

TRANSGRESSION AND STEREOTYPE IN CONTEMPORARY PERFORMANCE ART

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Performance art, in the cultural imaginary, is almost synonymous with transgression. Since its recognition in the 1960s as a distinct genre, performance artists have continuously worked to challenge preconceived notions of cultural, physical, and sex/gender norms. When the subject matter an artist is trying to grapple with is too painful – such as lives lost to systemic racism, gender-based violence, or neo-imperialist fascism – transgression can seem to be the only gesture available to express and/or address the affect that spills out beyond the confines of “rational” response. Transgressive performances have the capacity to counter the hegemonic neutralization and silencing of outpourings of pain and anger. Due to the “shock effect” they create, these performances have the power to destabilize the mastery of hegemonic (white, ableist, hetero & cisnormative) subjectivity itself.¹ The insights offered by the works I study subvert and even mock essentialist frameworks of sex/gender, race, ethnicity, and nationhood and thereby demonstrate the porous conceptual boundaries within which the category of “transgression” takes place.

A given work of performance art might transgress cultural boundaries, as in the work of James Luna, who offered the participants an opportunity to *Take a Picture With a Real Indian* (1992, 2001, 2010), or that of Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Coco Fusco, who exhibited themselves in a golden cage (1992). Contemporary performances can also transgress sexual boundaries, amplify, reverse, and/or obscure gender roles and decentralize normative narratives about gender and gendered relationships, such as in Lori Blondeau and Adrian Stimson’s vaudeville-like performances. In each of these cases, what I am specifically interested in, in this chapter, is the way that the artists’ transgressions rely upon the production of stereotypes – specifically racialized and gendered cultural stereotypes.

My interest in performances that create space for audience members to experiment with culturally transgressive fantasies takes its cue from Dylan Robinson and Keren Zaiontz’s critique of contemporary artist Sheila Hall’s *To Connect* (2008), a public artwork where the words “to connect” are written across Vancouver’s popular and touristic sites in twenty-two of the numerous languages spoken by the communities that inhabit the city. The authors describe the work as an affirmation of the “narratives of neoliberal multiculturalism in Canada” that have risen to popularity after the country adopted multiculturalism as a state policy in 1971.² While the authors find merit in Hall’s decision to inscribe the words in their original syllabics for its contribution to the creation of visual sovereignty, they are critical of the work for displaying the Indigenous languages spoken in the area alongside those of various settler groups without any distinction to indicate the former’s primacy on the occupied land that is called Canada: “*To Connect* thus affirms that Vancouver is today a place of many cultures, of which First Peoples are to be recognized as one part. As such, the piece participates in a process of integration that abrogates First Peoples *sui generis* claims to this territory through the equalization of cultures.”³

In comparison, Robinson points to the strategic use of language to represent, activate and enact Indigenous sovereignty in *Remarking/Reclaiming*, another public work created by the collective Ogimaa Mikana between 2013–2023. For this work the collective, which includes Anishinaabe artist Susan Blight and the Anishinaabe scholar Hayden King, renamed the street signs in Toronto with Indigenous place names, “re-covered” historical plaques with Indigenous histories, and occupied billboards with untranslated texts. The artists explained:

We are slowly reclaiming our territories from an alien landscape committed to erasing us while contributing to the growing Indigenous cultural, political, and linguistic revitalization efforts across Turtle Island. In the space between raiding up our nations and language and reminding non-Indigenous people that they are on Indian land, we hope to create dialogue.⁴

Exemplified by the billboard which depicts a wampum belt accompanied by the words “If you want to learn something, first you must learn this,” in both Anishinaabemowin and English, Dylan Robinson suggests that “the sovereignty of Ogimaa Mikana’s work takes place through a demand for the public to learn, rather than through an offer to teach.”⁵ Unlike Sheila Hall’s *To Connect*, which on Robinson’s reading contributes, despite itself, to the ongoing erasure of Indigenous cultures, Ogimaa Mikana’s project signifies the urgent need for redress by reminding the audience – through the refusal of translation – that they are, indeed, on unceded Indigenous land.

Relevant here is the article “Inuit Qaujimatuqangit: The Role of Indigenous Knowledge in Supporting Wellness in Inuit Communities in Nunavut,” by educational consultant Shirley Tagalik, which outlines two ongoing dangers that threaten the cultural sovereignty of Indigenous peoples. The first is the superficial acceptance of Indigenous ways of living and being within dominant cultural frameworks. The author sees this practice of tokenistic acceptance as appropriating and diluting Indigenous values, principles and beliefs, thereby enabling “the proponents of a universal culture to maintain the status quo by indicating that they have accepted cultural beliefs and, in fact, share them within the existing way of working.”⁶ As Tagalik points out, “this practice raises challenges to cultural authenticity and is ultimately a mechanism of assimilation.”⁷ Ogimaa Mikana’s public works resist the threat outlined by Tagalik, refusing translation and thereby refusing the colonial assimilation. As David Garneau writes in *Acts of Engagement*,

the colonial attitude is characterized not only by scopophilia, a drive to look, but also an urge to penetrate, to traverse, to know, to translate, to own and to exploit. The attitude assumes that everything should be accessible to those with the means and will to access them; everything is ultimately comprehensible, a potential commodity, resource, or salvage.⁸

At first sight, Garneau’s warning appears to be in direct contrast with Guillermo Gómez-Peña & La Pocha Nostra’s *Mexotica*, a three-day workshop/performance event put on by the Art Department of Georgia College and State University (GC&SU), whose program read:

You may now experience anything you want, become whomever you wish, or purchase whichever cultural, sexual, spiritual, artistic or political experience you desire. You can impersonate other genders or ethnic identities without having to suffer any physical, social, or political repercussions, or be subjected to the rage of the excluded. You don’t even need to belong to any ‘real’ community. And you can do all this from the solitude of your home or by visiting this gallery.⁹

La Pocha Nostra’s invitation, however, in overtly inviting the reader/viewer to contribute to the erasure of differences and distinctions necessary to maintain to protect the integrity of marginalized cultures and identities, offers a sardonic and pointed response to the rise of multiculturalism as a global trend.

In his collection of pedagogical essays on performance art, *Ethno-techno*, Gómez-Peña observes that the end of the twentieth century witnessed a backlash against humanitarian concerns and identity politics which worked in tandem with corporate multiculturalism. The practical consequence of this was to equalize and obliterate subjective realities. The “benevolent” yet apolitical multiculturalism adopted by corporations and media outlets in North America in the 1980s and 1990s ensured that issues such as race, gender, and matters of cultural diversity were no longer addressed as systemic issues requiring collective response. Instead, it was the individual’s personal responsibility to overcome the restrictions set by these socioeconomic realities.

Further, “(t)his global transculture artificially softened the otherwise sharp edges of cultural difference, fetishizing them in such a way as to render them desirable.”¹⁰ By way of response, Gómez-Peña’s works often take the form of “epic performances mimicking its very practices of representation.”¹¹ He and his colleagues create what the artist calls “total environments,” dioramas and prosceniums where marginalized artists enact and invite the audience to participate in “the stylized desires and intercultural fetishes of the mainstream.”¹²

In this context, and inspired by Bourriaud’s theory of relational aesthetics, in 1997, Gómez-Peña, Roberto Sifuentes and Sara Shelton Mann from the dance troupe Contraband started a three-year interactive performance series titled *El Mexterminator*.¹³ At one level, the work is a sociological study of North American attitudes and stereotypes regarding Anglo-Latin relations. Using the internet as an instrument to practice reverse-anthropology (as Gómez-Peña calls it), they developed “confessional” websites where they asked the public to share how they thought the artists should dress as Chicanos and Mexicans, and the types of social rituals and performance actions they should engage in. From this data, which Gómez-Peña describes as “explicit,” they derived a series of performances and performance personas.¹⁴ Gómez-Peña commented that while such performances “look and felt like fun [...] it was a painful time.”¹⁵

It is not that Gómez-Peña was not prepared for the emotional turmoil. In the well-known *Guatinaui World Tour*, also known as *The Couple in the Cage*, Guillermo Gómez-Peña and fellow artist Coco Fusco locked themselves in a golden cage that visually evoked the myth of the “noble savage” and toured major Western art institutions (primarily anthropological and ethnographic museums) beginning in 1992, during the quincentenary celebration of Columbus’s genocidal invasions. The couple, supposedly from a recently discovered land in the Gulf of Mexico, appeared in public three days at a time, enacting “the exotic, primitive Other” by speaking a nonsensical language and performing for the audience members in their “native” regalia. The ruse was emboldened by the contributions of the “security guards” – performers who informed the audience about these newly discovered people’s “primitive” ways of life while walking Fusco and Gómez-Peña to and fro on leashes during their bathroom breaks.

To the artists’ surprise, the performance, which was meant to provide “a satirical commentary on Western concepts of the exotic, primitive Other,” turned into the very spectacle of that which it parodied, as the viewers believed that Fusco and Gómez-Peña were in fact representative of a recently discovered peoples.¹⁶ Coco Fusco’s detailed account of her experience relayed in “The Other History of Intercultural Performance” and the short film *Couple In the Cage*, produced by Fusco and Paulo Heredia, document the wide range of responses from the witnesses of the performance. While there were some members of the general public who found the exhibit inhumane and contacted the hosting institutions to complain, there were many others who played along, feeding the artists bananas, taking pictures with them, and making racist comments that they did not realize the artists could understand. In one instance some teenagers attempted to burn Gómez-Peña with cigarettes and handed him a beer bottle full of urine.¹⁷ The performance thus revealed spectator gullibility when dealing with institutions, ignorance about world history, and both explicit and implicit racism. By situating the artists as “the Other,” Gómez-Peña and Fusco’s performance amplified the positionality of the witnesses (vis-a-vis the performance of stereotype) as the norm, bringing into question the very dialectic that has enabled and encouraged similar exhibits to happen since the era of colonial expansions.¹⁸

Another well-historicized Indigenous response to colonial practice of human display grounded in stereotype is James Luna’s *The Artifact Piece*. In 1987, Luna laid himself in a display case in the Museum of Man, the same museum where his great-grandmother Maria Soledad Apish Trujillo’s photograph – taken by settler ethnographer Constance DuBois and belonging not to the artist but the institution – was displayed.¹⁹ For the performance, Luna’s body was covered only with a breechcloth and classificatory labels placed around him indicated sites of injury and scars, revealing that they were received as a result of the artist’s alcohol-induced

escapades. In separate surrounding display cases were ceremonial items as well as the artist's personal belongings including '60s albums, divorce papers served to him during the performance, photographs and his college degree.²⁰

According to art historian Jane Chin Davidson, in her essay "Deterritorializing bodies: Body art and the colonial World expositions," Luna's *The Artifact Piece* was a

derisive reconstruction of the colonial display [which] contained all of the visual and discursive elements that were used to constitute the Other, the scientific catalogue of indexical scars, documentation of alcoholism as proof of aberrant behaviour, props that support tribal authenticity and, most importantly, the corporeal native as object.²¹

This effort, through the use of visual stereotype, to distinguish the West and the Western from "the rest" became an organized and well-established effort in the nineteenth century, which witnessed the proliferation of human showcases in midways and world expositions. Far from factual, "[i]n this period, the new identification of the cultural Other through visual depiction was never more than a tendentious representation of the superiority of the Western imperial subject."²²

One racist attribute still too often associated with Indigenous peoples is the "drunken Indian" stereotype, which has roots in so-called scientific studies of the nineteenth-century.²³ Luna's performance strategy, in *The Artifact Piece*, was to intervene into this stereotype by amplifying it, provoking the audience to contemplate the assumptions that they might readily have due to racist media practices. As the artist expressed, his mission was "to conceptualize and formulate ways that would visually confront and shift people's perceptions of 'Indian' in order to free myself and Native people from the confines of the imagined: from expectations that lock us in history and deny us a voice and place in contemporary culture."²⁴ By offering Luna's alive and present body amidst other objects of display in the museum which narrates the story of a colonized people through an institutional lens, *The Artifact Piece* asserts Indigenous culture as something present and alive rather than dying or dead, thereby challenging the dominant narrative of such institutions that Indigenous cultures are a thing of the past, an ideal that can be nostalgically reminisced (within formulated limits) but no longer robust or relevant.



Figure 20.1 James Luna. *The Artifact Piece* (1987). ↵

Courtesy of the Estate of James Luna and Garth Greenan Gallery, New York. Used with permission.

In *Take a Photo with a Real Indian*, performed in 1992, 2001, and 2010, Luna again mobilized the performance strategy of intervention-through-amplification to address the Eurocentric fantasy of “the vanishing race.” The audience was given the opportunity to have their photographs taken with the artist dressed in either contemporary khakis and a polo shirt, war dance regalia, or a loincloth, which were exemplified by three life-size cut-outs that accompanied the artist. Perhaps unsurprisingly, in all three iterations of the performance, few viewers opted for the first option, demonstrating the predominant contemporary perception of the modern Indigenous person as less interesting and valid than the romanticized one (Figure 20.2).



Figure 20.2 James Luna, *Take a Picture with a Real Indian* (1992). ↵

Courtesy of the Estate of James Luna and Garth Greenan Gallery, New York. Used with permission.

As Elizabeth S. Hawley suggests,

Take a Picture is particularly pointed in its interrogation of the pose and the photograph, and how both Native and non-Native peoples are implicated in and affected by the resulting stereotypes: Native peoples are expected to adhere to the stereotypic construction of Indian identity, but in performing this role, they reify the stereotype. At the same time, non-Native peoples perpetuate the problematic cycle by only characterizing as “Indian” those Native peoples that adhere to the stereotype that non-Native peoples have constructed and come to expect.²⁵

Indeed, Luna has described the performance as humiliating both for himself and for the audience.

Self-objectification and adopting and utilizing questionable stereotypes, while clearly coming with a psychic cost, can here be seen as an incisive – though clearly painful – strategy. As Rebecca Schneider notes, in regard to feminist performance art, in *The Explicit Body in Performance*:

At base, the explicit body in much feminist work interrogates socio-cultural understandings of the “appropriate” and/or the appropriately transgressive – particularly who gets to mark what (in)appropriate where, and who has the right to appropriate what where – keeping in mind the double meaning of the word “appropriate.”²⁶

This question of appropriateness is relevant also to works that interrogate stereotypes surrounding sex/gender norms. Described by performance artist Lori Weidenhammer as erotic and cathartic, Lori Blondeau and Adrian Stimson’s *Putting the Wild Back into the West* (2006–2010), which involves creating photographic evidence of subversive moments, demonstrates how the intersections between cultural, physical, and sex/gender transgressions are indissolubly interwoven.²⁷ *Putting the Wild Back into the West* (2006–2010) is a series of interactive performances that “pay homage to the histories of Native performers in the Wild West shows.”²⁸ In these shows, the artists personified their alter egos Belle Sauvage and Buffalo Boy, the latter appearing in high heels, fishnets and pearls and the former donning a cowboy/girl look and carrying a whiskey bottle, and invited the audience to take photographs with them in dioramas that depict “the Wild West” as it has been imagined within the settler-colonial cultural imaginary.

Similar to Guillermo Gómez-Peña’s *Mexotica*, participants in Blondeau and Stimson’s performance were invited to either dress up in costumes prepared by the artists, such as “a white pleather Indian princess dress, beaded suede vests, a ceremonial buffalo robe and ... an eagle feather headdress” or bring their own attire to the photo shoot, where they could – and were encouraged to – fulfill any and all transgressive fantasies about race, sex and gender.²⁹ *Putting the Wild Back into the West* playfully and purposefully challenges a white Western gender culture that affirms and promotes the gender-binary as norm and rule. Also important to the performance is that it does this on the invaded land that is called Canada, where the different gender expressions of Two-Spirit (or Indigiqueer) individuals have been systemically suppressed through genocidal means including the residential schools and other settler-colonial institutions.³⁰

“Gender cultures ... define the limits of social tolerance and, in this regard, may be seen within the scope of the overarching cultural system as a whole.”³¹ As history and politics scholar Sabrina Petra Ramet expounds, “gender culture” is a concept driven from the expanding literature on the social construction of gender.³² The theorizations in this field primarily focus on the processes by which societies establish and uphold norms of “expected gender-linked behaviour” and the socialization of individuals to conform to these norms.³³ Gender culture, which has also been named “gender policing,” is thus concerned with social control, while gender reversal is concerned with its transgression. Importantly, gender reversal (particularly from male to female) has a complex relationship with taboo in Euro-Western societies.³⁴ Stimson’s cross-dressing specifically violates a “great taboo” that is widely upheld in patriarchal societies, of men risking appearing like “sissies,” losing their “masculine identity” by wearing women’s clothing.³⁵ Blondeau’s Belle Sauvage and Stimson’s Buffalo Bill transgress binary gender boundaries, embodying and encouraging their cathartic dissolution through performance, inviting the audience to consider the interrelation between gender policing and settler-colonial violence.³⁶

The works discussed here highlight performance strategies that draw equivalences between different cultural expressions, amplify stereotypes and promote cultural appropriation practices that enable Anglocentric and racist imaginations to find physical form. Given that these issues are pervasive in contemporary society it may seem counterintuitive that the artists would augment imagery that could be detrimental to social justice efforts. What distinguishes the enactments of the audience members from banal racism is the delineated construct of the performance space in which participants can both experience catharsis and self-reflect on their own positionality within the performance and in the outside world. This is the space in which participants can experience and experiment with their fantasies, and heal them, through dis/identification with the Other. This is the difficult and hard work of the performance artist: putting their bodies, hearts and souls on the line, in public, vulnerably holding up a mirror and inviting us to walk through it.

This chapter has certain questions at its core: What risks are involved when engaging in transgressive behaviour, and for whom? What is the nature and quality of the relationships that result from these performances? How do they translate in a world where intersubjective boundaries are continuously being transgressed and transformed? In what ways are these performances reflecting the power dynamics that are evident in relationships outside the performance space, and how might they affect and reform them?³⁷

In *Hospicing Modernity*, educator Vanessa Machado de Oliveira describes modernity as the (false) understanding of land as an unalive, exploitable property, separate from the relations and entities that inhabit it, including humanity itself.³⁸ Her book invites the reader to learn how to hospice modernity (which, as the material, non-humane conditions of the late capitalist system demonstrates, is at its demise), thereby grieving, reckoning with, and celebrating the loss of a worldview that positions humans (but only the select white, male, cis het, wealthy, able-bodied) at the top of the proverbial food chain, granting Him allowance to exploit and abuse the rest. Importantly, hospicing modernity requires one to come to terms with modernity's accomplishments as well as failures; accept, acknowledge, and redress humanity's wrongs, especially those done in the name of good, throughout history and today. This is part of the work that I see the performances described in this chapter doing: controversially highlighting stereotypical representations of the Other rooted in racist history and creating space for the audience and the artists to experience their and each other's colonial modern positionality within the parameters of the performances. These performances invite us, without requiring us, to generate questions about our relational allegiances to various identities and our attitudes about Other(s), which, as de Oliveira points out, is imperative for humanity to partake and thrive in a sustainable and just future.

Notes

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Shirley Tagalik, "Inuit Qaujimatuqangit: The Role of Indigenous Knowledge in Supporting Wellness in Inuit Communities in Nunavut," *National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health* (January 2012), 6. ↵

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Guillermo Gómez-Peña, *Ethno-Techno: Writings on Performance, Activism, and Pedagogy*, New York: Routledge (2005), 48. ↵

Gómez-Peña (2005), 49. ↵

Gómez-Peña (2005), 50. ↵

Gómez-Peña (2005). ↵

Guillermo Gómez-Peña, *Conversations Across Borders: A Performance Artist Converses with Theorists, Curators, Activists and Fellow Artists*, London: Seagull Books (2011), 336. ↵

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Coco Fusco, "The Other History of Intercultural Performance," *TDR*, Vol 38, No 1 (1994), 143. It is important to note that the viewers' capacity to verify the truthfulness of the exhibit was relatively limited due to lack of immediate access to informative media such as the internet. ↵

Anna Johnson, Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña, "Interview: Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña by Anna Johnson," *BOMB Magazine*, Winter 1993, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/1993/01/01/coco-fusco-and-guillermo-g%C3%B3mez-pe%C3%B1a/>, last accessed May 2025. ↵

An extended and detailed history of colonial display in world fairs and touring exhibitions is outlined in art historian Jane Chin Davidson's essay "Deterritorializing Bodies: Body Art and the Colonial World Expositions," published in *Dead History, Live Art?* edited by Jonathan Harris, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press (2007). ↵

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Other terms are "gender code," "gender ideology," "gender dictates" and "gender policing." ↵

Ramet (1996), 1. ↵

Ramet (1996), 12–13. ↵

Ramet (1996), 12–13. ↵

It is important to note that in the cultural landscape of Indigenous artists Stimson and Blondeau, dressing as another gender might not be culturally transgressive, and thus should not be read as such, except to read it intertextually, against the colonized land on which the performance took place, and its dominant culture, through an anti-sexist, anti-colonial, anti-racist, anti-hetero-cisnormative perspective. ↵

These questions are addressed in detail in my dissertation (in progress), *Everything is Permitted: Transgressions in Contemporary Performance Art* (University of Alberta). ↵

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