I mean, to be excluded from a national project at a time when all nation states are collapsing is not an extraordinary act of heroism or literary fiction, ask the Welsh or the Irish, man . . .

[I]t suddenly dawns on me: tourism in a “globalized” world is perhaps an inevitable experience.
—Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Dangerous Border Crossers (30, 115)

I know, to my cost, [...] that there is always a price of incorporation to be paid when the cutting edge of difference and transgression is blunted into spectacularization. I know that what replaces invisibility is a kind of carefully regulated, segregated visibility. But it does not help simply to name-call it “the same.”
—Stuart Hall, “What Is This ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?” (470)

ON THANKSGIVING DAY 1994, THOSE IN A POTENTIAL audience of 3.5 million American households who were watching cable television might have been puzzled to observe what appeared to be a pirate signal interrupting their evening news programs. On-screen they saw a high-tech bunker, filled with video and computer equipment being manipulated by technicians in Mexican wrestling masks and other “exotic” paraphernalia. They found themselves being addressed as “post-Nafta America” by an anchorman dressed in a costume that combined a nose ring, mirrorshades, metal-studded leather bracelets, and elements derived from Central and South American native cultures, some accessories, such as an elaborate headdress, filtered through tourist kitsch (fig. 1). This apparition introduced himself as El Naftazteca, a self-styled “cross-cultural salesman, disc jockey apocalíptico, and information superhighway bandido,” accompanied by his assistant, Cyber-Vato, an “East Los techno-gang member.” They claimed to
offer viewers "direct access to the labyrinthic mind of a Mexican—and not just any Mexican, but one who talks back," through the "miracle of techno-rascuachismo, a true example of post-CNN Chicano Art" (Gómez-Peña, New World Border 112–13). In actuality, El Naftazteca and Cyber-Vato were the Mexican American performance artists Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Roberto Sifuentes, who had convinced over four hundred cable stations to let them broadcast a simulated pirate TV intervention (Gómez-Peña, Dangerous Border Crossers 80). For ninety minutes, viewers were exposed to a rapid-fire synopsis of Gómez-Peña's performance history, interrupted at intervals by what purported to be live demonstrations of the world's first "Chicano virtual reality machine," the Technopal 2000 (New World Border 112).

In one such scene, Cyber-Vato wears a "VR bandanna" over his eyes, an ethnicized version of the head-mounted display used in virtual reality computer interfaces to break down the gap between viewer and screen and to create a sense of immersion in the computer graphic, which seems to surround the user like an environment. Cyber-Vato is wearing a mechanical glove, also a typical peripheral in a virtual reality system; the data glove tracks the hand's movement, producing an image of the user's hand that can manipulate elements of the computer graphic. Cyber-Vato's glove is connected by a rope to a noose around his neck, a reference to lynching (fig. 2). El Naftazteca talks Cyber-Vato through a series of computer-simulated scenarios in which the user of the system is harassed by the Immigration and Naturalization Service and assaulted by the police—to Cyber-Vato's considerable dismay, despite El Naftazteca's attempts to remind him that "it's only virtual reality" (120). This performance of the relation of Chicanos...
to virtual reality raises a number of questions. In what way does it make sense to talk about a racialized form of virtual reality? How might Gómez-Peña’s incorporation of computer-mediated communications technologies into his performances, as themes and as structure, help analysts think through the vexed relation between the new technologies and the politics of racial representation?

Five-Worlds Theory: Race and Cyberspace

Emphasizing his hybrid history, Gómez-Peña opens his 1996 collection The New World Border by describing himself as a “nomadic Mexican artist/writer in the process of Chicанизation, which means I am slowly heading North” (1). A self-described “border artist,” Gómez-Peña is increasingly recognized as an important voice in academic and public debates about globalization, transnational flows of cultures and persons, and the effects of such flows on multicultural formations in nation-states.1 For instance, while most of Gómez-Peña’s written work was published by small presses, his most recent collection, Dangerous Border Crossers, was released by Routledge, and another from that publisher is forthcoming.

Less attention has been paid to the way The New World Border invites a dialogue between the topic of globalization and the thematics of new communications technologies. Gómez-Peña begins The New World Border by emphasizing its generic as well as cultural and national hybridity, referring to the book as “a kind of post-Mexican literary hypertext” (ii). The claim is that through “disnarrative fragmentation” (i) The New World Border incorporates characteristics of electronic communication into a print text at the same time that the material existence of the book in printed

FIG. 2
Roberto Sifuentes as Cyber-Vato, testing the “Chicano virtual reality machine.”

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form resists total virtualization, just as Jill Kuhnheim has argued that Gómez-Peña’s “textualization” of his performances in this book “goes against the ephemeral ontology of performance art” (27). But this description of *The New World Border* also associates such multimedia hybrids with the emergence of postnationalist—in this case, post-Mexican—cultural forms. In fact, this linking of post- or transnationalism with computer-mediated communication frames the entire collection, since it concludes with “End-of-the-Century Topography Review,” part of a pastiche of the materials that might be included in an introductory textbook on transnationalism, along with a glossary and a set of questions for readers (245). This review defines millennial topography as the coexistence of five worlds.

The First, Second, and Third Worlds in Gómez-Peña’s schema correspond to the standard post-1955 Bandung Conference mapping of global social space, the three-worlds theory. In the introduction to *The New World Border*, Gómez-Peña suggests that the “old colonial hierarchy of First World/Third World” is being replaced by “the more pertinent notion of the Fourth World,” defined as “a conceptual place where the indigenous inhabitants of the Americas meet with the deterritorialized peoples, the immigrants, and the exiles” (7). In a typical move, Gómez-Peña links the traditionally place-based cultures of indigenous peoples (the more familiar referent of Fourth World in contemporary political usage) with the “deterritorialized” cultures of migrant populations. The basis for this seemingly paradoxical linkage is a nonnational understanding of these groups, since in many modern nation-states native peoples have been disposessed of their original land claims and have begun to use *Fourth World* to identify themselves with other such populations across national boundaries. In this way, Gómez-Peña redefines the meaning of *indigenous* so that both migrant and native groups can be understood as occupying a “conceptual” rather than a material space, and the main characteristic of conceptual space is that it is not defined by clear boundaries between insides and outsides; Gómez-Peña’s Fourth World occupies “portions of all the previous worlds” (245).

Gómez-Peña’s Fourth World, then, embodies a concept of space different from that of the earlier three-worlds theory, and this new concept of space links the Fourth World with the virtual space of the Fifth World, where Gómez-Peña locates “mass media, the U.S. suburbs, art schools, malls, Disneyland, the White House & La Chingada” (245). Gómez-Peña’s seemingly neutral topography review implicitly critiques the nationalist model dominant in the three-worlds theory for naturalizing a particular concept of space as bounded territory; his Fourth and Fifth Worlds, with their supposedly more conceptual spaces, are not in fact directly opposed to the first three, because space is conceptual in all of them. The juxtaposition of two different concepts of space undermines and complicates the binary oppositions structuring the language used to describe them. Nationalist spaces are Euclidean, characterized by absolute boundaries. In this conceptualization, space is imagined to function only “as a field” or a “container, a co-ordinate system of discrete and mutually exclusive locations” (Smith and Katz 75). In contrast, the Fourth and Fifth Worlds embody a concept of spatial relations defined in terms of motion, flux, and relationality, qualities more typically associated in Western philosophical modernity with temporal experience. The opposition between the bounded spaces of the first three worlds and the more complex spatiality of the fourth and fifth therefore also causes the boundary between the Fourth and Fifth Worlds to remain open. In this way, Gómez-Peña poses the question of the relation between the virtual spaces of computer and media networks and the new forms of ethnicity that are emerging from what Arjun Appadurai calls transnational “ethnoscapes” or flows of displaced peoples and workforces across national boundaries (7–8). The main concern of *The New World Border* is to work out the complexities of this re-
lation between the Fourth and Fifth Worlds, which for Gómez-Peña are neither identical nor clearly distinct from each other.

Gómez-Peña’s refusal to simply separate the Fourth World as a site of resistance from the Fifth World as a site of co-optation, corporate transnationalism, and official or superficial multiculturalism makes an important intervention in the popular and academic discourses on cyberspace and new media technologies, as well as in the discourses on transnationalism within which Gómez-Peña is more often placed. For Gómez-Peña, transnational cultures are necessarily impure, and that impurity offers a model for intervening in contemporary rhetorics about the implications of the Internet. As Gómez-Peña puts it, his goal is to “‘infect,’” “‘spanglicize,’” and “‘brownify’ virtual space” (Dangerous Border Crossers 259). But to understand the value virtual space has for Gómez-Peña as a concept and the value of his work to contemporary debates about cyberspace, we must trace the route that led him to an engagement with these technologies, despite his initial resistance to them (250). My main focus in this essay will be the way Gómez-Peña has recontextualized his work in terms of cyberculture as well as Chicano or Latino art and literature. From this perspective, Gómez-Peña’s performances seem to offer a way out of the dilemma facing analysts of race in cyberspace, as defined by the editors of a recent collection on this topic, who describe the dominant technocultural responses to racial questions as caught in a “binary switch”: “All too often, when it comes to virtual culture, the subject of race” is either “completely ‘off’ (i.e., race is an invisible concept because it’s simultaneously unmarked and undisussed), or it’s completely ‘on’ (i.e., it’s a controversial flashpoint for angry debate and overheated rhetoric),” and the assumption behind this angry reaction is that issues of race have no relevance in cyberspace.7

In an important essay entitled “The Virtual Barrio @ the Other Frontier” (originally written between 1995 and 1997 and revised for inclusion in Dangerous Border Crossers), Gómez-Peña both adopts and subverts the role of intruder, taking on the “unpleasant but necessary roles of web-backs, cyber-aliens, techno-pirates, and virtual coyotes” or guides to illegal border crossings (258). The project of brownifying the Internet has become explicit rather late in Gómez-Peña’s career, as he notes (255), but this impulse can already be observed in his definition of the Fifth World, specifically in the inclusion of the term “La Chingada” under the heading of the Fifth World and the virtual spaces of postmodern media simulacra and consumer culture. Tracing the internal logic that required Gómez-Peña to redefine himself and his work in relation to new technologies shows that a Mexican presence on the Internet is not just an unwelcome intrusion and that this turn is not merely trendy.

Gómez-Peña’s phrase “La Chingada” implicitly connects racial categories and performances to the increasing technological mediation of contemporary experience in all worlds. In Mexican culture, “La Chingada,” or “the Fucked,” is an epithet popularly associated with the figure of La Malinche, Cortés’s captive mistress and translator. Octavio Paz famously interpreted the link between La Chingada and La Malinche as a figure for necessarily mixed or illegitimate origins, arguing for the centrality and positive value of hybridity or mestizaje in the formation of Mexican national identity after the Spanish conquest (79). Norma Alarcon notes that the term la chingada is itself a linguistic hybrid, “derived from the Hispanicized Nahuatl verb chingar” (63). In Gómez-Peña’s work, this term represents a crossing of racial categories into the virtual, and his use of the term moves toward Donna Haraway’s definition of the cyborg as figuring a “monstrous and illegitimate” unity and as having “no origin story in the Western sense” (154, 150).

The figure of La Malinche is one of the more contested in Mexican culture, having given rise to the term malinchismo, or treachery. Even in Paz, it is hard for la chingada not to carry connotations of contempt. In Alarcón’s reading,
Paz can only recuperate La Malinche by emphasizing that she was raped and victimized (65), so that Paz’s interpretation of La Chinga as a figure for an irreducibly plural origin tends to displace the gendered specificity of the term to generalize its relevance. In contrast, Gloria Anzaldúa attempts to appropriate this figure as a model for agency and for attempts to negotiate between others’ cultures and languages (22–23). The result of these critiques is to highlight the mediated and contested nature of La Chinga, which is less a designation than an interested construction. Gómez-Peña foregrounds the mediation of racial and gendered identities by including La Chinga in the Fifth World, a highly charged and double-edged association. If the inclusion of La Chinga under this rubric of virtual space begins to brownify the Internet, it also suggests a critique of the media’s role in creating and perpetuating stereotypes of Mexicans and women. This reading is reinforced by a bilingual pun on a second, idiomatic meaning of la chingada—“and on and on”—which suggests that clichéd media representations of race and gender are so familiar as to go without saying.8 This adaptation of a term derived from a history of sexual and racial violence to describe the general effects of living in a postmodern media environment also risks depoliticizing the term, while preserving its misogynistic connotations, if only as a metaphor for how the media fuck us all. It seems to me that Gómez-Peña intends to highlight the danger of generalizing specific experiences of dislocation and hybridity when he places La Chinga in the Fifth World rather than the Fourth, even as that placement also suggests an alternative historical perspective on postmodern virtualization. For Gómez-Peña, such historical intervention becomes possible only if one takes the risk of virtualization and generalization, of reproducing stereotypes, a risk that is crucial to understanding his performances of life on the border.

One reason for stressing the connections in Gómez-Peña’s work among virtual space, multicultural representations, and the social and economic changes associated with globalization is to foreground how problematic the concept of the border has become for him. While often encouraged by Gómez-Peña’s self-presentation as a “border brujo” articulating the conditions of migration, diaspora, and cultural hybridity that increasingly seem to define postmodern subjectivity in general, characterizations of the artist as primarily celebrating border culture are at best anachronistic or only partially accurate.9 The New World Border in fact marks a key moment of self-consciousness about how this concept or figure of the border lends itself to co-optation by transnational corporate cultures and what Roger Rouse calls corporate-liberal multiculturalism (“Thinking” 381). For more than a year before the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was passed by the United States Congress, in 1993, debates about the treaty raged in the popular media. During this time, Gómez-Peña and Sifuentes were performing the title piece in The New World Border. The introduction to the book indicates the crisis the debates about NAFTA provoked in Gómez-Peña, whose rhetoric of border crossing as a subversive or critical act seemed to have been pulled out from under his feet. As he points out, the kind of “free trade art” promoted by NAFTA “is tricky. It promotes transculture and celebrates border crossing, but for all the wrong reasons” (11). At the same time, Gómez-Peña advocates creating a resistant “structure parallel to NAFTA”: a “Free Art Agreement” (9).10 The trickiness of NAFTA’s rhetoric is precisely its structural parallelism with Gómez-Peña’s, and the lack of a clear distinction is dramatized by the similarity between “free trade art” and “free art.” In this sense, NAFTA represented for Gómez-Peña both a crisis and a new opportunity, to the extent that transculture and border crossing were revealed to be basically appropriable, by Gómez-Peña and NAFTA—that is, if the passage of NAFTA proved that border crossing could be domesticated as “conservative diplomacy” (11), it also proved that the idea could be reappropri-
ated for less conservative purposes. But that reappropriation could only be accomplished through the admission that the border is no one’s exclusive property or territory, neither NAFTA’s nor Gómez-Peña’s. The performance piece “The New World Border” therefore begins to thematize the difficulty, perhaps impossibility, of clearly distinguishing between an official or conservative transculture and a resistant one.

A similar self-consciousness about the co-optation or preempting of the border as a critical concept appears slightly earlier in Gómez-Peña’s work, during his break with the Border Arts Workshop / Taller de Arte Fronterizo (BAW/TAF) in 1989–90, completed in 1991 with the publication of his controversial essay “Death on the Border: A Eulogy to Border Art.” The occasion for this essay was Gómez-Peña’s perception that “in 1989 everyone” in the art world “went border” and jumped on “the Aztec high tech express” (8). Gómez-Peña’s colleagues in the BAW/TAF, including the founder, David Avalos, and Gómez-Peña’s wife, Emily Hicks, justifiably regarded this kind of language as a repudiation of their collective project and not just of the art institutions that might be attempting to co-opt their key concepts. A number of critics see this rhetoric as part of Gómez-Peña’s shift away from a site-specific concept of the United States–Mexico border (Berelowitz) and toward a “global border consciousness,” substituted for “an art of place” (Berelowitz) and toward a “global border consciousness,” substituted for “an art of place” (Fox 62–63). As José David Saldivar puts it, Gómez-Peña casts himself no longer “as border brujo or as an Aztec/high-tech theorist” but instead as a “Warrior for Gringostroika,” the title of a performance (and book collection) in which Gómez-Peña tied border cultures worldwide to the breakup of the Soviet Union and the collapse of the three-worlds model (152). Saldivar argues that the result of this shift is to dematerialize the actual geography of border cities like Tijuana (158) and the city’s and therefore reproducing the logic of media spectacle and stereotyping, in a way that has led some critics to challenge his authority to speak for the border as a Chilango—a native of Mexico City—rather than a Chicano. As Gómez-Peña sums up this shift, “[F]or me, the border is no longer located at any fixed geopolitical site. I carry the border with me, and I find new borders wherever I go” (New World Border 5).

But if the more site-specific art of the BAW/TAF could also be co-opted by mainstream media, then Gómez-Peña’s generalization or globalization of the border might be read as strategic in a political rather than just a careerist sense. Is the connection to place a sufficient form of resistance to media co-optation? Is it possible to resist that co-optation from within the virtual space of the postmodern Fifth World? The legitimacy of these kinds of questions is made clearer in sociological work on new communications technologies like that of Manuel Castells. For Castells, the space of virtual flows of information is today “superseding the meaning of the space of places” (349), and “the emergence of the space of flows [. . .] expresses the disarticulation of place-based societies and cultures from the organizations of power and production,” which henceforth function less visibly and less accessibly (349). In Castell’s model, to simply reassert the value of the material is to play into the hands of this disarticulation. The challenge for local communities and resistance movements is to “reconstruct an alternative space of flows on the basis of the space of places” (352–53), and Gómez-Peña’s performance work can help us imagine what such a reconstruction, what Arif Dirlik calls critical localism, would look like.

Popular rhetorics about the Internet and about virtual reality pose the same challenge to Gómez-Peña’s work that NAFTA did. The first fictional text in The New World Border is a poem entitled “Freefalling toward a Borderless Future.” For Gómez-Peña, the “borderless future” contains “incredible mixtures beyond science fiction,” including not only “cyber-Aztecs” and “cholo-punks,” a hybridization of Chicano and cyberpunk cultures, but also “butoh rappers”
and “Hopi rockers,” new cross-cultural ethnic formations informed and generated by contemporary media, which are thereby racialized in new ways (1). However, in the essay “A Borderless World?” Masao Miyoshi points out how the same rhetoric circulates in transnational corporate cultures, where borderless worlds are ones in which race is irrelevant, not remixed. Lisa Nakamura argues that recent advertisements for Internet services similarly “claim a world without boundaries for us, their consumers and target audience” (“Where Do You” 21). In these kinds of cultural contexts, it becomes increasingly dangerous to write about “jumping borders at ease / jumping borders with pleasure” (New World Border 3), as Gómez-Peña does in this poem, since what is desired is an easy model of cultural exchange, which leaves racial stereotypes and inequitable social relations intact at the same time that it facilitates what Nakamura calls “identity tourism” and Gómez-Peña later refers to as “cultural transvestism” (Dangerous Border Crossers 215).

From this perspective, Gómez-Peña’s declaration that “I make art about the misunderstandings that take place at the border zone” takes on a new meaning: those misunderstandings are about the status of the border zone itself, not just about its inhabitants or visitors, and the emphasis on misunderstanding in part qualifies the “ease” and “pleasure” of crossing borders. Equally important is the statement that follows, about how Gómez-Peña carries “the border with me” and finds “new borders wherever I go” instead of locating the border “at any fixed geopolitical site” (5). Slavoj Žižek has critiqued popular depictions of cyberspace for imagining it as a site of identity play, where users can construct and control their own personae and “you can be whatever you want” (487). This common view of cyberspace as a means of externalizing or staging fantasies is for Žižek informed by a desire to overcome the internal splitting of subjectivity into conscious and unconscious and thereby to gain greater control over self-fashioning (506, 508–09). In effect, cyberspace is imagined to turn subjectivity inside out, but this operation only assimilates virtual role-playing to a model of ego psychology and possessive individualism. For Žižek, the danger of celebrating virtual self-fashioning and fantasies of cross-identification is that such practices will ultimately instrumentalize the subject; we can be whoever we want to be only if we understand our selves to be machinic assemblages vulnerable to reconstruction by external power as well as by our desires and fantasies. The unconscious structuration of subjectivity limits this instrumentalization, even when it proceeds under the rubric of self-fashioning and agency.

In contrast, Gómez-Peña’s border subject remains permanently divided, though not along the lines of conscious and unconscious. Gómez-Peña’s model of subjectivity retains the postmodern depthlessness that Žižek resists; Gómez-Peña’s border subject is constituted by a refusal to allow the Mexican presence to be repressed in the political unconscious of North America. At the same time, this subject avoids the trap of conceiving subjectivity as internally homogeneous and therefore as amenable to control or self-control. The relevance of Žižek’s argument to racial identity in the United States is suggested by Harryette Mullen, who defines the production of a “media cyborg” through the same processes of externalization that cyberspace seems to literalize. For Mullen, the media representations of blackness extract “the soul of black folks […] from the black body,” make that soul “comprehensible in its expressiveness,” and render it consumable or appropriable by white audiences; rap music is the most obvious contemporary example (84, 87).

Gómez-Peña’s most recent performance pieces revolve around the use of the Internet, especially the World Wide Web, to construct “ethno-cyborgs.” This use of the Internet is grounded in but significantly extends his long-standing technique of “reverse anthropology,” in which Gómez-Peña and his collaborators gener-
ate performance personae by stylizing and ex-
aggerating stereotypes of Mexicans and inserting them “back into public spaces” (New World 
Border 84, 96). “The Temple of Confessions,” 
originally designed in 1994 as a set of “living 
dioramas,” included an interactive element: visi-
tors’ fantasies about Mexicans and immigrants 
were solicited in face-to-face exchanges and 
then used to revise the performers’ characters 
and their scripted actions. Soon Gómez-Peña 
and Sifuentes, with the help of galleries and mu-
seums where they performed, began to set up 
Web sites where virtual visitors were encouraged 
to narrate similar fantasies. The relative anonym-
ity and the physical detachment of computer-
mediated communication induced confessions 
that, as Gómez-Peña puts it, “couldn’t possibly 
have been obtained through field work, direct in-
terviews,” or even “talk radio” (40). This Web-
ased element was introduced into a performed 
work later in 1994, in a piece entitled “The 
Ethno-cyberpunk Trading Post and Curio Shop 
on the Electronic Frontier” (46). Finally, in 1995 
Gómez-Peña and Sifuentes presented “El Mex-
terminator” in Mexico City, based almost entirely 
on the Web confessions received (a selection 
of these confessions is included in Dangerous 
Border Crossers and can be contrasted with the 
confessions delivered in person in the earlier 
performance [58–60, 41–43]). Personae gener-
ated in this manner include a revised version of 
Sifuentes’s “Cyber-Vato” character, who ap-
peared in “The New World Border,” and Gómez-
Peña as “El Mad Mex” (54; figs. 3 and 4).

The shift in the circumstances of these con-
fessions, from the physical copresence of the 
visitors and performers to computer-mediated 
anonymity, makes it difficult to generalize about 
the demography of those who provided the fanta-
sies. In his commentaries on this work, Gómez-
Peña exploits this ambiguity by usually referring 
to both types of confessions as examples of “ar-
chetypal American fears” (40). He concludes 
that “The Temple of Confessions” should be un-
derstood as “an exercise in reverse anthropol-
ogy” because it “was more about America’s cul-
tural projections and its inability to deal with cul-
tural otherness than about the Latino ‘other,’” 
and he offers a similar analysis of the virtual 
confessions as expressions of “America’s millen-
nial fantasies” (40, 50). Discussing “The Temple 
of Confessions,” Gómez-Peña notes that the performance included examples of internalized stereotypes among Mexicans and Latino audi-
ence members (40), but his tendency is to as-
sume that the Internet users were predominantly 
Anglo, most likely because of the “unexamined 
ethnocentrism” the artist critiques in his essay 
on the “virtual barrio,” where he points out how 
English has been naturalized online as an “un-
questioned lingua franca” (Dangerous Border 
Crossers 255). Gómez-Peña also suggests that

FIG. 3
Sifuentes in a 
version of the 
Cyber-Vato 
ethnocyborg 
persona. Photo: 
Eugenio Castro.
online anonymity made respondents more willing to expose their most stereotypical modes of thinking about racial minorities and immigrant populations, modes of thought that might otherwise have been censored or stigmatized. Given the selection of Internet confessions included in the commentaries on these performances in Dangerous Border Crossers and the book Temple of Confessions (Gómez-Peña and Sifuentes), it certainly appears that the overwhelming majority of the respondents were Anglo, or at least not Chicanos or Latinos, though it is not clear how much Gómez-Peña and his collaborators focused on the more stereotypical responses. Similarly, since my access to the responses is mediated through Gómez-Peña’s performances and his commentaries on them, it is not clear to what extent the online questionnaires tended to elicit stereotyped or hostile answers. Some of the questions were biased for or against Mexicans and Mexican Americans, such as “Do you think that immigrants are contributing to America’s downfall?” and “Should the US/Mexico border be opened and, if so, why?” Another question described a group of racially stereotyped figures (a tattooed gang member, a “Native American in full regalia,” and “a romantic over-sexualized Mexican macho”) and prompted respondents to describe the “wild fantasies” they would like these figures to “re-enact”; the idea of reenactment implied that the question confined respondents to the cliché, the already represented, the stereotype (Dangerous Border Crossers 58–59). Did no respondents contest the terms of these questions, perhaps from a more directly political or nationalist perspective?

Such doubts qualify Gómez-Peña’s claims to having excavated a new layer in the American psyche through his “Temple of Confessions.” The ambiguity is whether the confessions reflect valid ethnographic data about an emergent set of newly technologized racial fantasies, as Gómez-Peña claims in his commentaries on them, or whether and to what extent they reflect Gómez-Peña’s thinking about the effects of new technologies on racial representations. Given his critique of anthropological knowledge, it is perhaps best to consider the confessions and the performance personae based on them as collaborations or shared inventions rather than a new truth about America. Gómez-Peña’s project in these performances, after all, is to exploit the “intercultural” nature of a specific set of fantasies about racial others in a way that clarifies what it means to brownify virtual space (49). The point of reversing anthropological relations of knower and known by reinserting stereotypes and racial fantasies into public space is to make those fantasies more dialogic. This tactic of reversal is developed more fully in the science-fictional scenario sketched out in performance pieces like “The New World Border,” in which Gómez-Peña imagines North and South America dominated by a new transnational norm that minoritizes monocultural identities. This tech-
nique is applied to the Internet in *Friendly Cannibals*, an electronic epistolary fiction with art by Enrique Chayoga. In a story that takes the form of a set of e-mail communications from a future version of Gómez-Peña, cyberspace has become “brown & rowdy, punto, and its lingua franca is colloquial Spanglish” (10). At the beginning of the performance “El Mexterminator,” audiences encounter a similar “metafictional premise,” in the form of a written or recorded text explaining that the ethnocyborg personae represent “interactive ethnographic exhibits” designed to educate supposed future audiences about the historical attitudes of the outmoded national era (*Dangerous Border Crossers* 52).

Gómez-Peña disclaims authorship of these new ethnocyborg personae when he asserts that the confessional results of his “experiment in anti-colonial anthropology” through the Internet were “much stranger than anything we could have imagined on our own.” Regardless of the extent to which these fantasies mix his audience’s fantasies and his own predispositions and imagination, Gómez-Peña’s ethnocyborgs represent a significant advance in thinking about the possibilities for articulating racial histories and new technologies. Specifically, Gómez-Peña takes the confessions as evidence of an unexpected displacement of traditional Mexican stereotypes such as the “‘sleepy Mexican,’” the “‘exotic border ‘senorita,’” and the “‘greaser’ bandit.” Such figures have been replaced “by a new pantheon of mighty robo-Mexicans” (*Dangerous Border Crossers* 50). What is the significance of such a shift in racial figurations? These technologized racial fantasies reflect a challenge to concepts of American citizenship and nationality and a strategy to contain that challenge, both articulated on the level of body imagery. The fantasies that Gómez-Peña has elicited and restaged, of Mexican ethnocyborgs with prosthetic implants and tattooed brown skin, conceptualize immigrant populations and the transnational imbrication of the Mexican and United States economies as having a prosthetic relation to an imagined social body. On one level, this kind of fantasy appears to serve as a new means of exoticizing Mexicans and Mexican Americans and imagining them as a mere supplement to or departure from American norms, a reading that emphasizes the difference between the prosthesis and the organic body. But on another level the image of the prosthesis also figures a less easily dismissed process of incorporation without assimilation, given that the prosthesis is an artificial extension of the body. As Allucquere Rosanne Stone points out, the prosthesis is opposed to the instrument or tool, which does not change the user (12). An analogy to the instrumental approach to technology is the desire to cast immigrant populations as an exploitable labor force rather than as agents of cultural exchange. Resistance to such exploitation disrupts the primitivizing stereotypes that seem to have disappeared from Gómez-Peña’s confessions. The ethnocyborg, then, represents a restructuring of time and space. Primitivist ideologies may imagine the spatial coexistence of temporally distinct and bounded populations, a nonsynchrony that serves as a defense against possibilities for cultural mixing necessarily implied by coexistence. Fantasies about ethnocyborgs register the collapse of such temporal and spatial distinctions.

Gómez-Peña succinctly formulates his recognition that the ethnocyborg constitutes both a significant change in racial representations and a new stereotype when he describes these fantasies as “projections of people’s own psychological and cultural monsters—an army of Mexican Frankensteins ready to rebel against their Anglo creators” (*Dangerous Border Crossers* 49). The potential for resistance or rebellion in such constructions of “Mexican-ness” and their difference from Mullen’s “media cyborgs” reside in the emphasis Gómez-Peña places on the embodied repetition or “stylized anthropomorphization” of his audiences’ “own post-colonial demons and racist hallucinations” (50). The language here echoes the imagery used to describe cyberspace computer networks as a collective or “consensual
hallucination,” a phrase found in William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* (1984), the novel that coined the term *cyberspace* (5). But Gómez-Peña departs from the typical cyberpunk tendency to imagine cyberspace as a site of disembodiment when he insists that what his reverse anthropology does is “embody [...] information” and that such an embodiment reinterprets the data he gathers through the Web (113). This element of reinterpretation makes these performances potential critical reflections on racism. An extension of this technique occurs when the artist and his collaborators encourage viewers to “modify our identities by changing our make-up, hair or costumes” and then to allow the performers to do the same to audience members, who can thus “fulfill their fantasy of a brand-new ‘temporary ethnic identity’” as “their ‘favorite cultural others’” (55). Gómez-Peña’s performances aim to literalize computer-mediated identity play and invention of personae. The result is not to reject or resist those practices as inauthentic but to raise the question of material consequences that qualify the ease and pleasure audiences might take in such border crossings.

Gómez-Peña then connects race and cyberspace by extending to cyberspace the kind of analysis Stuart Hall makes of popular culture and mass media in general. Emphasizing the impurity of representations of blackness in popular culture, Hall argues that “spectacularization” has to be understood in terms of the operation of power through hegemony—that is, as involving both co-optation and the potential for significant change (468). Gómez-Peña reveals such a dual process at work in the exteriorization of racial identity and assimilation of race to norms of postmodern depthlessness analyzed by Mullen and defined by Žižek as a general feature of communication in cyberspace. In this model, the reproduction of power relations depends on negotiation between dominant and subaltern groups, on the ability of subaltern groups to talk back to power and therefore to be given opportunities for change and resistance. This model of resistance is never completely co-opted but also never completely oppositional. In an essay included in the *Temple of Confessions* collection, Ed Morales defines the central issue of Gómez-Peña’s recent work as the problematic of mutual access, the access of “a misinterpreted meta-ethnicity” to the “American technological infrastructure” and of “mainstream America to the historical and cultural memory of a hybrid Naftaztca south-of-the-border being” (136–37).

I now turn to an exploration of how Gómez-Peña moved toward a conceptualization of racial identity as a hybrid of information and bodies as a result of his interest in mapping the shifting borders between the Fourth and Fifth Worlds. The rest of this essay offers readings of the origin of these concerns in two performance pieces, “The New World Border,” which dates to 1992–94, and “Naftaztec: Pirate Cyber-TV for A.D. 2000,” the simulated pirate TV broadcast that aired in 1994. This second work directly thematizes the relation of Chicanos to immersive virtual reality interfaces and telepresence technologies. “Naftaztec” is partly organized as a kind of demonstration or test of the Technopal 2000, the “Chicano virtual reality machine,” presented as making visible the mediation of racialized bodies.

“Chicano Cyber-punk Art”: Gómez-Peña’s “The New World Border”

The performance piece entitled “The New World Border” imagines a near-future America in which “the sinister cartography of the New World Order” has been replaced by “a great trans- and intercontinental border zone, a place in which no centers remain,” the “only true ‘others’ are those who resist fusion, mestizaje, and cross-cultural dialogue,” and “hybridity is the dominant culture” (*New World Border* 7). This definition perhaps emphasizes the utopian aspect of the New World Border, but Gómez-Peña’s performance also addresses the emergence of cultural hybridity and “borderization” as new social norms and a new regime of power and domi-
nance—that is, this transformation of America into a border zone seems progressive in relation to earlier models of national culture and secure national boundaries but not necessarily in relation to a contemporary world system increasingly dominated by transnational corporations and the border-crossing cultures they promote. This ambivalence reflects Gómez-Peña’s increasing awareness that “to be excluded from a national project at a time when all nation states are collapsing is not an extraordinary act of heroism” (Dangerous Border Crossers 30). By the same token, however, neither is such exclusion merely a “literary fiction”; instead, it marks the emergence of a new topography of social space.

In the introduction to “The New World Border,” written for the version printed in the book of the same title, Gómez-Peña tells how his thinking about the piece changed over the two years that he presented it. He describes how reviewers and colleagues insisted on labeling “The New World Border” “chicano cyber-punk art,” until ultimately he decided “to embrace [that] definition” (21). To the extent that it is derived from how others perceive Gómez-Peña, “cyber-punk” becomes another example of reverse anthropology and the self-conscious repetition or “involuntary performance” of imposed identity categories, like Chicano or Mexican. I am particularly interested in the way Gómez-Peña tries to cross these two sets of identity categories, as he does on the most basic verbal level in the poem introducing The New World Border, “Freefalling toward a Borderless Future,” when he divides “cyber-punk” into “cyber-Aztecs” and “cholo-punks” (1). This linguistic maneuver typographically dramatizes the acceptance of a technocultural framing of Mexican American identity, which nevertheless interrupts and divides that framework from within.

In his introductory comments on the New World Border, Gómez-Peña goes on to define the project of this performance as one of “gringo-grostoiika” or the projection onto the United States of “the processes of balkanization that Eastern Europe underwent from 1989 to 1992” (21). This focus on the decline of the nation-state defines one of the main similarities between the performance and the representational framework of cyberpunk science fiction, which Fredric Jameson famously refers to as one of the most fully realized contemporary expressions of “transnational corporate realities” (38). In fact, Gibson’s Neuromancer, the paradigmatic cyberpunk novel, never mentions the United States but refers only to new urban formations within its former boundaries (the Sprawl, the Boston-Atlanta Metropolitan Axis) and to fragmented subcultures (the Big Scientists, the Panther Moderns). Gibson says in an interview that the novel omits national references because he “wanted the reader to question the political existence of the United States” (“Eye” 26).

This challenge to national boundaries is linked to the emergence of cyberspace, defined in Neuromancer as a global “consensual hallucination” or “graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system” (51); this definition emphasizes the use of cyberspace as a medium for interactions not only with information but also with other computer users, a social space in which national boundaries, and indeed material limitations of any kind, seem irrelevant. But the obsolescence of the nation-state in this type of science fiction is also explained by the dominance of transnational corporations, or zaibatsus, to use the term most often found in Neuromancer. In another interview, Gibson remarks that the absence of national entities in his version of cyberpunk reflects his view that “we’re moving toward a world where all the consumers under a certain age will probably tend to identify more with their consumer status or with the products they consume than they would with a sort of antiquated notion of nationality” (Interview). In other words, cyberpunk fiction represents the dissolution of national borders as liberatory, a movement into the freer spaces of computer-mediated communication, and as oppressive—
or, more accurately, as reflecting a new set of social and cultural norms. This ambivalent attitude toward transnationalization provides the most substantive connection between cyberpunk fiction like Gibson’s and Gómez-Peña’s performance art and makes the labeling of “The New World Border” as Chicano cyberpunk art more than just a forced or involuntary classification.

“The New World Border” narrates gringostroika as a science fiction plot, offering a future history in which the countries of the North American continent follow the Soviet Union into the “geo-political limbo” of “former” nationhood (245). In a reimagining of NAFTA that explores with relish Ross Perot’s worst nightmares, “the implementation of a Free Raid Agreement” results in the merging of Canada, the United States, and Mexico into the F.U.S.R., or Federation of United States Republics, governed by “a Master Chamber of Commerce, a Department of Transnational Tourism, and a Media Junta” (27). The result is described by one of the characters as a new “reality” that “looks and feels like a cyber-punk film codirected by Jose Marti and Ted Turner” (29).

The performance consists of expository sections like the one quoted above, narrated by Gómez-Peña in the character of El Aztec High-Tech and by his collaborator Sifuentes in the character of Super-Pocho, alternating with various set pieces, such as an official news broadcast and radio programs, intended to dramatize the institutionalization of hybrid identities. The main features of this new historical reality include passage of a “Spanglish Only Initiative” that establishes “Spanglish” and “Gringonol” as the official languages of the F.U.S.R. (28); the emergence of “new hybrid identities” of “mesti-mulatas,” or peoples who are “the product of at least four racial mixtures,” such as Mexkimos, Chicanadians, Germanchurians, Anglomalans, and Afro-Croatians (33–34); new syncretic religious figures, such as Tezcatlipunk, the Mexican god of urban wrath, or Funkahuatl, the Aztec divinity of funk (41); and the relegation of “art about identity” to “a dignified form of nostalgia” (42–43). This institutionalization of cultural and ethnic hybridity also results in an inversion of contemporary social norms, so that “the monocultural territories of the disbanded United States […] have become drastically impoverished, leading to massive migrations of waspbacks to the South” (27).

At the same time, the collapse of national boundaries and what the narrator calls “the rise of the New World Border globalist rhetoric” also lead to “a resurgence of ultranationalist movements,” including the secession from the F.U.S.R. of Quebec, Puerto Rico, Aztlán, south central Los Angeles, the Yucatán, and all the Indian nations (30). At this point, it becomes clear that the New World Border is what the performance calls an “official” or dominant postnational transculture. The emergence of transculturation as social norm appears inherently progressive only in relation to older national norms. As one of the characters puts it, in this new borderized culture “the crossing from the Third to the First World” is no longer an act of time travel, a passage from “the past to the future,” and so primitivist ideologies disappear and are replaced by new problems (41).

The negative consequences of this official transculture as a new regime of power are dramatized by the F.U.S.R.’s “campaign of the amigoization of the North, better known as Operation Jalapeño Fever,” in which “multicultural consumer training” promotes “sexy and inoffensive Latino products” such as taco capsules and inflatable Frida Kahlo dolls (37). The main features of the official transculture are the coimplication of globalism and localism and the articulation of postnational power through the paradoxically simultaneous imperatives to participate in the globalizing processes of cultural homogenization (border crossing) and the localizing processes of cultural differentiation (border fortification), which seem to be two sides of the same transnational coin. In this way, “The New World Border” dramatizes not a celebration of border crossing but instead what David Harvey calls the “central paradox” of post-
Fordist global economies—"the less important the spatial barriers" between nations become, "the greater the sensitivity of capital to the variations of place within space, and the greater the incentive for places to be differentiated in ways attractive to capital" (295–96). The emergence of transnational economies, with their normative disregard for national borders as spatial barriers, is paralleled by an equally powerful and only seemingly contradictory imperative to heighten and market one’s local color, in sexy but inoffensive ways.

The performance ends with a list of sectarian movements or "mafias," including Straight White Guys Are Alright, White Women Experts of Otherness, Thin and Gorgeous Artists of Color, Born Again Latinos, and the Real African Nation (who supposedly claim that "the entire African continent sold out" and is "no longer African enough" [45–46]). During the reciting of this list, audience members are encouraged to raise their hands to identify themselves with the appropriate category, and Gómez-Peña describes how before the performance he and Sifuentes often seated audience members, "segregating" them "according to racial and/or linguistic criteria" (an act of segregation reinforced formally, at least for "monocultural" audience members, by the multilingual nature of the performance [22]).

These forms of identity politics are presented as one possible mode of resistance to the official transculture and its market-driven multiculturalism. At the same time, such movements are ruthlessly and indiscriminately mocked, in ways that seem designed to offend and alienate every possible audience member. Why do this? In the transnational order of the New World Border, these identity-based movements resist only one of the dual imperatives of official transnationalism—the imperative to global homogenization—but by doing so they participate in the imperative to differentiate locally in ways attractive to capital. For Gómez-Peña, identity politics plays into the hands of the transnational corporations’ new strategies for producing and managing social differences, to the extent that such a politics defines new niche markets and demographic categories for capitalism, like lesbian chic or alternative music. While this aspect of Gómez-Peña’s transnational or borderized culture involves political or social movements, the artist also identifies a problem inherent in computer-mediated communication. Manuel Castells argues that the functional distinction between the space of flows and the space of places in contemporary society encourages the tribalization and fragmentation of social space, among other effects: “faced with the variable geometry of the space of flows, grassroots mobilizations tend to be defensive, protective, territorially bounded, or so culturally specific that their codes of self-recognizing identity become non-communicable.” The result is a fragmentation “into tribes” and a tendency toward “a fundamentalist affirmation of […] identity” (350).

In contrast to these partial and therefore recuperable modes of sectarian resistance, “The New World Border” opposes a resistant mode of transnationalization. A section called “The Barrios of Resistance” imagines every block as having “a secret community center” that functions as a “contemporary version […] of the old kilombos” (38); the “glossary of borderismos” in the back of the book defines kilombos as “independent micro-republics created by runaway slaves,” like the maroon communities that were often sites of alliance between indigenous peoples and fugitive slaves, most notably in Florida. These are Fourth World sites, as Gómez-Peña would define that world.

The practices of resistance in these barrios include self-published “laser-xerox magazines,” “experimental home videos on police brutality,” and “pirate radio interventions” (38). In contrast to the sectarian movements as Gómez-Peña presents them, the barrios of resistance define themselves as locally situated, one for each city block, and as capable of transcending the local through the expropriation of globalizing media technologies—publishing, video, and radio. These
community centers resist the official culture’s imperatives to localize and globalize by restaging both processes in a more critical modality. As Arif Dirlik puts it, in an essay attempting to distinguish a “critical localism” from modes of local differentiation that are only attractive to capital, “local resistance” must also be “translocal,” to successfully resist transnational corporations that domesticate themselves “in various localities without forgetting [their] global aims and organization” (Dirlik 41, 34). From this perspective, the sectarian movements succeed only in becoming local, without redefining local identities as simultaneously translocal.

Gómez-Peña’s resistant transculture attempts to turn the instruments of the official transculture, its localizing and its globalizing mechanisms, against that dominant culture. Unlike the more nationalist or sectarian identity-based movements, such a strategy of resistance risks becoming what it resists, since these barrios, as their name suggests, work within and, they hope, against the same official logic of transculturation that reduces Latino culture to sexy and inoffensive products on the world market and also generates ghettoized neo-nationalisms. In Dirlik’s terms, under the conditions of transnationalism, the local “becomes the site [...] where critique turns into ideology and ideology into critique, depending upon its location at any fleeting moment” (35). In this sense, it is necessary to return to Gómez-Peña’s representation of the sectarian mafias and ask whether the seemingly savage mockery of those movements is not in fact undermined in the same way that resistant transculture always threatens to blur into its media image. In this reading, Gómez-Peña does not simply reject the sectarian mafias or identity-based movements, as it is often suggested he does (Kuhnheim comments on Gómez-Peña’s sexism, for instance [27]). Gómez-Peña has acknowledged his willingness to move between a strategic essentialism and a strategic antieessentialism, depending on audience; he suggests that Mexican audiences often need to be confronted with the position of Chicano nationalism, while Anglo audiences need to be confronted with “a pan-Latino or pan-subaltern space” (Dangerous Border Crossers 177). This kind of shift informs Gómez-Peña’s commentary on his work and on transnationalism in general. In an interview in Dangerous Border Crossers, Gómez-Peña draws on “The New World Border” to try to distinguish between the official multiculturalism of NAFTA and the emergence in that official transculture of an “anti-NAFTA transborder zone.” Later in the same interview, however, Gómez-Peña admits how difficult it is to maintain that distinction, commenting that “border culture has been fully commodified” and hence it is necessary “to reposition the border” again and again—y la chingada (205, 218).

While attempts to recuperate a critical localism like Dirlik’s, or Gómez-Peña’s, for that matter, are clearly indispensable, they often neglect the unsettling effects of what Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto calls “virtualization” or the progressive “dissociation of space from place,” which finds its logical extreme in representations of cyberspace (115). The dissociation of space from place means the dissociation of the local from location. While this abstraction of the idea of the local from bounded material spaces can obviously facilitate the transformation of local sites into easily manipulable and commodifiable images or simulacra, it also permits local sites to function translocally. This is the lesson and the challenge that the Fifth World poses to the Fourth in Gómez-Peña’s work. This challenge undermines the separation between the translocal barrios of resistance and the aggressively bounded in-groups represented by the sectarian mafias. The modes of guerrilla media practiced in the barrios of resistance share the ephemerality and nonrepeatable uniqueness or site specificity often associated with avant-garde performance art, qualities that many claim place that art outside or at least in conflict with the commodity system; as Peggy Phelan puts it, this type of performance wants to be “represen-
tation without reproduction” (27). But Kuhnheim points out how the publication of a printed version of the performance undercuts this claim to specificity (27). At the same time, I would add that the turn to a printed text resists complete virtualization, as does the sectarianism of the mafias.

This self-consciousness about the packaging of his performance work, as analogous to the commodification of border culture, is intensified in Gómez-Peña’s next performance piece, “Naftaztec,” which simulates the kind of pirate media imagined to originate from the barrios of resistance. After the initial cable TV broadcast in 1994, “Naftaztec” was edited from ninety minutes to an hour and packaged as a videocassette, which can be purchased from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and which is advertised in the back of The New World Border. In a comment on the ideal of interactivity, the performance not only encouraged viewer response by telephone but also was transmitted over computer networks, so that e-mail messages could be sent to the performers. The implication is that this performance reflects on the media packaging and reappropriation of ethnic difference and of resistant attempts to appropriate the media. It is no coincidence, then, that this performance also thematizes skepticism toward the use of virtual reality technologies and toward cyberspace and its increasing romanticization as a site of freedom in which to perform and to reinvent oneself.

The Chicano Virtual Reality Machine: “Naftaztec”

Might virtual reality or computer simulation be harnessed, one wonders, for the purposes of multicultural or transnational pedagogy, in order to communicate, for example, what it feels like to be an “illegal alien” pursued by the border police or a civil rights demonstrator feeling the lash of police brutality in the early 1960s?

—Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, “From the Imperial Family to the Transnational Imaginary” (166)
ethnic expropriations of the media is an inescapable risk that any attempt to articulate the Fourth and Fifth Worlds must take.

The negotiation of this predicament informs the first demonstration of the Chicano virtual reality machine, the Technopal 2000. This scene is framed in terms of the value of such technologies for diasporic populations, since El Naftazteca comments on how immigrants might be tempted either to “immerse ourselves in nostalgia for a homeland that no longer exists” or to “embrace our present condition as public enemies, unwanted minorities, and become politicized, as painful as it may be” (this scene is included on the videotape of the performance but omitted from the published version). The rhetoric of immersion in nostalgia invokes the immersive qualities of virtual reality computer interfaces, in which hardware peripherals such as the head-mounted display and data glove are intended to produce the sensation of being inside a computer graphic. This collapsing of the alienating distance between viewer and screen is often celebrated as one of the main, liberatory accomplishments of virtual reality interfaces. The question Gómez-Peña raises is whether or not virtual reality can be made to produce painful politicization rather than escapist fantasy.

This question remains open while the Technopal 2000 is introduced, since the performance emphatically uses racial stereotypes to mark the technology as Chicano. El Naftazteca begins by calling to Cyber-Vato, “Let’s try the virtual reality sombrero. Some Mexican nostalgia, please” (another scene omitted from the book).22 The sombrero stands in for the head-mounted display, so that the virtual reality technology is initially presented as reproducing rather than disrupting stereotypes (fig. 5). While the conflation of high technology and the primitive might seem to destabilize the conventional image of the Mexican, Gómez-Peña presents immersion in a computer graphic as intensifying the collapse of any possible distinction between media images and real persons, and that collapse here works in the favor of the media image.

In contrast to the strand of thinking that celebrates virtual reality for its immersive qualities and collapse of dualistic distinctions, another perspective argues that the value of virtual reality interfaces derives from the split they produce between the physical and the virtual. This view makes it possible to define the relevance of virtual reality to El Naftazteca’s reflections on how migrant, racialized subjects cannot enter the public sphere except as “public enemies” and “unwanted minorities.” Stone has recently argued that virtual reality systems should be contextualized in the history of the public sphere and of its construction of the modern citizen as “composed of two major elements,” the “collection of physical and performative attributes” referred to as the “culturally intelligible body” and the “collection of virtual attributes which, taken together, compose a structure of meaning and intention for the first part,” primarily through institutional and discursive means, discipline in Foucault’s sense. For Stone, location technologies, defined as mechanisms for “the production and maintenance of [a] link between a discursive [or virtual] space and a physical space,” long precede the invention of virtual reality computer interfaces (40). In this reading, virtual reality technologies merely literalize the national public sphere’s longstanding historical techniques for disembodying citizens (in terms of gender and ethnicity) to render them genetically American. This use of the public sphere as a cultural context for the emergence of virtual systems opens the possibility for reading those technologies in relation to racial histories.

The Americanists Michael Warner and Lauren Berlant have analyzed how the “real attraction of abstract citizenship” lies “in the way the citizen conventionally acquires a new body,” a virtual body, “by participation in the political public sphere” (Berlant 113). But this access to a new, virtual body is available only to those (white, male, middle-class) subjects whose physical bodies are constructed as transcendent in the first place, in contrast to the inescapably particularized
bodies of minoritized subjects. From this theoretical perspective, the construction of “minorities” can be understood as a process of denying them a virtual body or, more accurately, denying them the possibility of relating their particular physical bodies to their possible virtual attributes, and this theoretical context defines the attraction virtual reality might have for such subjects.

The second scene in which the Chicano virtual reality machine appears offers a more extended reflection on the value and limits of virtual reality for minoritized subjects. El Naftazteca begins by outlining how the use of the sombrero was one stage in a miniaturization that began with a virtual reality poncho and that has now moved on to the bandanna. Sifuentes as Cyber-Vato then enters, wearing the ethnicized virtual reality costume (fig. 6). The audience watches the blindfolded figure of Cyber-Vato pretend to negotiate a series of computer-simulated environments controlled by El Naftazteca, who repeatedly asks Cyber-Vato to describe what he is seeing and experiencing. Cyber-Vato begins by describing being driven in a car; when El Naftazteca asks what the driver is wearing, Cyber-Vato replies a blue uniform and dark glasses, cheerfully adding that “he seems like a cool guy.” El Naftazteca plays the typical role of a computer programmer (at a trade show, for instance) encouraging a novice user to explore the options in a simulation and an interface, so that onlookers receive the most interesting demonstration. When El Naftazteca tells Cyber-Vato to get the driver’s attention by tapping him on the shoulder, Cyber-Vato finally realizes that he is in a police car with his hands cuffed. In what will become a motif, he panics and asks El Naftazteca to take “this pinche helmet off me,” while El Naftazteca tries to calm him down and reminds him that “it’s only virtual reality.” As the simulated policeman begins to assault Cyber-Vato with a nightstick, he refuses...
to jump out of the speeding car, even in virtual reality, and begs El Naftazteca to “change the program,” because “this is too real, ese!” (New World Border 120). El Naftazteca obliges by shifting to a simulation of a soothing desert landscape, which Cyber-Vato enjoys until the appearance of a “migra helicopter.”

While continuing the play with ethnic costumes transformed into virtual reality hardware, the simulations that Cyber-Vato describes go further by placing him in the position of a victim of police violence and the object of border patrol scrutiny, in a way that recalls Ella Shohat and Robert Stam’s speculations about whether virtual reality might be used as a form of transnational pedagogy, to demonstrate what it is like to experience police brutality or be treated as an illegal immigrant. The obvious point of these simulations is to indicate that virtual reality offers no escape from the limitations of real life. Use of the Chicano virtual reality machine results only in a kind of reracialization of Cyber-Vato’s virtual image. On one level, that reracialization is a commentary on the popular utopian rhetoric of cyberspace as a place where bodily limitations are meaningless, a simple repetition of the traditional logic of the public sphere and the ideology of abstract citizenship. On another level, the simulations suggest that reracialization is inevitable to the extent that virtual reality is a medium for social interaction, more analogous to the telephone than to television. In that sense, racialized modes of perception are inevitably imported to cyberspace, and racial fantasies are restaged there. As a visual medium, virtual reality necessarily invokes such cultural frameworks for reading body images.

This interpretation of Gómez-Peña’s dramatization of Chicano virtual realities works in at least two ways. The playing out of racialized scenarios in virtual reality implies that virtual reality offers no escape from real life, but equally it implies that minoritized subjects often experience real life as a kind of virtual fantasy with material consequences, as when Cyber-Vato faces a beating by a policeman presumably for no reason other than the policeman’s perception of Cyber-Vato’s racialized body as always already a threat. El Naftazteca’s continual assertions that it is just virtual reality, in the face of Cyber-Vato’s panicked reactions, underscore this irony and the complex borders between virtual experiences and real life. It is not just virtual reality, as El Naftazteca claims it is, but it is not all real either, despite Cyber-Vato’s exclamations. This reading suggests that virtual reality might make visible the ways in which Chicano experience, for example, cannot be distinguished from such “involuntary performances” of other people’s racial fantasies, the modes of “mistaken identity” that Gómez-Peña reflects on elsewhere in the video as an American “national sport,” summed up by the question “did I see you on the TV of my fears?”

This reading also suggests that Berlant’s argument about how minority subjects are denied the right to the prosthetic or prophylactic social body of the abstract American citizen in the public sphere might be reversible. Is Cyber-Vato dramatizing the particularizing of minority bodies, or is he demonstrating how he often finds himself treated as if his body were always already virtual, a screen for others’ fantasies, his life just playing on the TV of our fears? Is he
dramatizing his forced embodiment as a Chicano or his virtualization and disembodiment as an Anglo fantasy? In this sense, Gómez-Peña's Chicano virtual reality machine restages or doubles the paradoxical relation between hypervisibility or overembodiment and invisibility, associated, in an African American context, with Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man. 24* The Chicano virtual reality machine makes visible the double experience of having a body that is too definitely marked, too easily read, but that for that reason does not register to (Anglo) others as needing any interpretive attention. On one level, the virtual reality scene simply doubles the jeopardy and exactly imitates this traditional construction of the racialized physical body. On another level, Gómez-Peña's Technopal 2000 suggests the possibility of crossing categories, of making visible and sensible the virtual or the invisible and at the same time demonstrating the intangibility of the physical, its virtual dimension.

Gómez-Peña's depiction of virtual reality satirizes the current interest in cyberspace as a possible site of freedom from the body and its limitations—that is, cyberspace as a site for crossing the borders of personal experience, as do people who assume different genders on the Internet. At the same time, his presentation of virtual reality implies that it also has a critical value for Chicanos, one that lies primarily in reading virtual scenarios back into the physical spaces of everyday life. The border between the Fourth and Fifth Worlds turns out to be no more fixed than the other borders Gómez-Peña's migrant performance art routinely crosses.

**NOTES**

1 Rouse's influential 1991 essay on Mexican migration as a transnational formation and as a postmodern social space begins by quoting Gómez-Peña ("Mexican Migration"). Fox critiques Rouse for taking Gómez-Peña as a spokesperson for border culture (69); I will return to this issue below.

2 Kuhnheim argues that the textualization of performance art in printed texts is part of a larger strategy of Gómez-Peña's that includes the packaging of performances in video or CD recordings (Gómez-Peña and Sifuentes's *Temple of Confessions* comes with a CD). She suggests that Gómez-Peña uses such packagings to comment on commodity culture's ability to turn resistance and subversion into consumer products (27).

3 See Ahmad's excellent historical discussion of the Bandung Conference and the three-worlds theory, in ch. 8 of *In Theory*. In the topography review, Gómez-Peña cites the collapse of the opposition between First and Second Worlds, with the breakup of the Soviet Union, as making it possible to go beyond the model of the Third World and to define nonnational modes of collective identity. Pérez-Torres uses similar language to describe how Chicano culture "perpetually negotiates" four or five worlds, though he defines those worlds other than Gómez-Peña does, ending with nonnationalized indigenous cultures and therefore not including transnational media culture, Gómez-Peña's Fifth World (29).

4 The association of Fourth World with the native peoples of the Americas dates back at least to George Manuel in the 1970s, though Gómez-Peña seems to use the term more loosely and to apply it to ethnic minorities in European contexts as well. Brotherston historicizes the specifically American concept of the Fourth World, emphasizing the continuity of native traditions. In contrast to Gómez-Peña, Silko's novel *Almanac of the Dead* offers an alternative elaboration of the Fourth World's relevance to contemporary transnational racial politics. Whereas Gómez-Peña tends to assimilate indigenous peoples to a diasporic or migrant model, Silko's novel moves in the opposite direction, assimilating groups like African Americans to a model of "tribal internationalism." *Almanac* also draws more of a distinction between this Fourth-World tribal internationalism and contemporary media and computer technologies.

5 Smith and Katz draw on Lefebvre's account of the capitalist shift from absolute spaces to abstract ones, which are defined as spaces "of exchange and communications, and therefore of networks" (Lefebvre 266). Part of the originality of Gómez-Peña's definition of the Fourth World is his treatment of it as a kind of abstract space and not as a precapitalist survival of place-based social forms. However, Gómez-Peña has also been criticized for this movement away from the materiality of places, as we shall see. If the shift to what Castells calls the abstract "space of flows" (348) is part of the internal logic of capital, as Lefebvre argues, then to what extent can this new space of flows provide a basis for resistance?

6 Gómez-Peña's increasing interest in high technology is one of the reasons I disagree with Fox's characterization of his skepticism toward technology; whereas Fox argues that Gómez-Peña differs from cyberpunk science fiction writers in his dystopian view of technology (73, 81n60), I argue that he has taken the characterization of his work as cyberpunk seriously and has begun to explore what it would mean for a Mexican American artist to be a cyberpunk.

7 Kolko, Nakamura, and Rodman, "Race" 1. See Nakamura for an analysis of the relatively impoverished constructions of
racial personae in Internet chat rooms and in other forms of

text-based virtual community ("Race"). I have attempted to

explain this impoverishment, given the focus on forms of
gendered and sexual identity play in virtual communities
("Trapped"). The collection edited by Kolkko, Nakamura, and
Rodman is an important corrective to the lack of attention race
has received in cyberculture criticism.

1 I am indebted to Cynthia Steele for this suggestion.

9 For such characterizations, see Saldivar, on Gómez-
Peña's popularizing of border art and his success in spatial-
izing "in-betweenness" (152); Pérez-Torres's posing of
Gómez-Peña's border identity as an alternative to nationalist
politics (93); Davis, on Gómez-Peña's embracing of "the
Border" (18); and Rouse ("Mexican Migration" 8).

10 For this reason, I think Fox is wrong to suggest that
the problem with NAFTA, from Gómez-Peña's perspective, was
its lack of attention to cultural issues (74). For Fox, Gómez-
Peña's weakness lies in his lack of attention to economics and
to the uneven relations of different social groups to border
crossing (75). It seems to me plausible to read Gómez-Peña
as trying to use NAFTA as an opportunity to turn his rhetoric
toward larger social and economic issues, even if he is not enti-
tirely successful in this project. Davis makes a similar argu-
ment about how the forms of "cultural bifocality" that Rouse
described in his 1991 essay as an accomplishment of Mexi-
can migration have after NAFTA become economically ex-
plitable as "positive externalities" (81).

11 Berelowitz offers the best account of the BAW/TAF and
Gómez-Peña's break with it, including Gómez-Peña's re-
sponses to the criticism his essay generated (70-81). See also
Fox (63-64, 66). Hicks's Border Writing and the edited collec-
tion by Gómez-Peña and Kelley offer documentation of the
BAW/TAF by artists involved in it. Of special interest is Ava-
los's answer to Gómez-Peña's claims of the death of border
art, which contains some of the most direct personal attacks
on Gómez-Peña, from the perspective of an artist closely
identified with Chicano nationalism; Berelowitz explains
many of Avalos's inside references to the history of the BAW/
TAF (81-82). See Gómez-Peña's response to these kinds of
criticisms (Dangerous Border Crossers 181-82), in which the
artist describes his self-presentation as strategic and shifting.

12 Berelowitz begins her essay by raising some similar
questions about the extent to which border art should be
site-specific and might legitimately be generalized in post-
modern culture (69).

13 In addition to the Aztec-high tech pun that shows up
in the 1991 essay on the death of border art, Gómez-Peña
had already linked "cholos" (a slang term for Mexican
American street culture, emphasizing its mestizo roots) and
"punk" as early as 1985 (qtd. in Saldivar 153-54), almost
certainly encouraged by Jaime Hernandez and Gilbert Hern-
andez's alternative comic book Love and Rockets, which
told stories of the involvement of Chicano and Chicana
characters in punk rock and incorporated elements of pulp
science fiction and space travel. Cyberpunk, I will argue,
also provided a model for synthesizing these various cul-
tural elements, which were already present in Gómez-Peña's
performances and writing.

14 Berelowitz describes the circulation of the same rhet-

eric in the BAW/TAF, whose art was informed by a "revolu-
tionary dream of a borderless world of multi- and intercultural
exchange" (71). I believe that Gómez-Peña ironically cites
this kind of rhetoric in "Freefalling toward a Borderless Fu-
ture," acknowledging its conservative appropriation without
simply rejecting further uses of that rhetoric for his purposes.

15 Jameson famously associates postmodern culture with
the perceived disappearance of all types of hermeneutic depth
models, including manifest and latent or conscious and uncon-
scious (12). Saldivar analyzes representations of Ti-
juana as a border zone in which social space is redefined in
terms of this collapse of categories and boundaries; he posits
Gómez-Peña as the most extreme example (131). On the level
of theories of subjectivity, Butler has most directly addressed
the danger of homogenization that results from this type of
collapse, given that her model of performativity is also un-
derstood as challenging expressive models that depend on
distinctions between bodily surfaces and inner essences (28).

16 The New World Border contains a performance chroni-
cle that discusses the history of this technique in Gómez-
Peña's work (96-97). The most notorious example is "The
Guatinaui World Tour," in which Gómez-Peña and his collabor-
or Coco Fusco exhibited themselves as "authentic primitives"
in cages in museums and public spaces, often being
mistaken for actual specimens on display. For analyses of this
performance, see Kelly; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett; and Taylor.

17 At one such earlier site, Temple of Confessions (www
.echonyc.com/-confess/), users were invited to "confess
your intercultural cyber-sins" as well as to "fears, desires, fan-
tasies and mythologies." This site is associated with the
Corcoran Gallery of Art, in New York City, where Gómez-
Peña staged a number of performances and installations be-
tween 12 October and 30 December 1996, as described at
www.echonyc.com/-confess/review.html. The performance
"Ethno-cyberpunk Trading Post and Curio Shop on the
Electronic Frontier" was combined with a Web site of that
title created by the Rice University Art Gallery, in Houston
(riceinfo.rice.edu/projects/CyberVato). Hakken's book on
cyberspace ethnography defines some of the challenges that
this medium poses to traditional anthropological methods,
challenges Gómez-Peña sets out to exploit. For instance,
Hakken points out that fieldwork in cyberspace is compli-
cated by the lack of "geographic 'thereness,'" as well as by
the multisitedness created by hypertext links (58, 59). In ad-
dition, computer-mediated communication raises basic ques-
tions about what constitutes participation in virtual cul-
tures and about how to conceptualize the agent of culture in
highly mediated environments (60, 69).

18 As Gómez-Peña puts it in Friendly Cannibals, "[S]o-
Social, media, pop cultural, and virtual realities have become
indistinguishable; they feed off each other, reflect, and rein-


terpret one another in kaleidoscopic and multidirectional ways. And so does identity (personal and transnational)” (Gómez-Peña and Chayoga 12). Saldívar offers a similar reading of an earlier performance text of Gómez-Peña’s, suggesting that the artist’s work is “about cultural reversion,” a process of mutual appropriability that Gómez-Peña associates with the borderization elaborated in “The New World Border” (Saldívar 157). The fullest elaboration of Hall’s approach to black popular culture is Gray’s work on the mixed nature of black television programs such as The Cosby Show (10, 83–84).

19 For similar critiques of official or corporate transnational cultures, see Sonnega; Miyoshi. Sonnega focuses especially on the ways that new computer graphic techniques such as morphing reinforce the logic of market-driven multiculturalism.

20 Price similarly notes how electronic communications are characterized by a high degree of “addressability” toward narrow audiences or demographic units, which need no longer be in physical proximity. Price sees these technologies as resulting in a “closing of the speech terrain” and in the formation of “intense and exclusive diasporic communities, assembled along ethnic, class, or interest lines” (79–80).

21 Gómez-Peña offers a fuller account of the production process of “Naftaztec” in Dangerous Border Crossers (79–81). The videocassette version of the performance is titled El Naftazteca: Cyber-Aztec TV for 2000 A.D.

22 This attempt to mark virtual reality equipment ethnically finds a parallel in Vizenor’s story “Bone Courts,” which introduces a Native American virtual reality apparatus that includes, instead of a data glove, an “electronic moccasin” designed to allow others (in this case, a judge) to “enter the shadow realities of tribal consciousness” (84).

23 This rhetoric of disembodiment might be traced in part to Gibson’s Neuromancer, where the main character, a computer hacker, lives for “the bodiless exultation of cyberspace” and buys into “the elite stance” of “relaxed contempt for the flesh. The body was meat” (6). Hayles offers an extended critique of this rhetoric (Posthuman). For a nonfictional example, one might turn to a document originally distributed online by Barlow as a protest against the 1996 Communications Decency Act and its attempt to regulate Internet content (now ruled unconstitutional). Barlow’s “A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace,” Gauntlet 12 (1996): 82–83. 10 Aug. 2001 <http://www.eff.org/~barlow/Declaration-Final.html>.

24 Ellison’s fictional representation of the sermon “The Blackness of Blackness” (“black is” and “black ain’t” “black will make you” and “black will unmake you” [9–10]) is often taken as a classic statement of the performative nature of racial identity, in this case African American. See, e.g., Gates (236–37) and Benston’s essay on “performing blackness,” which contrasts Ellison with Amiri Baraka. Hayles briefly suggests a similar parallel between virtual reality technologies and Ellison’s Invisible Man when she says some of the privileged themes of fictional narratives about virtual reality technology are “marked bodies, the longing for invisibility, stig mata that also become sources of strength” (“Seductions” 183).

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