *Temple of Confessions*:

We combined the format of the pseudo-ethnographic "diorama"...with that of the dramatic religious "dioramas" displayed in Mexican colonial churches, exhibiting ourselves inside Plexiglas boxes as both cultural "specimens" and "holy" creatures. [...] The piece was based on a religious meta-fiction; we became two living *santos* [saints] from an unknown border religion, in search of sanctuary across America. People were invited to experience this bizarre pagan temple and confess to the saints their inter-cultural fears and desires.

In addition to touring various museums and art venues in the U.S. for two and a half years, the piece appeared at a desacralized sixteenth century Mexican convent and in book form accompanied by an audio CD in 1996:

In the main altar of the Chapel of Desires, Roberto poses as "el Pre-Columbian Vato," a "holy gangmember." His arms and face are painted with intricate pre-Columbian tattoos, and his tank top is covered with blood and perforated with holes from gun shots. He shares the restricted space inside the Plexiglas box with 50 cockroaches, a live, four-foot-long iguana, and a small table of useless gadgets...Behind him stands an "authentic"-looking façade of a "pre-Columbian temple" made out of Styrofoam.

In confession, the spectators become participants projecting interpretations and engaging the performers through oral and body language. Spectators respond as to a Rorschach inkblot that elicits their desires and fears. "We incarnate your fears," reads a neon sign over the Gómez-Peña diorama. "We incarnate your desires," reads the sign over that of Sifuentes. The performers' identities illusive and suggestive, admit territorializations in an infinite series of semiotic fields. As objects of ridicule, these two characters can be seen as abject clowns, ironizing those traits of their ethnicity that confirm the US American cliché of the Mexican: the mustache, the hat, the tacky and

overt sexuality, the “macho” gaze, the filth (represented by the cockroaches), the superstitious aspect of the idol in a glass case, so common in Spanish Catholic filled churches, inhabited by bloody, martyred effigies of sons-of-God and saints. Gómez-Peña and Sifuentes have designed a temple as provocation for that good old WASP sense of decorum. The public’s responses range from curiosity to open rejection, from longing and desire to indifference and hostility. The saints are the foreigner, the Native, the Other, the ones whose sexual knowledge puts them in contact with the dark forces secretly coveted by those whom Benjamin Franklin called “of the lovely White skin.”¹⁹

Here are some of the audience’s responses:

“I wish all Mexicans would be deported!!...and take this bad art with them!” (47).

“I am a gringo, but wish I could someday sing with el Mariachi Vargas” (44).

“I desire this trash [the exhibit] be destroyed. The drugs, guns, witchcraft stuff, and liquor make me think so highly of Hispanics” (47).

“I desire his touch, his smell, his attention, his gaze. I desire his warmth and unconditional love. I desire his lips, his grip, and his sensitivity. I desire his understanding. I desire his body” (48,49).

“Yo quiero a un Revolucionario! Yo Necesito una Revolución. Nosotros necesitamos un Revolución aquí en el Norte. Libertad de la opresión de la gente de Los Estados Unidos. Soy un anglo, pero conozco la verdad” (50).

“I desire to live in a place where labels of difference and identity (white, Mexican, Catholic, Agnostic, etc.) are overlooked and similarities are stressed” (52).

“I feel all Mexican women are whores” (53).

“I fear ignorance on the part of all cultures. Because ignorance results in death, war, stolen land; death to innocent children, innocent mestizos, innocent gringos...” (54).

“I am concerned over the many peoples from Mexico coming across the borders illegally. How do we assimilate all these people without a heavy burden on our resources?” (54).

“I fear that American will become a two-language country. My parents were immigrants, but they learned English. Can’t you Mexicans do the same?” (54).

“I feel some self-loathing at being white, US citizen of Euro background. Ashamed of my history. My skin. And when I am in Central America, I feel so conspicuously oppressive” (54).

The Temple of Confessions as performance art propitiates the proliferation of interpretations that will successfully, if tentatively, integrate certain elements of their personas into a somewhat coherent narrative, a story whose explanatory power might make sense of the absurd situation in which two individuals of distant groups come face to face with each other in the strange context of an art exhibit. As effigies, the performers make themselves objects willing to absorb the interpretation projected onto them. A unique aspect of the piece is the fact that the spectators’ performative responses are spoken into a microphone and recorded, and that they are integrated as part of the piece once the performance morphs its format into book and disk form. For it

¹⁹ Ronald Takaki, *Iron Cages* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) 14.

is those reactions then that become objects of interpretations of the *new* spectator (a spectator once-removed, a spectator of spectators) whose interpretative task is reconciling the myriad competing, contradictory “stories” in which the performance artists have been integrated. By eliciting a network of alternative explanations in which certain elements of the piece “fit” and make sense, an important aspect of the world is revealed, as it pertains to the here-and-now context of the borderlands at the turn of the 21st century. The hegemonic force by which a hierarchy of differential values for kinds of people, that blanket story of WASP nativism lacks specificity to account for the contradictions inherent in such a grand narrative. These contradictions, however do not make the narrative untenable: it may break down in a selective collection of fragments, but it does not collapse entirely. As the performance successfully shows, people operating as one unitary society can easily entertain these contradictory reactions to the same provocation.

CONCLUSION

I have been speaking of the borderlands shared by the U.S. and Mexico as a semiotic arsenal. By that I mean a haphazard collection of remnants of sign series, at the disposal of new interpreters ready to appropriate them, to pass them on knowingly or unknowingly. It is through interpretations that unused signs, leading virtual existences in the layers of history and soil, can become actualized in new interpretive series. In Nietzschean fashion, armed with the authority of an artist strong enough to impose her interpretation as an aesthetic credo, Anzaldúa decrees a direct link between Coatlicue and the Virgin of Guadalupe. Anzaldúa believes in her right to invent a new Mestiza identity based on the signs discovered in and sampled from the cultural mix of U.S. Americans, Native Americans and Mexican Americans in the borderlands landscape. She claims Coatlicue to be the last Aztec matriarchal goddess displaced by the god of war Huichilopochtli. She claims the invention of Guadalupe on the temple of Tonantzin, Our Lady of the Aztecs, as a recycling of strands of Aztec sign regimes in Catholic shape. She claims the right to embrace patriarchal Mexican American culture while exposing and rejecting the patriarchal.

Similarly, the Minutemen and Gómez-Peña selectively appropriate the signs that the borderlands offer them, claiming the right to membership in a tradition of their own choosing, albeit with an important difference. The Minutemen trace their lineage

backward and stop at the mythologized “race” from whose values issued forth liberty, democracy, and above all, the right to individual, fenced property. This is the American Creed that Huntington attributes to the WASP. Gómez-Peña, and Anzaldúa, by contrast, also appropriate sampled signs from their mythologized past, except that for them there is no tracing back of the series to an ultimate source! Unlike the Minutemen, there are no founding fathers, whose virtuous seed took hold in the fertile womb of the American earth, which had been lying there expectantly, awaiting the arrival of those of the “lovely White skin.” For the traditions in which Gómez-Peña claims membership too are haphazard samplings from traditions invariably at odds with each other: the Spanish, the Indian, the postmodern punk.

I also have been speaking of performance art as a kind of event that draws the spectators’ attention to the specificity of the terrain in which it *takes place*, the historical moment in which a proposed collection of signs is presented for interpretation. I have shown that in responding to a certain aesthetic logic, these three performance actions proclaim the validity of an identity, an identity worthy of imposing itself on other competing logics. I call them aesthetic logics because, invariably, each of these semiotic strands or traditions contains as a keystone concept a notion of that which is beautiful and noble. Beauty and nobility for the Minutemen can be traced to the myth of the founding pioneers. For Gómez-Peña and Anzaldúa beauty resides in the transformative process in which identities carry out novel, playful and inventive metamorphoses. Furthermore, I have suggested that with these actions the performers seek to elicit the participation of the spectator, and that in the process the piece grows in interpretive material, since it collects input from the public. The Minutemen, for instance, present themselves as militarized pacifists. But their rhetorical gestures, aimed at convincing the public that the homeland is besieged, do not occur in a vacuum. Their performances are strengthened by feedback from a U.S. public that is increasingly receptive to anti-Mexican rhetoric. Indeed, the sobering reality of today’s anti-immigrant atmosphere reflects growing permissiveness in the use of force against undocumented border crossers. Not only is the Immigration and Naturalization Service Border patrol increasingly resorting to lethal force, but U.S. ranchers and vigilante groups are enthusiastically joining a more and more culturally sanctioned sport called “mexercising,” the sport of chasing and bashing Mexicans.

How long before we again see lynching mobs sanctioned by a legal system that looks the other way? For now, the national attitude regarding Mexican immigrants

seems to be: "we will give you work, but we don't want to see you." But how long will the current precarious status quo of 11 million undocumented aliens (mostly Mexican) last? How long before nativism again expresses itself in vicious anti-foreign actions such as the incarceration of Japanese-Americans during the second world war, or the Mexican Repatriation Act of 1930? These are some questions that these border performance actions urge their audiences to address.