

June 2014

The Body as Politic: Education and the performance Art of Guillermo Gómez-Peña

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Recommended Citation

Cole, Dana (2014) "The Body as Politic: Education and the performance Art of Guillermo Gómez-Peña," *Cultural Encounters, Conflicts, and Resolutions*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/cecr/vol1/iss1/3>

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The Body as Politic: Education and the performance Art of Guillermo Gómez-Peña

Abstract

Art has been used as a tool in many fields as a method to tap into different ways of knowing and learning. It promotes creativity and individual expression by encouraging innovation and by opening up possibilities to different ways of expressing and experiencing. My work looks at the performance art of Guillermo Gómez-Peña as a form of public pedagogy using a/r/tography, an arts-based methodology, to illuminate way art it can be used to enhance the learning experience. This article examine the in-between spaces created in Gómez-Peña's work as epistemological borderzones underscoring how borders come together in heterogeneity, contradiction, and flux to create emancipatory possibilities that open up spaces for counter-hegemonic epistemologies.

Keywords

Guillermo Gómez-Peña, performance

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Art has been used as a tool in many fields as a method to tap into different ways of knowing and learning. It promotes creativity and individual expression by encouraging innovation and by opening up possibilities to different ways of expressing and experiencing. My work looks at the performance art of Guillermo Gómez-Peña as a form of public pedagogy using a/r/tography, an arts-based methodology, to illuminate the way art can be used to enhance the learning experience. This article examines the in-between spaces created in Gómez-Peña's work as epistemological borderzones underscoring how borders come together in heterogeneity, contradiction, and flux to create emancipatory possibilities that open up spaces for counter-hegemonic epistemologies.

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1. Introduction:

Art has been used as a tool in many fields as a method to tap into different ways of knowing and learning. It promotes creativity and individual expression by encouraging innovation and by opening up possibilities to different ways of expressing and experiencing. My work looks at the performance art of Guillermo Gómez-Peña as a form of public pedagogy using a/r/tography, an arts-based methodology, and it addresses the ways it can be used to enhance the learning experience.

Creativity, imagination and fluid boundaries characterize the artistic mindset, yet are undeveloped in classroom pedagogy. I believe it is in the best interest of students and a means to democratic inclusion to incorporate these processes into the learning experience. As an educator I propose the utilization of a rhizomatic view of learning that focuses on the process of never-ending inquiry, questioning, and multiple sensory ways of knowing that can open up spaces to new epistemologies and break down dichotomous thinking of "right" and "wrong" binaries. In addition I propose incorporating public pedagogy, or outside curriculum, into the classroom. I use the performance art of Guillermo Gómez-Peña to initiate

conversations, which question and rupture borders that confine conceptualizations and fixed identity markers of ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and language.

This article will detail Gómez-Peña's work as an example of public pedagogy and will examine the in-between spaces created in his work as epistemological borderzones underscoring how borders come together in heterogeneity, contradiction, and flux to create emancipatory possibilities that open up spaces for counter-hegemonic epistemologies. Furthermore it will underscore how Gómez-Peña's borderzone art affirms states of uncertainty and confusion and how these spaces are ripe with liberatory possibilities as they unshackle limits and unchain stasis.

2. Who is Guillermo Gomez-Peña?:

Guillermo Gómez-Peña was born in 1955 and raised in Mexico City until 1978 at which time he immigrated to the United States. Through performance art, poetry, journalism, critical writings, and cultural theory he has been exploring cross-cultural issues, identity and the relationship between Mexico and the United States as well as the politics of globalization. His eight books include essays, experimental poetry and chronicles in English, Spanish and Spanglish. For over twenty years, Gómez-Peña has been exploring intercultural issues with the use of mixed genres and experimental languages. Critics have termed his border perspective performance projects "Chicano cyber-punk performances," and "ethno-techno art" in which audience members are placed in the position of the foreigner or the minority as cultural borders are repositioned at center, and the alleged mainstream are placed at the margins and treated as exotic and strange.

Gómez-Peña is the first Chicano/Mexicano to receive the MacArthur Fellowship (1991-1996) and a regular contributor to the national radio news magazine *All Things Considered* (on National Public Radio), a writer for newspapers and magazines in the US and Mexico, and a contributing editor to *The Drama Review* (MIT). He is also the founding member of the art collective *Border Arts Workshop/Taller de Arte Fronterizo* and director of the performance art troupe *La Pocha Nostra*. Gómez-Peña's performance and installation work has been presented at over 700 venues across the US, Canada, Mexico, Europe, Australia, the Soviet Union, Colombia, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Brazil, and Argentina.

The goal of Gómez-Peña's collaborative art projects are "to work in politically and emotionally charged sites, and for diverse audiences; and to collaborate across racial, gender, and age boundaries as a gesture of citizen-diplomacy" (*La Pocha Nostra*, <http://www.pochanostra.com>). Most of his artistic and intellectual work concerns border culture(s) and all

that it encompasses: Language, ideology, ethnicity, color, and ultimately how all these facets define and determine personal and communal power relations, which exploit the notion of border on many fronts. As a live interactive performance the work breaks down borders between audience and performer as a way to push audience members to confront their prejudice and fears, whether they reside in intolerance of other languages, ideologies, accents, skin color or any other physical or imagined boundaries. Additionally his work blurs borders, or creates borderzones, in order to disrupt and rupture binaries and static definitions. Following Maxine Greene's (1988, 1995) belief in the power of possibility, the creation of borderzones opens up the possibility for what is not yet, but can be.

3. Borderzones:

My ongoing work examines the performance art of Gómez-Peña by illuminating how it creates body and embodied borderzones and how this idea is relevant and applicable in education. From a cultural and anthropological perspective a borderzone is a site where cultures come in contact, creating something anew, something in-between. Postcolonial theorist, Homi Bhabha, (2004) coined the term *cultures in-between*, which refers to the contact zone that spawns a complex and ever-changing borderzone. Gloria Anzaldúa's (1987) seminal book, *Borderzones: La Frontera*, is a poetic, interlingual and politically powerful documentation of what it is like to grow up in-between Mexico and the US, both geographically as well as metaphorically.

Anzaldúa (1987) discusses what she calls the borderland and illuminates the inherent inconsistencies that engender this space: It is a place of empowerment as well as oppression. It is a place of contradictions, hatred, anger and exploitation. Yet, on the other hand, being a Mestiza, or living on the borders and in the margins, allowing one's shifting and multiple identities to soar, is forging new grounds. There is exhilaration in being a participant in the further evolution of humankind being 'worked' on.

Anzaldúa (1987) also addresses and problematizes rigid psychological borders. The New Mestiza, a woman who crosses the Mexican/US border geographically as well as psychologically, has to accept contradiction and have a tolerance for ambiguity. "Constantly bombarded with conflicting information she is subjected to swamping of her psychological borders. She cannot hold concepts in rigid boundaries. Rigidity is death. Only by remaining flexible is she able to stretch the psyche horizontally and vertically" (p. 103).

Flores and Yudice (1990) comment on the power of the borderzone as a place of possibility and change as it emerges as the locus of redefinition and re-signification. “To vocalize the border transversing it is not enough, we must be positioned there, with ready and simultaneous access to both sides....The border houses the power of the outrageous, the imagination needed to turn the historical and cultural tables” (p. 80). Although the authors illuminate the transformative power of the borderzone, their point is weakened by its adherence to the idea of two mutually exclusive sides. Their conceptualization might better be defined as the borderline rather than borderzone

Fairly recently scholars in Border Studies and other related fields have questioned, scrutinized and reassessed the idea of the border, and the focus has expanded to include other less tangible borders such as linguistic, social class, epistemological, and artistic boundaries. Medina-Rivera and Orendi (2007) comment on this change in direction,

What began as Border Studies with a focus on political and cultural borders between nations, however, has recently morphed into a more abstract and far-flung project that tasks itself with transcending limitations of any kind: Cultural, sexual, spiritual, religious in addition to political, ethnic and national. (p. ix)

Some scholars have taken up looking at an expanded notion of the border by focusing on the internal borderzones of specific social and cultural practices that may also be located on geographic borderzones (Lugo, 2008; Madrid, 2008; Milian, in Goldberg & Solomos, 2002; Alvarez in Madrid, 2011; Dorsey and Diaz-Barriga in Madrid, 2011; Kun in Madrid, 2011). Madrid (2008) uses a semiotic approach to analyze the borderzone describing it as “Fluid give-and-take areas where complexity, negotiation and hybridity are everyday constants.... where contradictions collide – and where meanings are negotiated and re-signified” (p. 3-4).

Ming Fang He’s *Exile Pedagogy* (2010) complicates the idea of being in the in-between spaces of the borderzone as she delves into the experience of being in-between many in-betweens on numerous dimensions: Between cultures that themselves are in-between, the US and China; generationally and politically in-between in Chinese culture as a woman who grew up during the Great Communist Revolution—an event of which the younger generation of students has a very different experience and interpretation; and finally in-between as a US academic of color. Moreover, other theorists, activists, and performance artists such as Guillermo Gómez-Peña (1993, 1996) and Coco Fusco (1995) have written

on border issues from a Cultural Studies perspective, using it to express their theoretical and activist positions.

4. Linguistic Borderzones:

Borders between languages have been discussed in numerous ways by scholars including Gloria Anzaldúa, Ofelia Garcia, and bell hooks. The blurring of linguistic boundaries is most obvious in codeswitching (mixing of two or more languages). The term borderzone is not generally used in linguistics but I argue that the utilization of two or more languages creates borderzones that open up possibilities for new ways to articulate and hence new epistemologies. If we accept at least the weak version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis then we must acknowledge how language influences culture or ways of knowing and being. Each language has its unique worldview and corresponding structure and semantics. The merging of multiple codes opens up new possibilities for new articulations and novel visions.

Equally important interlingual language practices reflect in-between identities and experiences. Those living in two or more cultures and languages have expressed the importance of codeswitching as a reflection of their multiple and merging identities. Anzaldúa (1987) makes the following statement, “ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language. Until I take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself” (p. 59). As a *Borderigena*, an inhabitant of the border, Gomez-Peña asserts how he must be fluent in English, Spanish, Spanglish, and Inglenol, because Spanglish is the language of border diplomacy in the borderlands between the US and Mexico.

Language is used for political commentary and political action. In Flores and Yudice (1990) Gomez-Peña asserts, “the disenfranchised use inventive languages to record the other (non hegemonic) history from a multi-centric perspective” (p. 24). Flores and Yudice claim that Latinos do not want to enter into an already given America, but to participate in the construction of a new hegemony dependent on their cultural practices and discourses. And, the struggle over language signals this desire and the opposition to it by dominant groups. For Gomez-Peña (1996) it is the role of the artists and writers who inhabit the Fourth World (a conceptual place that rejects the binary conceptualization of us/them, north/south, Third World/First World and is instead a new territory that eliminates myths of purity-national, linguistic, cultural—and the static identities that these concepts produce) to elaborate new dialogues, new metaphors and symbols, and new languages to “locate us in these fluctuating cartographies.” The Fourth World is where monoculturalism and monolingualism are expelled to the margins, and diversity and confluence

are central. The discussion that follows will illuminate in more detail how linguistic crossings have been discussed and used by scholars and artists alike.

One theoretical trend in scholarship on bilingualism is to view languages not as mutually exclusive bounded systems, but as systems in translinguistic flow. In fact, Garcia (2008) uses the term *translanguaging* to talk about the use of multiple languages by bi- and multilinguals in a free flowing performative way. Flores and Yudice (1990) comment on the emancipatory nature of bilingual language practices among Spanish speakers. “Language is the most obvious site of Latino inventiveness whether the wildest extravagance of the bilingual poet or the most mundane comment of everyday life, Latino usage tends necessarily towards interlingual innovation. Interfacing of multiple codes serves to de-canonicalize all of them” (p. 4).

This type of creative expression, interlingualism, multidirectional mixing and switching, characteristic of Border Culture, does not serve to exclude but to include in a new terrain. It makes possible a more complex and inclusive form of communication characterized by a plurality of vernaculars, multiple intermingling and infinite permutations and possibilities. In addition, once we see language boundaries as permeable, we will lose the notion of linguistic purity completely. And, losing the notion of this ideal type will render the idea of linguistic inferiority/superiority obsolete. This is important in education due to the increasingly multilingual and multicultural classrooms in major US cities. Codeswitching is a common everyday practice among bi- and multilinguals and to classify this type of linguistic practice as “incorrect” or “deficient” denigrates and devalues a large aspect of the bi- and multilingual’s identity. Moreover, codeswitching and other creative language acts are used as a form of rebellion, a way of resisting linguistic and cultural oppression. For instance, Anzaldúa speaks of Chicano Spanish (a mixed-code variety) as a border tongue and calls it a form of *linguistic terrorism*.

Hooks (1994) asserts that we must create spaces where diverse voices can be heard in words other than English or in broken vernacular speech. This means at times there will be fragments of a talk, lecture or written piece that may or not be accessible to every individual. Hooks calls for a rethinking of listening and understanding where the whole narrative is not mastered or understood. We can know it in fragments, and those places where we do not recognize the words is a significant part of the whole. We can learn from spaces of silence and confusion as well as spaces of speech, “that in the patient act of listening to another tongue we may subvert that culture of capitalist frenzy and consumption that demands all desire must be satisfied immediately, or we may disrupt that

cultural imperialism that suggests one is worthy of being heard only if one speaks in standard English” (p. 259).

Kumashiro’s (2001) anti-oppressive work in education views moments of discomfort, which can stem from different sources including language, as important in the process of transformation and in the educational experience. He details a story of semantic resistance as students in one of the first courses he taught could not accept the fact that gays and lesbians and affiliates of the queer ‘nation’ had taken and subverted the term ‘queer’ and began to use it as a statement of pride and inclusion. His students could not accept that the semantics of the term could change depending on historical and cultural contexts. They were able to see neither the dynamic and fluid nature of meaning nor how agency was involved in meaning-making. It is necessary for those of us resisting conventional ideology to begin to use and abuse pejorative terms to disrupt stasis as well as to create semantic spaces characterized by multiple meanings and uses. This must become part of our act of linguistic terrorism if we are going to change the discourses of oppression and move away from the idea of normalizing, which excludes all that fall in between, outside, and otherwise.

Language is a medium through which borders, boundaries, and inequalities, are articulated, communicated and reified (see Gee’s work on Language Ideologies, 1989, 2008). The work of Gómez-Peña utilizes multiple languages in interesting, playful and very political ways. The creation of new languages is used to express the ethno-linguistic realities of the Border. In his performance pieces (which have been transcribed and published in book form) Gómez-Peña uses multilingual dialogue to make a statement about the flexible and inconsistent nature of identity. He uses different languages and combinations of languages, including Spanglish, Nahuatl, and various invented “tongues’. He also uses different registers and accents as he changes characters. This use of use of multiple codes makes a point not only about fluctuating identities and self-identification but also regarding inclusion vs. exclusion. Complete exclusion from the text would not allow anyone to understand the political position, yet complete inclusion would not allow the linguistic exclusion that forces his audience members to adopt, to varying degrees, the identity of the immigrant, the eccentric, the outsider. The Pocha Nostra piece titled Brown Out 1 (see appendix) is an example of the use of multiple codes.

Gómez-Peña’s work breaks down the borders between languages as part of his project to instigate another kind of knowing that will lead a reorganization of the social world. In order to push for a reconceptualization of epistemologies and categories, we must break

down, disrupt, and rethink how we use and practice language. We can take oppressive language and turn it around. We can bend and break repressive concepts and categories. We can smudge and distort semantic domination. We can find these in-between alternative spaces and places in language that inch us towards liberation.

5. Language in the Classroom

How does the acceptance of different linguistic expressions play out in education? In reading the following section we can keep in mind the reframed critical curriculum questions posed by Razfar (2012) as those to ponder when discussing linguistic practices and language ideologies in the classroom:

- 1) What **language** should be learned?
- 2) How should **language** be organized for teaching?
- 3) What **language** is most worthwhile?
- 4) What **language** is of most worth?

The blurring of the in and out of school curriculum and the acceptance of innovation, creativity and personal forms of expression will necessitate a rethinking of language ideologies including the use of linguistic varieties, especially in terms of code switching and Black vs. White English. In order to give voice to those who have historically been silenced we must give voice and legitimacy to all expressions, in terms of content and structure and allow for the creation of new linguistic varieties. We must not only begin to rethink the value placed on what is being said, we must do the same for how it is being said. Policy-makers and curriculum designers in public schools most likely will not take on this counter-hegemonic work, so we educators, concerned with ridding school discourse of oppressive ideologies, must break down barriers that police and begin to allow, even encourage, ideas that challenge the status quo to enter classroom conversations. We must permit, even teach to, the uncomfortable; the itchy, edgy ideas that make us squirm. We must learn to sit still, feel unsettled and confused, and begin to ponder anew.

Regardless of the conceptualization and focus of the borderzone it is consistently characterized by heterogeneity, competing discourses, contradiction and fluidity. It is a space of continual reinvention, ongoing transformation, and identity construction. The idea of the borderzone has reshaped my way of looking at knowing, creativity, innovation and possibility. It has given me a vocabulary to discuss the breakdown of binaries and stasis, and to discuss the liberatory nature of fluidity and change. It has helped me articulate my ideas about rich confusion

(Walker, 1980), productive uncertainty (Huebner, 1966; Schubert, 1986), and contradictions, especially in terms of how these ideas relate to curriculum and learning and its value in the process of educating and personal growth and development. I argue that the borderzone is a site of possibility; the possibility of new ways of thinking and being. I use a/r/tography to investigate this phenomenon.

6. A/r/tography: An Arts-Based Methodology

A/r/tography is a form of representation that privileges both text and image as they meet within moments of métissage. But most of all, a/r/tography is about each of us living a life of deep meaning enhanced through perceptual practices that reveal what was once hidden, create what has never been known, and imagine what we hope to achieve.

(Irwin & De Cosson, 2004)

6.1. What is a/r/tography?

A/r/tography is performative inquiry. It is an arts-based methodology, yet it differs from other art-based methodologies in that it places emphasis on the mode of searching or the inquiry process, rather than the end result or the representation (Springgay, 2008). A/r/tography is inclusive in that it incorporates all those participating in the research to be a part of the inquiry process, not only in terms of having a voice, but also in contributing to epistemologies in-the-making. It utilizes the idea of *currere*, an autobiographical approach discussed by Pinar (1975), in which the noun curriculum (the content of what is taught) is replaced with a verb, *currere* (action research). Taken from *the Encyclopedia of Curriculum Studies*:

Currere is living practice that lingers in the in-between of binary notions of theory and practice. It is a negotiated space that dramatically broadens what it means to be a teacher and a learner. And perhaps most importantly, *currere* as conceived through a/r/tography allows subjectivity to transform objectivity and encourages a community of inquirers (learners) to become engaged in very deep, yet evocative or provocative ways (Irwin, 2010, p. 43).

A/r/tography is a living inquiry which involves continuously asking questions, enacting interventions, revising questions and analyzing data in repeated cycles. Rather than beginning the research with a set of predefined questions and determined method of data analysis,

a/r/tography is a dialectical process in which questions arise, which lead to theorizing and then more questions in a continuous cycle. There is no end where the ultimate truth, or real meaning, is attained. All discoveries along the way are meaningful. If there is an answer for Schubert's (1986) curriculum questions, "What's worthwhile? What knowledge is most worthwhile?" the a/r/tographer would reply, it depends on to whom, when and where you ask the question.

6.2. The Rhizome

A rhizomatic plant has no center and no defined boundary; rather, it is made up of a number of semi-independent nodes, each of which is capable of growing and spreading on its own, bounded only by the limits of its habitat. (Cormier, 2008)

A/r/tography uses the metaphor of the rhizome to illustrate how knowledge and the research process itself are conceptualized. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) use the concept of the rhizome to describe theory and research that allow for multiple, non-hierarchical entry and exit points in data representation and interpretation. The inquiry process is complex and ongoing. Knowledge does not work with dualist categories and binary choices. Instead, attention is paid to the in-betweens where meanings reside in the simultaneous use of language, materials, situations, space, and time. In this sense a/r/tographic research cannot be subject to the same standardized criteria as it is always in dynamic, fluid, and constant motion.

6.3. A/r/tography and the borderzone?

I claim that a/r/tography, which focuses on in-between spaces and is characterized by rhizomatic inquiry and epistemology-in-the-making, takes place in the borderzone, and I therefore maintain that it is a most fitting methodology to examine the embodied and body borderzones in the work of Gómez-Peña. A main focus in my inquiry is how the work of Gómez-Peña creates in-between spaces that engender continual reinvention and ongoing transformation that lead to the rejection of static and reified ways of knowing by opening up spaces to new epistemological possibilities. This process arises in the borderzone, characterized by ongoing reinvention, which aligns with a/r/tographic inquiry.

Both a/r/tography and the performance art of Gómez-Peña reject the idea of certainty and instead embrace the uncertain as providing endless possibilities. A/r/tographers are concerned with possibility rather than probabilities. Knowledge is not seen as bounded pieces of information, static and definite. Knowledge is constant inquiry and

discovery; therefore, it is constantly transforming. The borderzone is a place of constant change and continual reinvention. The goal of a/r/tographic inquiry is to forge a path that has not yet been forged; to find what has not yet been. Presence is found in absence, and hence the ideas of loss, shift, and rupture (or in-between spaces) are seen in a positive transformative sense and are foundational concepts or metonyms for a/r/tographers. For those who are bicultured such as Gómez-Peña, the experience of deterritorialization is an undeniable reality, yet also a catalyst for new discoveries.

7. The Borderzoned Body: Corporeal Intertextuality

I argue that the performance art of Gómez-Peña utilizes the body to depict borderzones, a kind of corporeal intertextuality, by blending symbols, genres, gender associations, cultural icons, and historical time, which serve to dismantle hierarchy, binaries and static definitions. Gómez-Peña's work challenges and realigns borders, not solely geographic borders (although he does address the US/Mexico border as well as international) but also the borders we have erected around social categories that construct identity. His work embraces, art, performance, and the body as means to opening up in-between spaces and exposing their inherent possibilities. The body becomes a site of representation, signification and re-signification through which identities are depicted as fluid, porous and heterogeneous. Additionally, the work disrupts dichotomous categorizing as the body is positioned in the borderzones characterized by contradiction, diversity, and interaction; and also as sites of interaction and possibility. The borderzoned body comments on and critiques dominant discourses by uniting incongruent and contrasting cultural images, which exposes the libratory nature of fluidity, blending, and change, especially in regards to identity. In sum, Gómez-Peña's art complicates normalized notions of gender, immigration, ethnicity, and language. It complicates social categories that have been defined and used to confine, oppress, repress, marginalize and silence. It reveals the fluid nature of existence as he highlights the countless, if not infinite, ways people can orchestrate their identities for emancipatory purposes.

8. Bringing the Borderzone into the Classroom:

Although art is used in education, it is rarely used as a catalyst to open up conversations or as a way for students to develop their own epistemological stances. The majority of Gómez-Peña's messages are not found in official educational curriculum. The general ideas of fluidity and flux are most often not incorporated into classroom explorations, and

binary constructions still reign as a powerful ideological constructs in educational discourse as it reflects the larger cultural ideology.

The advent of the new Common Core curriculum in most US state school systems along with recent STEM initiatives represents a further ideological and pedagogical trend towards standardization—the mastery of particular subject areas defined by specific outcomes. Diversity and individual thinking are devalued as standardized test scores become the assessment *du jour*. The humanities are losing favor and art and other enrichment programs are being eliminated from school curriculum as the emphasis moves towards reading and math—subject areas that most effect standardized test scores. Subject area drills prevail rather than activities that lead to new conversations and innovative unique ways for students to express themselves and discover their worlds. Classroom conversations are stunted due to prefabricated lesson plans and a limited epistemological scope that inevitably includes and reveres certain ways of knowing and certain knowns to the neglect of others, and, equally important, to those which could be.

Decades ago Macdonald (1975, 1977) pushed for expanding the scope of curricular material to include the humanities in order to develop our ability to see in new and rewarding ways with the ultimate goal of liberation. Eisner (1991) echoed Macdonald’s confidence in the humanities for expanding learning possibilities. “Teaching practices...that use resources from the visual world, from music and dance, and from poetry and literature can enable children to grasp what cannot be revealed in text” (p. 246). And, Greene (1995), one of the most prominent advocates of the humanities in education, urged art be part of the learning process as a way to overcome stasis by enabling students to imagine, meander and renew. Yet, given the status of arts in education today, curriculum developers and policy makers did not listen to these advocates with a discerning ear.

9. A Certain Uncertainty

Both are convinced that a sudden surge of emotion bound them together.

Beautiful is such a certainty, but uncertainty is more beautiful.

Every beginning is but a continuation, and the book of events

is never more than half open.

(Wisława Szymborska, 1989)

My inquiry into Gómez-Peña's work underscores how uncertainty and confusion are productive spaces. What happens when one encounters something for the first time; a new idea or a new way of seeing themselves in the world? There is a period of questioning, of not quite knowing how to articulate the new idea or assimilate it into one's cognitive maps. This is a state often referred to as confusion, a certain uncertainty. Taking from Jacques Lacan, not understanding something allows for hope. It is good to not understand because one never understand anything other than what is already in one's head. We need to not understand, to be confused and uncertain in order to be transformed. Confusion indicates contemplation, expansion, and growth. Bell hooks (1994) says we can learn from places of silence, places from which we do not understand. Lather (1991) discusses the impossibility of knowing across difference. Yet, the idea of confusion is abhorred in school classrooms and is treated as a temporary negative space, a state of not-knowing and outside of learning. Every attempt is made to eliminate it. I would like to propose a rethinking of this in-between space, the cognitive state of uncertainty or confusion, as a site of possibility and creativity which can be seen as a constructive part of the learning process. It indicates process and movement, questioning, and pondering new ideas and rethinking old ideas in new ways. Confusion expands rather than limits consciousness and allows for the possibility of continual reflexivity, self-reinvention and transformation.

Moments of 'not knowing' are part of the learning process that open up and expand epistemological possibilities. Uncertainty and confusion lead to questions that produce a certain certainty that again opens up more uncertainty and confusion and more questioning. In this sense, like rhizomatic growth, learning is a dynamic and endless cycle of epistemological exploration.

There are important messages, emancipatory epistemologies, and new possibilities that can be revealed, even created, by teaching to the in-between messy confusing spaces. For this reason, following Pinar (1994, 2004), I urge educators and scholars to use curriculum in ways that trouble, unsettle, and subvert any simple attempt to arrive at one definitive answer. The goal is to invite the student, the reader, to complicate her or his understanding in ways that do not lead to closure or easy answers. Public pedagogy, especially in the form of art and popular culture, can be used to open up these in-between messy spaces in order to complicate and confuse conversations, so that a multiplicity of ways of knowing and experiencing are represented and can be discovered, and the possibility for new epistemologies is always present.

Many philosophers and scholars have discussed the impossibility of knowing or the futility of attaining certainty. Difficult questions about life,

the deep philosophical ponderings, have no simple answers, or no answers at all. A century ago Bertrand Russell aptly asked, “Is there any knowledge in the world which is so certain that no reasonable man could doubt it?” If the purpose of education, as Schubert (1986) discusses, is a move “towards greater growth, goodness, and enlightenment,” then the difficult unanswerable questions are the ones we must muse as we continue in the journey of becoming.

Lather (2007) asserts that, in striving to connect across difference, we must accept not knowing. One we must accept and “practice ‘lost’ as a way to move out of commanding, controlling, and mastery discourse and into a knowledge that recognizes the inevitable blind spots of our knowing.” She looks at research as “ruined from the start,” which is another way to express the limits of our knowing. It is in these spaces on the “edge of intelligibility” where a new type of qualitative research must take shape, where we acknowledge our inability to know. Yet, in Lather’s vision, not knowing is not just a lamentable inevitability we must accept, it is a productive space of undoing. “We must learn to unlearn, read to unread, move against tendencies to accept and settle into dogmas. We must work the ruins” (p. 13).

10. My Research

Currently I hold a lecturer position in the social sciences department at a community college. I teach two introductory social sciences classes; both groups are international students for whom English is not their native language. This preliminary research examines the performance art of Guillermo Gómez-Peña as a form of public pedagogy and asks the following questions:

How does the performance art of Guillermo Gómez-Peña create borderzones that open up classroom conversations to new epistemological in-between positions that are absent from school curriculum?

How does the performance art of Guillermo Gómez-Peña create uncertainty and confusion, and how do these cognitive spaces embody innovation and liberation?

How does students’ confusion lead to an ongoing dialogue?

How can art depict our renderings?

I served as the researcher practitioner as I collected data while teaching these two social science classes during one full year. Each of the four classes had about 20 students between the age of 18 and 30 from countries as diverse as Venezuela, Ethiopia, Mexico, Thailand, Korea,

Nigeria, Algeria, and China. I collected data about half way through the semester so I had developed a rapport with the students. Field notes were collected once in each class for about 30 minutes during each of the two semesters with a total of four field notes. Students in all the classes were aware I was recording the classes, but they did not seem to alter their level of participation in the group discussions. I transcribed the recorded classes from the audio recording, but I was unable to include non-verbal data. Therefore, the data focus on what is said and how it is said, as opposed to what is done or how it is done. I recognize this as a limitation and future research will include observations in other contexts in which I am not the teacher in order capture the non-verbal communication which may reveal additional insights.

10.1. Data

All the classes in which I collected data consisted of lecture and group discussions. First I presented new material that related to our week's topic on gender. Then I asked questions about the material and we talked as a group. I taught the four groups the same lesson which was specifically on the work of Guillermo Gómez-Peña and the idea of border and borderzones. The time I talked in both classes was significantly more than the time the students talked. For the purpose of this analysis I have focused on the analysis of the field notes, a narratives that arose out of a class discussion, and two formal interviews.

The initial coding of the transcripts was completed after several readings of the classroom field notes, the interviews and one narrative. The codes include Statement of Confusion, Certainty, Uncertainty, Gender, Sex, Spectrum, Geography, Physical Features, and I think/I feel Statements. The data were analyzed first with an overall look at the speaker's expression of confusion, uncertainty or subjectivity (I think, I feel statements) in relation to gender as well as at how gender was articulated—as a binary or on a continuum.

My second level of analysis looked at the data to determine if gender was discussed in a different manner than biological sex. Sex is often constructed as more concrete, static, and objective and based on physical biological attributes or characteristics. Gender is seen as culturally determined, individually defined, and negotiable. I wanted to determine if students expressed gender border crossings with a differing degree of certainty than sex border crossings. I included comments on geography to determine if they were expressed in a more certain, objective way as physical space is often conceptualized as clearly delineated, a border that is not disputed. The final analysis was whether the content of

the lesson, the art of Guillermo Gomez Peña, can be a catalyst to opening up new conversations in the classroom.

10.2. Data analysis

Five themes arose from the codes; Uncertainty (codes: confusion, uncertainty, context, words of subjectivity), Certainty (code: certainty), Sexual Identity Marker (codes: gender, sex), Material Reality (codes: physical characteristics, geographic), Spectrum (code: spectrum).

Confusion was expressed when trying to define gender, especially as separate from biological sex. One interviewee spent a great deal of time explaining why the question, “Have you even been confused by someone’s gender” was confusing. First he asserted that in order to be confused by someone’s gender there has to be a culturally fixed notion of gender to deviate from:

I feel that is what it is based on cause it is stupid it has to be based on a traditional norm cause you can’t say there is a gender role you have to have a baseline to compare it to....

He also explained gender as context based:

Well gender uhm uhm gender is uhm I feel like it has changed a lot...I guess that is what I was getting at it is pretty ambiguous it depends on the context in which you are using the word it could mean ...

He also defined his confusion as a result of the various ways one can interpret gender:

No no no yeah I am just saying that yeah it is ambiguous to say like are you confused about the gender of a person because I am not sure if you are referring to them biologically or their role in society or how they even see themselves so it could be like three different things.

Throughout the discussion of gender the interviewee used many words of subjectivity. Constructing his responses as subjective indicates he interprets the definition of gender as flexible, varying and individually defined as opposed to having a static objective and universal definition.

Gender and sex were both expressed as binaries. This is not necessarily the sole function of the speaker’s individual perspective on gender because the English language leads us to construct both gender as sex as dichotomies. While there are words such as intersex, transgender and pandrogeny they tend to be used among specific groups of people (academics, medical practitioners and those in the transgender and LGBTQ community). Generally male/ female; man/woman; girl/boy; masculine/feminine are used to distinguish what is conceived of as two distinct categories. In the interviews the adjectives masculine and

feminine were used to describe both gender and sex despite their association with cultural norms and hence with gender. One interviewee wanted a clear definition of gender, which he could not arrive at without a clear distinction between gender and sex. He could not answer the question about gender without being able to distinguish it from sex, or by collapsing the two and reframing gender as biological:

Therefore the question only makes sense if we are speaking of gender as biological.

Most often sex was determined by outward physical characteristic and/or appearance as exemplified below:

like I said the way they dress, hair styles lack of make up or addition of make up uhm uhm maybe the way they walk their gait but also at the same uhm in the same way it gives it away.

Well actually. No. No. No. I think it is a man because like it doesn't look like a woman. It's just dressed like a woman.

Yeah and he has really hairy legs.

Because he had long hair and he had a skirt.

Well, because I was just guessing because he has a ski mask on and really hairy legs.

Gender is described as more fluid and changing than sex:

one's biological sex which is pretty static you are born into this world you are born into well there are exceptions you can be hermaphrodite your sex is very separate from your gender and your gender role so uhm I would say that sex is definitely more of a static characteristic where gender can be uhm you know a sliding scale through the spectrum.

One participant relayed a “coming out” story that illustrates how the speaker conceives of sexual identity more like sex as static and not changeable rather than like gender as fluid and negotiable. The speaker and his group of friends could not make sense of the fact that their friend had revealed his sexual identity as homosexual when the friends all along thought he was heterosexual:

It just didn't seem possible and there were never any suspicious or even thoughts along those lines about Mark. No indications whatsoever.

The reason for the friends' discomfort is not clear. It could be due to the fact that the revelation contradicted their notion of their friend's identity or they were expressing homophobic sentiments. It is possible that Mark's flip flop to the other side of the sexual identity spectrum was not easy to accept for this group of friends. Because of their age, young teenagers tend to conform to peer pressure more than older adults. Maybe their reaction had more to do with the belief that sexual orientation should be fixed at

birth, akin to the cultural belief about sex, and expressed in accordance with that position regardless of social pressures and other reasons one might repress certain sexual urges.

The speaker continues to explain how he cannot understand the friend's change in mannerisms (becoming more effeminate) after "coming out":

Obviously there would be no physical or biological sudden change that would happen to someone that decides to let others know that they are gay, but this is how it went down. After all it seems like most effeminate and flamboyantly gay men are just that way and have been always and didn't wake up one day and decide they are now going to talk and act differently.

The speaker interprets the change in mannerism and behavior as out of the ordinary, rather than the friends' reactions as an expression of intolerance. Not only does the speaker believe that sexual identity is something we are born with, but that the behaviors that are associated with homosexuality are also fixed at birth. There is some acknowledgment of being unaccepting teens who do not know how to deal with a sudden shift, yet there is also blame placed on the one who comes out which serves to somewhat legitimize the friends negative reaction.

I suppose I thought at the time and still do that whether gay or not and no I'm sure we weren't the most accepting teenagers in 1985 it seemed like a very odd way for Mark to handle that situation on his part as well.

As expected geographic borders were discussed in more certain static ways; the statements about geographic borders contained no words of uncertainty or subjectivity. A student's response to the question "What is a border" was: *A line that divides a country.*

When I asked "What is border crossing?" one student responded: *People crossing illegally.* In addition, there were three different examples relayed by students that illustrated how one country's culture had crossed into another's. For example one student from Africa spoke about how the European/United States business dress code of wearing a tie had become very popular in Nigeria despite the impracticality of it in terms of the hot weather. National culture is seen as confined to bounded geographic areas, clear lines delineate nations, and it is clear when a cultural expression from one nation enters another. Geographic border crossings make sense and do not invoke confusion or lack of clarity. Crossing the imaginary line that divides one bounded area from another is easy to imagine. The crossing of complex intangible spaces such as gender are not so easy to imagine clearly. The physical, tangible, concrete aspects that tend to be used to define sex make it a category that is more like a static

geographic border than a human characteristic with all the individual difference that characterizes the human race.

When students viewed pictures of Guillermo Gómez-Peña's work their reactions expressed confusion and discomfort. The confronting of the gender borderzone in the work most likely did not fit into their previous conceptualizations, and this can be expressed as confusion, rejection or flat out dislike. Here are some of their reactions:

This picture makes me confused in so many ways. First of all I can't identify gender of people, who on the picture. So this is a good example of blurring and border crossing because I cannot separate things that usually have to be able to be split.

I have so many things in my head but I don't know how to say them.

I don't know if it is a woman or a man.

I was confused about the guy look a girl. He was wearing make up and a label.

Anyway, I am not love this kind of picture. It brings me kinds of chaos and uncomfortable.

I am looking at the picture and I am confused out of my mind. I see a man that is about to be executed by a woman with hairy legs , or a man that had a sex change or something....This is just weird and freaky.

This photo of Peña has many elements that are confusing and contradictory, which cause the viewer to question what exactly his point is. (not an Iraqi photo)

11. Discussion:

Did the performance art of Guillermo Gomez Peña open up classroom conversations? The preliminary data suggest that students begin to connect with material and ideas or make sense out of things as they relate them to their own experience, or that are incorporated in their personal epistemology. Students made sense out of the blurred idea of gender when it related directly to an experience of theirs (at least as much as their verbalizing indicated). There are a lot of transsexuals in Thailand, and this enabled some of the students to make sense out of a blurred gender/sex boundary. Others, who felt discomfort or confusion, may not have had experience with this, and it may have deviated from their personal sense-making.

It is difficult say if the work of Guillermo Gómez-Peña opened up conversations in ways that other content would not. His work certainly urges the reader/viewer to break binary conceptualizations, gender being the more visually obvious. The number of comments that expressed confusion and discomfort lead one to conclude that blurring certain boundaries is not part of one's personal epistemology or experience and hence leads to confusion and uneasiness. The next step is to investigate

whether confusion and uneasiness enables students to expand and/or create new ways of knowing.

12. Limitations:

Some limitations in this initial phase of research will be ironed out before the next phase of data collection ensues. They are as follows:

- 1) As the researcher practitioner I was unable to collect non-verbal data. Future research would include different sites in which I am not the teacher in order to collect this type of data which could reveal further insights
- 2) The students included in this study were all non-native English speakers, having been in the US for varying amounts of time. The fact that English is not their first language may have affected their ability to understand the discussion on Guillermo Gómez-Peña, and hence the confusion could be a result of a language issue rather than due to the content of Guillermo Gomez Peña's work.
- 3) Both classes were structured as lecture and question/discussion, which resulted in my speaking much more than the students. Another type of activity, such as group work or student presentations, might reveal more in terms of student perspectives and understandings.
- 4) This preliminary study focused on gender crossings. Guillermo Gómez-Peña's work addresses other borderzones that could be included to ensure the responses are based on border crossings in general not solely on gender.
- 5) The interviewees and the narrative story teller were all males. This is a serious limitation, especially when the focus of the conversation was on gender. Future research would include more women.

13. Conclusion:

The ultimate goal of using the work of Gómez-Peña is to open up classroom conversations to new epistemologies and to enable students to participate in epistemology-in-the-making; to make their own sense out of the social world and their experiences in it. I embrace Pinar's belief in our personal liberation and "our ongoing subjective self-formulation in society" and believe that opening up epistemological positions is how to attain this.

I hope my work inspires others to use forms of public pedagogy and art as catalysts to open up new spaces for knowing and giving voice to those that have been absent from, silenced, or marginalized by dominant discourse. As fields such as Border Studies have moved away from looking

at the border as a fixed physical location, so, too, should education. Educators, curriculum developers, educational policy makers, and parents should begin to see the boundary between in and out of school learning as porous and recognize the various spaces in which learning takes place. I find this relevant and important for two reasons. One, we are all exposed to myriad representations, images and discourses in public spaces, mass media, and artistic expressions. Youth especially are exposed to and embrace pop culture. These representations, that both reproduce and push against dominant ideologies, are largely absent from school curriculum, and students must become adept at critically assessing them (see Guillory's work on Black female rappers as public pedagogues, 2010). Are we really teaching to the whole child if we erect an artificial border between what children experience within school and what they are exposed to outside of school?

Two, these public forms of meaning-making open up spaces for new epistemologies, especially those that are rendered invisible or never allowed to be by dominant hegemonic voices. By including previously silenced voices and allowing for new representations and discourses we can begin to include all students in ways that allow each student to identify with aspects of the curriculum and find his/her sense making. We must expand our understanding of learning environments and start using public pedagogy as a tool to arrive at a more complex understanding of our students and how they learn. We, as educators, must step out of the spot light and let our students teach us as they bring in their 'knowns', their experiences and interests. We have to expand ways of knowing so we can begin the project of democratic inclusion and human fulfillment (see Ayers, 2008).

As educators we must begin to embrace uncertainty and confusion and begin to see them as productive and necessary places to be. We must begin to see learning as guided by questions, not by answers, and, as my son said when he was six, we must "adore and appreciate the unexpected." As previously discussed, a rhizomatic view of learning and knowledge captures these ideas and I promote this pedagogical model as it resists 'core principles' or 'final outcomes,' as well as being an ongoing process of growth, of surprise and of change. Educators, we must develop the literacies required to deal with and talk about uncertainty because to teach the curriculum of static truths and rights and wrongs is to teach from power. And teaching from power perpetuates repression and oppression and does not allow for "our ongoing subjective self-formulation in society."

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Appendix 1

Brown out Part 2 La Pocha Nostra

In the americas, things are equally peludas	Tenepantia tinemi y es que
Regarding l'identite	la pisca existential esta ka..ka
...y es que la neta escueta?	So drop your cuete mujer
Plus o moin	et fiches-moi la paix
Aqui o alla	y hagamos la paz
Ceci cela	con la lengue babe
Que esto/que aquello	dans la voiture
sacre	
Ici/la-bas	en la mera rranfla
Que tu/que yo	my toyota
flamingero	
I mean	toyo-ti
Not really wanting to decide yet	la sale du sex
transculturelle	
cause for the moment machin	my lowrider
sanctuary	
aujourd'hui	tlatoanl
tlacanacatl el mio	I say
II Corpo Pecaminioso	je n'ai rien a
declarer	
Hurts un chingo	(I scream)
Especially my feet	enough pretentious language poetry
Ikchitl	GP Back to script #one
Pero tambien otos partes del cuerpo-	no manches
comache	
Po-po-ca, capiscas guey?	Hospital de Santa Catalina. Cuidad de Mexico, 10:00 am

About the author:

Dana Cole is a professor of Social Sciences and English Language Learning at Harold Washington College, Chicago, Illinois. Her research crosses borders among Border Studies, Education and Art. Her teaching incorporates outside curriculum, or public pedagogy as means to opening classroom conversations enabling students to make their own sense out of the worlds in which they live. She is the recipient of the 2014 Ann Schubert Fellowship award.