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A Savage Performance

Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Coco Fusco's "Couple in the Cage"

Diana Taylor

Theatricality

On an island, in the middle of nowhere:

(Ruido de avión. El ARQUITECTO, como un animal perseguido y amenazado, busca un refugio [...] Explosión y resplandor de llamas. El ARQUITECTO, con la cabeza contra el suelo y los oídos tapados con los dedos, tiembla de espanto. Pocos momentos después entra en escena el EMPERADOR con una gran maleta. Tiene una cierta elegancia afectada, intenta permanecer tranquilo. Toca al ARQUITECTO con la extremidad de su bastón al tiempo que le dice:)

EMPERADOR: Caballero, ayúdeme, soy el único superviviente del accidente.

ARQUITECTO: *(Horrorizado)* ¡Fi, fi, fi, figa...!

(Le mira un momento aterrado y, por fin, sale corriendo. Oscuro.)

—Fernando Arrabal
El arquitecto y el emperador de asiria (1984)[1]

On 11 September 1995, my local newspaper ran an article informing its readers that an "Expedition Claims to Have Found New Tribe in Amazon Rain Forest." The expedition leader, Marcelo Santos, an expert from Brazil's Indian Agency, recounts coming upon "'two huts'" in the Amazon, "'surrounded by gardens of corn, bananas, manioc and yams. We made noise to announce ourselves, and after a waiting period, the Indians approached.'" There were two of them.

> "The Indians—a man and a woman—wore headdresses and jewelry made in part from bits of plastic apparently taken from mining or logging camps. They carried bows and arrows," Santos said. [...] For two hours, the two groups marveled at each other. "The male Indian became fasci-

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> nated with my watch," Santos said. He gave the man the watch and two knives. (*Valley News* 1995:A8)

Santos has vowed to return to the area, taking either a "language expert or an Indian with a similar dialect with us to establish verbal communication." Though there are more than 500 indigenous groups in Brazil, according to Santos, including some that might still be "undiscovered," a lawyer for landowners claims the story is a hoax, staged to justify the appropriation of their lands.

This is only the latest in a long line of "discoveries" of wild men and women in the New World. In his first letter from his First Voyage (1493), Columbus writes of the people he "discovered" as unarmed, naked, generous, "timid and full of fear" (Columbus 1978:6). Columbus also popularized images of "natives" he never saw—the cannibals "born with tails" (11), who "wear their hair long like women." The women were equally threatening, for they "employ themselves in no labour suitable for their sex, for they use bows and javelins" (15). To prove his point, Columbus captured "some Indians by force." Their use-value was multiple: The "Indians" could facilitate his reconnaissance mission if "they might learn our language, and communicate to us what they knew respecting the country" (9). Secondly, the physical presence of the "Indians" would authenticate his story: "I bring with me individuals of this island and of the others that I have seen, who are proofs of the facts which I state" (15). And, if we believe Columbus, the astonished natives believed and propagated notions of his innate superiority: "they continue to entertain the idea that I have descended from heaven; and on our arrival at any new place they published this, crying out immediately with a loud voice to the other Indians, 'Come, come and look upon beings of a celestial race'" (9). When he returned to Spain in 1493, Columbus had several Arawaks with him. One was left on display in the Spanish Court until he died, of sadness apparently, two years later.

Insofar as native bodies are invariably presented as not speaking (or not making themselves understood to the defining subject), they give rise to an industry of "experts" needed to approach and interpret them—language experts, scientists, ethicists, ethnographers, and cartographers.

Theatrical encounters, certainly, are captured in these scenarios. The theatricality of the colonial encounter allows, perhaps even makes inevitable, the countless iterations. By "theatricality" I refer to the aesthetic, political, and perspectival structures within which the characters are positioned and perform their prescribed roles. The use of the passive voice is perhaps indicative: theatricality, as I have argued elsewhere, "is a noun with no verb and therefore no possibility of a subject position" (1994:199). It's more about artistic framing or political bracketing than about political agency. And unlike "performativity," whose power to shape a sense of cohesive identity comes through the seeming naturalness and transparency of what Judith Butler, in *Bodies That Matter*, calls the "iterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names" (1993:2), theatricality (like theatre) flaunts its artifice, its constructedness. As the opening scene of Arrabal's *The Architect and the Emperor of Assyria* so lucidly illustrates, the show always seems structured in the

same way. No matter who tells the story—the playwright, the discoverer, or the government official—it stars the same white male protagonist-subject and the same brown "found" object. The moment of convergence, conveyed in the present tense, is followed by the hesitant tension of unknowing. The hero's resolve to bring the power of his civilization to bear on the native results in the same tragic denouement—even though names and places change in its many reincarnations. Though clearly a setup, the theatricality of the colonial encounter can be no less regulatory than performativity in producing "the effects that it names."

The colonialist discourse that produces the native as negativity or lack itself silences the very voice it purports to make speak.

The drama of discovery and display of native bodies—then and now—serves various functions. The indigenous bodies perform as a "truth" factor; they "prove" the material facticity of an "other" and authenticate the discoverer/missionary/anthropologist's adventure, both in terms of geographic and ideological positioning. That materiality, of course, confirms no one point. As in the case of the native populations of the Americas and the recently "discovered" tribe in Brazil, the native body serves, not as proof of alterity, but merely as the space on which the battles for truth, value, and power are fought out by competing dominant groups. The debate between Ginés de Sepúlveda and Bartolomé de Las Casas in the mid-16th century is a case in point. Were the "Indians" by nature inferior, soulless, as Ginés de Sepúlveda maintained, and therefore "'obliged to submit to Spanish rule, as the less intelligent are ruled by their betters'" (in de Las Casas 1985:165)? Or were "Indians" human beings with souls and, thus, deserving of humane treatment, as Bartolomé de Las Casas contended (1985)? In other words, could they be worked to death with moral impunity by their "superiors"? The outcome of the controversy affected not only the self-image of the conquerors and the fate of the conquered. The inscription of the native body as "weak" resulted in the abduction and enslavement of "strong-bodied" Africans, brought to the Americas to continue the back-breaking work. Not for that were the native peoples spared. In the 50 years following European contact, 95 percent of the population died (Stannard 1992:x). Economics have always been deeply entangled in debates about moral value and have fueled or foiled the discussions surrounding the definition, status, and rights of the native body. If these natives "exist," the Brazilian landowners want to know, what does that do to the value of their land? Are there really "undiscovered tribes" that have somehow or other failed to enter "our" scopic/legal field? Or is the Brazilian government staging this farce to confiscate the landowners hard-earned land?

Then, insofar as native bodies are invariably presented as not speaking (or not making themselves understood to the defining subject), they give rise to an industry of "experts" needed to approach and interpret them—language experts, scientists, ethicists, ethnographers, and cartographers. "The primitive," as Marianna Torgovnick puts it, "does what we ask it to do. Voiceless, it lets us speak for it" (1990:9). Native bodies can only be seen or heard from the perspective of the "discoverer." The colonialist discourse that produces the native as negativity or lack itself silences the very voice it purports to make speak. For this reason, Gayatri Spivak has maintained, "the subaltern cannot speak" (1988:308).[2] Santos, the head of the Indian Agency, describes

the encounter to the journalist who then passes it on to "us"—the audience unwittingly forged by the scenario.

The "primitive" body as object reaffirms the cultural supremacy and authority of the viewing subject—the one who sees, interprets, and records, from the divine Columbus to the ethnographer (à la Malinowski, Mead, and Lévi-Strauss), who poses as a neutral observer, an authorized, disinterested professional dedicated to the discovery and analysis of societies of which the ethnographer forms no part. The native is the show; the civilized observer is the privileged spectator. The objectified, "primitive" body exists, isolated and removed. "We," those viewers who look through the eyes of the explorer, are (like the explorer) positioned safely outside the frame, free to define, theorize, and debate their (never "our") societies. The "encounters" with the native create "us" as audience just as much as the violence of definition creates "them"—the primitives. The drama depends on maintaining a unidirectional gaze, and stages the lack of reciprocity and mutual understanding inherent in "discovery."

Performance

In 1992, Latino performance artists Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña decided to put the viewer back into the frame of discovery. They started their Guatinaui World Tour as a sardonic response to the celebrations of the quincentennial:

> Our plan was to live in a golden cage for three days, presenting ourselves as undiscovered Amerindians from an island in the Gulf of Mexico that had somehow been overlooked by Europeans for five centuries. We called our homeland Guatinau, and ourselves Guatinauis. We performed our "traditional tasks," which ranged from sewing voodoo dolls and lifting weights to watching television and working on a laptop computer. A donation box in front of the cage indicated that, for a small fee [one dollar], I would dance (rap music), Guillermo would tell authentic Amerindian stories (in a nonsensical language), and we would pose for Polaroids with visitors. Two "zoo guards" would be on hand to speak to visitors (since we could not understand them), take us to the bathroom on leashes, and feed us sandwiches and fruit. At the Whitney Museum in New York we added sex to our spectacle, offering a peek at authentic Guatinaui male genitals for $5. A chronology with highlights from the history of exhibiting non-Western peoples was on one didactic panel and a simulated Encyclopedia Britannica entry with a fake map of the Gulf of Mexico showing our island was on another. (Fusco 1995:39[3])

For the next year, the highly controversial performance, *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit...*, traveled around the world—from Plaza Colón in Madrid to the Australian Museum of Natural Science in Sydney, from the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History to London's Covent Gardens, to Buenos Aires, Argentina. Fusco and Gómez-Peña chose countries deeply implicated in the extermination or abuse of aboriginal peoples. By staging their show in historic sites and institutions, they situated the dehumanizing practice in the very heart of these societies' most revered legitimating structures. The performance (among many other things) repeated the colonialist gesture of producing the "savage" body, and it historicized the practice by highlighting its citational character. As in the 15th-century Spanish Court, the "natives" were once again constructed as exotic others and given to be seen. Furthermore, it activated current controversies about what and

how museums display. Since their inception in the 19th century, museums have literalized the theatricality of colonialism—taking the cultural other out of context and isolating it, reducing the live performance of cultural practice into a dead object behind glass. Museums enact the knower/known relationship, preserve (a particular) history, (certain) traditions, and (dominant) values. The monumentality of most museums emphasizes the discrepancy in power between the society which can contain all others, and those represented only by remains, the shards and fragments salvaged in miniature displays.

The cage confronted the viewer with the "unnatural" and extremely violent history of representation and exhibition of non-Western human beings. Yet, it also introduced another history: the caging of rebellious individuals in Latin America from pre-Hispanic times to the recent public caging in Peru of Guzmán, leader of Sendero luminoso (Shining Path). These performances of power have different histories or, as Joseph Roach would put it, genealogies.[4] The museum space, Fusco and Gómez-Peña made clear, was certainly a "practiced place," in de Certeau's meaning of the term (1988:117). In a cage, in a museum, in a society that segregates and incarcerates its inhabitants, Fusco and Gómez-Peña openly gave themselves up to be classified and labeled. Scantily clad, like exhibits in a diorama, they exposed themselves to public scrutiny. Their performance went along with the museum's fictions of discontinuity, for the deracinated past and the informed present appeared to coexist on either side of the bars. The "barbaric," the display teased us to believe, could be safely contained. Like the other exhibits, these two beings offered themselves up as all surface. There was no more interiority to their performance of the stereotype than in the stereotype itself and nothing to know, it seemed, that was not readily available to the viewing eye. Like the stereotype, the "business" of the performance was monotonous and repetitive. The artists engaged in the domestic routine of eating, sleeping, and watching TV. Fusco and Gómez-Peña's vow of silence, their avoidance of eye contact and any other gesture of recognition, stripped their performance of anything that could be mistaken for a "personal" or individual trait. Colonialism, after all, has deprived its captives of individuality, attempting both to create, then domesticate, barbarism. These bodies were presented as little more than the generic "male" and "female" announced in the didactic panel. The observers, like typical visitors, milled around, at times disturbing the repose of the objects, who were there to be looked at.

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The critique of colonialism was multifaceted. The performance challenged the way history and culture are packaged, sold, and consumed within hegemonic structures. It called attention to the Western history and practice of collecting and classifying that James Clifford explores in *The Predicament of Culture* (1988). It recalled the construction and performance of the "exotic" staged in the ethnographic fairs of the late 19th century, in which "natives" were placed in model "habitats" much as lifeless specimens were placed in dioramas.[5] And it parodied the assignation of value that the West has placed on

the exotic. For one dollar, the artists would perform their culture. It suggested the impossibility of self-representation by the "indigenous" contained in and through representation ("the subaltern cannot speak"). It openly confronted the voyeuristic desire to see the "other" naked (passing, of course, as a legitimate interest in cultural "difference") that animates much current ethno-tourism. The world tour, moreover, highlighted the continued circulation of these images and desires in the global neocolonial, imperialist economy. Fusco and Gómez-Peña enacted the various economies of the object I alluded to earlier—the body as cultural artifact, as sexual object, as threatening alterity, as scientific specimen, as living proof of radical difference. They were anything the spectator wanted them to be, except human. The way they "did" their bodies very consciously linked together a series of what Brecht would have called "quotable" gestures drawn from a tradition of stereotypes of native bodies developed through ethnographic world fairs, circus shows, dioramas, films, and pseudo-scientific displays. As "objects," Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña out-fetished the fetish. Fusco played scientific specimen and exotic curio with her face painted, her voluptuous torso, her grass skirt, wig, sunglasses, and tennis shoes. Gómez-Peña wore his "enmascarado de plata" mask, sunglasses, bare chest, briefcase (with a snake in it), and black boots. Silent, impassive, enticing, they performed the subaltern in style. Their self-representation belonged less to the colonial grotesque (of the Hottentot Venus variety) than to a postcolonial chic. Nonetheless, there was also something Latin American, something proud, rebellious, humorous, and contemptuous in the way Fusco and Gómez-Peña approached their audiences. Pure critique, and pure *relajo*.[6]

The Cage promised the security of partial recognition; visitors could marvel at the stereotype of the uprooted natives without worrying about the contemporary reality of displacement and migration.

While the performance critiqued structures of colonialism, there was less of an attack on prevailing structures of sexism or heterosexism. Both performers very much played the "male" and "female" referred to in the explanatory panels. There was something very alluring about Fusco with her beautiful face painted and wearing a grass skirt and skimpy bra, and the frequent sexual overtures by men suggest that perhaps the erotic pleasure of her performance eclipsed its ethos (1995:61). Gómez-Peña's performance of masculinity was also troubling for some audience members. His macho presentation affirmed and challenged the age-old ambivalence and anxiety surrounding the sexuality of the nonwhite male. His long, straight, black hair brought back Columbus's description of the effeminate "natives." When, for five dollars, he displayed his genitals at the Whitney Museum, he held his penis tucked between his legs, showing only a "feminine" triangle. Yet there was also something threatening about his macho strutting around and some S/M quality to his performance, highlighted by spiked gloves and dog collar. Several times on their tour, women actually touched him. One woman in Irvine, California, Fusco recounts, "asked for plastic gloves to be able to touch the male specimen, began to stroke his legs and soon moved towards his crotch. He stepped back, and the woman stopped" (1995:57). Against the body-as-primitive scenario,

the viewer apparently felt tempted to assume a protagonic, exploratory role. And the assumed normativity of the heterosexual "couple" bothered some commentators. Why was gender construction more difficult to deconstruct than colonialism? The unquestioned naturalness of the couple doing their domestic act in public bespoke a different kind of blindness, and prompted lesbian performance scholar Sue-Ellen Case to suggest that all heterosexuals belong in cages.[7]

But the focus of the performance, according to Fusco, was:

> less on what we did than on how people interacted with us and interpreted our actions [...W]e intended to create a surprise or "uncanny" encounter, one in which audiences had to undergo their own process of reflection [...C]aught off guard, their beliefs are more likely to rise to the surface. (1995:40)

The spectator was now not only in the frame, but the main player. However, one of the most interesting and complicated aspects to the Cage performance was that several performances were taking place simultaneously. While Fusco and Gómez-Peña paced in their cage, object of the audience's gaze, an "expert" with an "Ask Me" button explained the natives' dress, habits, and origins. Someone with a Polaroid took souvenir photos of audience members posed against the couple in the cage. And, all the while, Fusco and Paula Heredia were making a documentary video of the performances and the audiences. Cuts from films representing "natives" were interjected with routines performed by the artists and interviews of audience members in the many sites hosting the Cage. So while viewers were tourists, consumers, dupes, or colonizers in one production, they were actors in another—in which, as the footage shows, they played tourists, consumers, dupes, and colonists, along with other roles. The film of the Cage, moreover, makes dupes of viewers who think that they're speaking of the live performance. The video, we might be tempted to believe, transparently documents what happened in the former. But these are quite different shows, in part because the two mediums—live performance and film—affect the nature of the audience response. The intense controversy surrounding the Cage, I believe, is in part a product of this double staging.

Trying to resist the temptation to "read" one performance as the other, I'll briefly look at the way the audience of the performance is constructed in the video. Though the filmmakers selected the responses, the range of reactions to the show, according to Gómez-Peña, was actually wider than what Fusco and Heredia chose to include. Gómez-Peña speaks of skinheads trying to get into the cage, and both he and Fusco document the incident in Buenos Aires when someone threw acid on his leg (Fusco 1995:61; Gómez-Peña 1996:112). Nonetheless, the video shows a fair range of reactions. Many viewers, much to Fusco and Gómez-Peña's surprise, believed the show was "real" and that the Guatinauis came from that far-off world of National Geographic–land. For all the parodic staging and acting, many in the audience believed the performance.[8] They spotted traces of ritual action and other signs of primitivism that they recognized but didn't exactly understand. Others showed more skepticism. One woman, who looked Mayan in origin and expressed an interest in and knowledge about Guatemala, refused to fall for a simplistic "is it or isn't it?" approach to the issue of native identity. Her somewhat defensive and defiant pose suggested that she knew better than to comment on whether "undiscovered" people exist, saying only that if you're willing to pay people to travel around in a cage, you'll probably find candidates. She also eschewed essentialist notions of cultural authenticity, stating that people go into a soci-

ety and take what they want. Her notion of societies as constantly in flux, absorbing, and resemanticizing "foreign" cultural materials, ran along the lines of Latin American theories of transculturation which explain how aspects of native cultures survived and continue to flourish after 500 years of conquest, colonization, and imperialism. Other viewers felt deterritorialized through the encounter. One woman, sensing the ground beneath her feet shifting, giggled nervously as she concluded that the spectacle made tourists of its audiences. Several people identified (with) the very "real" message underlying the highly parodic performance—a Spaniard knew it was about the conquest and colonization. A Pueblo elder looked in the cage and recognized the faces of his grandchildren, and lamented that Native Americans are not much better off today. The video shows an Anglo man staring at the couple with rapt attention. He (much like Santos on his Brazilian expedition) marveled at how "natives" are fascinated by miracles of technology they cannot understand. He kept looking, fascinated, at "their" fascination.[9]

The responses that the video highlights, however, are those by people who felt deceived or offended by the show. These stemmed from people who felt drawn or coerced into the scenario of discovery and either "believed" or felt that they were being asked to believe that "primitives" existed. Why these responses, one wonders, given that there was little illusion of authenticity to the performance? Aside from the "authoritative" framework provided by the museum, the guides, and the Encyclopedia Britannica, everything that the audience saw was blatantly theatrical. The Guatinauis, linguistically derived from "what now," demanded incredulity. The point of the performance was to highlight, rather than normalize, the theatricality of colonialism. Fusco and Gómez-Peña parodied Western stereotypes of what "primitive" people do. Every stereotype was exaggerated and contested—the sunglasses offset the body paint, the "traditional tasks" included working on a computer. When paid to dance, Fusco performed a highly unritualistic dance to rap. So, two questions: How could people either believe the show or feel offended by it, maintaining that they were being "deceived?" And, secondly, why were they, and subsequent viewers of the film, so angry?

Let's start with the first. The gullibility and deception are flip sides of the same will-to-believe. The first accepts "the truth" of the colonial claim, the other sees only the "lie." One stubbornly clings to the official version, no matter how glaring the contradictions; the other feels nothing but outrage—can't anyone be trusted anymore? Some viewers clearly wanted to believe in the Guatinauis. They longed for authenticity. One dollar was a small price to pay for an encounter with "real" otherness. The reassuring notion of stable, identifiable, "real" otherness legitimated fantasies of a real, knowable "self." The cage might signal dislocation, placed as it was in the very heart of civilization. But the dislocation, one might choose to believe, resulted from the momentary interruption of the barbaric into "our" world. It didn't have anything to do with the diasporas and cultural transformations provoked by colonialism. It was worth a dollar to imagine that the Guatinauis' primitive cage in no way reflected back on the troubles of our postmodern societies, and most emphatically not on what Homi Bhabha calls the "unhomeliness" of the colonial and postcolonial condition stretching from 1492 to the present (1994:9). The Cage promised the security of partial recognition; visitors could marvel at the stereotype of the uprooted natives without worrying about the contemporary reality of displacement and migration. Most, if not all, native peoples of the world today are uprooted, forced to migrate, or are pushed onto reservations of some sort or another. But one could pretend that the show of displacement was unrelated to that history, or to the current history of political

exile and migration of artists like U.S.-Cuban Coco Fusco or *Chilango-Mexicano-Chicano* Gómez-Peña. "Home" for the migrant, "is always somewhere else" as Gómez-Peña puts it (1995). For Fusco, deterritorialized from postrevolutionary Cuba, or for Gómez-Peña, who fled Mexico City, there is no "there" there. They, like many others including myself, really are from nowhereland, really are Guatinauis of sorts, though not in the way their spectators were being asked to believe. For some viewers, the bars actually protected against that realization, marking the radical boundary between the "here" and the "there," the "us" and the "them," allowing for no inter-, no cross-, no trans-cultural-nada. Precolonial subjects, frozen in static essence, didn't experience today's hybrid ethnic and racial identities. The native body was believable, then, not because it was "real" but precisely because it wasn't. It served to maintain a distance between the *pre-* and the *post-*: precolonial to postcolonial; premodern to postmodern. Rather than challenging us to more fully acknowledge the racial and cultural heterogeneity of societies such as Latin America's in which very real indígenas continue to live in or alongside industrialized centers, the "pre"/"post" hammers in distinct and identifiable boundaries. Suspended *over there*, outside time, beyond civilization, the naked, mute native body lures the destabilized postmodern viewer into dreaming about fixed positions, stable identities, and recognizable difference. The degree to which some of the viewers continued to disavow the marked theatricality of the performance attested to how deeply invested they were in maintaining the colonial fantasy. The last thing they wanted, it seems, was to recognize the contemporaneity of the postmodern, postcolonial encounter. Maybe that's what made the spectacle so troubling to many spectators—when they got close to the cage and stared at the "savages," they saw themselves reflected in artists' dark glasses.

Bringing the spectator into the frame, making people see themselves as implicated in these colonial fantasies, is what the performance and the video were all about. So why are so many people who agree politically with the project so angry?

Once again, the video watcher is outside the frame, the unseen-seer. We can laugh at others' reactions. We know; they don't. The hierarchies and epistomologies that the performance attacked are in danger of being reproduced.

While I personally love the video, and the live performance that I imagine I see in it, I believe the anger in part comes from the "testlike" quality of both. No matter what, we fail. Would audience members go along with the expert's explanations about the Guatinauis and their island? If the spectators believed the show, they were gullible fools or self-interested colonists. But what if they didn't believe the show, that is, if they understood it as a performance? Some people recognized it as performance without recognizing that Fusco and Gómez-Peña were the artists. Coco Fusco complains about an audience member at the Whitney Biennial who was willing to pay $10 to feed her a banana. In her essay, she writes: "even those who saw our performance as art rather than artifact appeared to take great pleasure in engaging in the fiction, by paying money to see us enact completely nonsensical or humiliating acts" (1995:50). Could we argue, conversely, that the man was just willing to

play along? I asked Gómez-Peña what his ideal spectator would have done. He stated, "open the cage and let us out." But, unlike the performance that Gómez-Peña and Roberto Sifuentes staged on the Tijuana/San Diego border in which they crucified themselves and explicitly asked audience members to bring them down from the cross, there is nothing in this performance that calls for intervention. The prohibition against uninvited intervention comes specifically from its performative nature. People who recognize the conventions of performance, as Cervantes so ferociously demonstrated in *Don Quixote*, don't interrupt the show. And, ironically, the ones who actually tried to open the cage during the world tour were the skinheads who wanted to attack the actors physically. So what do we do? Play along as a "good" audience? And what would that mean, exactly? Participate in the fantasy by posing for a photograph with the "natives"? Would it be appropriate to laugh at the obvious parodic mode? Or would that be highly inappropriate, given the West's violent history of displaying, incarcerating, and exterminating human beings? Should we walk out and cancel our membership to the museum? There is no appropriate reaction, no "true" or "false" response to this performance that, as Fusco writes, "falls somewhere between truth and fiction" (1995:37). Some spectators felt offended. Others felt sad and confused.

The video further accentuates the spectators' discomfort when suddenly faced with the disturbing spectacle of people locked in cages. Several spectators I've watched the video with felt angry at the intrusive video camera that "outs" spectators as closet colonists or dupes. Sprung upon the viewer with the intention of creating "a surprise or 'uncanny encounter'" (Fusco 1995:40), the spectacle would surprise anyone. As Gómez-Peña stated toward the end of the video, sometimes it takes a while for the viewers to understand what they're seeing and their role in it. Most of us know all about imperfect responses, painful pauses, or delayed witticisms of the "this is what she was thinking but could not say" variety. But though it might have been the artists' intention to create a pause for reflection, this is the space that the video does not allow for. Quite the opposite, it freezes that immediate response. Before the spectator can digest and come to terms with the show, that response is turned into a show for someone else. As video watchers, our pleasure is somehow tied into the audience members' floundering or, worse, humiliation. I, personally, feel gloriously Latin American when I watch this video, very empowered knowing I "get it" and "they" don't. That's what relajo is all about. Through a disruptive act, it creates a community of resistance, a community (as Portilla puts it) of underdogs. Maybe that's why I love it. But my own pleasure troubles me—is this the "appropriate" response to a history of dehumanizing colonial subjects? (Even though I enjoyed the performance and relished its sardonic humor, I knew I'd failed the test.) And is putting the viewer on the spot automatically a form of critiquing the ethnographic, one-way focus? While the live performance situates us all in the Lacanian field of the gaze, in which we're all in the frame, looking at each other looking, the video shifts the borders. Once again, the video watcher is outside the frame, the unseen-seer. We can laugh at others' reactions. We know; they don't. The hierarchies and epistemologies that the performance attacked are in danger of being reproduced. Our looking becomes unidirectional and invasive. "Their" gullibility reaffirms our superior wisdom; "they" once again serve to stabilize "us." Does reversing the ethnographic lens, albeit sardonically, prove less invasive than the ethnographic practice under critique? Unlike the live performance—which offers the spectators a little room to pause, look, and look again in their attempts to grapple with the colonialism in the heart and soul of Western cultures (assuming the video camera doesn't

pounce on them)—the video "captures" or "cages" the viewer. It, like the systems of representation it parodies, produces and exposes the other, and unwittingly colludes with the ethnographic pleasures it sets out to deconstruct. So is that the point? That there is no "other"—no noncoercive system of representation? We're all trapped in our performative traditions, mimicking the seemingly endless slate-cleaning, original, and elucidating gestures of those who came before even as we struggle to do away with the cage? Or does the problem have more to do with the way ethnography and performance come together in staging encounters with otherness as they seek to elucidate the drama of cultural encounters?

Ethnography

Ethnography, I have suggested throughout, not only studies performance (the rituals and social dramas commentators habitually refer to); it is performative. Many commentators, Edith Turner and Victor Turner most notably, have stressed that they *perform* ethnography by recording social dramas, ritual action, and other forms of "twice-behaved behavior" that Richard Schechner, in *Between Theatre and Anthropology*, calls "restored behavior." As Schechner puts it: "Directors have been, and fieldworkers are becoming, specialists in restored behavior" (1985:109). And other performative aspects have been stressed. The ethnologist studies theatrical aspects normally associated with acting (movement, body language, gesture), with staging (backdrop, context), with dramatic plot (crisis, conflict, resolution), and with cultural meaning. The object of analysis is present, embodied cultural behavior which, as in theatrical performances, takes place live in the here and now. Like the director, as Schechner points out, the ethnologist mediates between two cultural groups, presenting one group to another in a unidirectional way. The target group that is the object of analysis (like the actors) does not usually see or analyze the group that benefits or consumes the ethnographer's accounts (the audience). And it rarely, if ever, gets to respond to the written observations which, in some cases, it might never even see. The addressed audience for both, Schechner continues, is not necessarily the same as the audience for which it was (or will be) written (1997).

Moreover, the ethnologist plays a role in the drama that he or she (in theory) is there to simply observe. Victor Turner tries to dispel notions that the ethnologist imposes a Western narrative on the material under examination: "It may perhaps be argued against me," he writes, "that I have imposed a Western, even an Aristotelian, form on my field data" (1986:37). Though it's hard to imagine a more Western narrative of discovery into the "heart of darkness" than Claude Lévi-Stauss's description of his voyage into the "primitive" societies of Brazil in *Tristes Tropiques*, which is subdivided into chapters such as "Departure," "On Board Ship," and "A Backward Glance" (1967), I have tried to argue that ethnography is performative primarily in the way it stages, or restores, the social drama. The encounter is constructed theatrically, staged in the here and now, rather than as a past-tense narrative description. The ethnographer brackets the moment [here the drama of "discovery"], chooses the cast of characters by virtue of framing the event, and endows it with shape and meaning. The ethnographic "other," like the dramatic character acted by a live actor, is part "real," part "fiction"—that is, real bodies come to embody fictional qualities and characteristics created by the ethnographer/dramatist. Nonetheless, the ethnographer insists that the spectacle is "real" or, as Turner puts it, quoting Galileo's affirmation of the incontestable order of our solar system, "and yet it moves" (1986:37). The spectacle is "real"; it comes first, he insists, and the theoretical framework after.[10] *And yet*, we would answer, we are the products

1. *A flyer for the film* The Couple in the Cage: A Guatinaui Odyssey *by Coco Fusco and Paula Heredia (1993).*

of our own discursive and epistemic systems; we are no more outside the cultural repertoires that produce us than the earth is free from the sun's pulls and tugs. This created, fictional other, child of the ethnographers' cultural repertoire, is the figure that Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña capture and put behind bars. Their enactment shows the violence of the ethnographic performance that tries to pass as real—violent because its performative strings are hidden from the spectator's view. The spectator of "real" ethnography (as opposed to Fusco and Gómez-Peña's parody) is supposed to see it as objective science of authenticity rather than as fantasy.

However, there is also a way in which performance, or at least *this* performance, is ethnographic—though not perhaps in the way that it intends. All performance, in a sense, has much in common with the raw material of ethnography—stemming from the same rituals and social dramas that ethnographers

make their focus. Performance, too, explores the use and significance of gesture, movement, body language, and so on. And 20th-century artists have actively tried to reconnect to ritual action, as evident in the writing and work by major practitioners such as Artaud, Grotowski, Barba, and others. However, performance is not just a doing, a form of "carrying through" as its etymological roots (*parfournir* = to perform, carry through thoroughly) would suggest. Performance, like ethnography, has also served as an instrument of cultural analysis, though the society under examination has tended to be the artist's own, rather than the "other's." The subject of analysis in the Cage performance is not the "couple" inside but the audience outside. Certainly, the history and practice of Western ethnography is the target of the parody. But the performance is in itself ethnographic. Like the ethnographer, these performance artists made assumptions about the imagined viewers (a "white audience" as Coco Fusco describes it in the opening paragraph of her essay [1995:37]), formulated their goal ("to create a surprise or 'uncanny' encounter, one in which audiences had to undergo their own process of reflection as to what they were seeing" [40]), defined their methodology (interactive performance), and adjusted their expectations according to information gained in the field ("We did not anticipate that our self-conscious commentary on this practice could be believable" [50]). They then decided to measure (collect hard data) the size and range of reactions of the audiences that attended the performance. This analysis led to certain conclusions about deeply held Western cultural stereotypes and anxieties that manifest themselves in certain forms of public behavior on the part of spectators (chagrin, insulting and humiliating speech, etc.), which were then broken down and classified according to age, race, class, gender, and national origin. "[W]e found that young people's reactions have been the most humane" Fusco writes (1995:52). Or, "Several feminist artists and intellectuals at performances in the United States" said this (55); "Artists and cultural bureaucrats, the self-proclaimed elite" did that (52); "people of color who believed, at least initially, that the performance was real" did something else (53); while "Whites outside the U.S. were more ludic in their reactions than American whites" (55). While the performance sardonically mimics the gestures of ethnographic displays and dismantles the "real" they purport to reveal, the video in turn wants to function as a "document" of cultural behavior. So, is this reverse ethnography that sardonically shows up the violence inherent in ethnographic practice, as Gómez-Peña and Fusco intend, or is it ethnography, complete with its own inherent violence? Is the discomfort manifested by the audience simply about the troubling content (the treatment of aboriginal peoples)? Is it about the disconcerting true/false setup? Or, is it *also* about the way in which it, the audience, is being constructed? Does the scrutiny of the audience in fact end up turning spectators into specimens? Does the encounter give us more information about our own cultural fears and fantasies, "our" being the audience at the performance and captured on tape, or is the data being used, classified, and presented to some other audience entirely? Does that audience get to respond *to* the show, rather than *as* the show?

These questions, though directed at the performance and particularly the video of the Cage, hold for other forms of performance that move the focus from the stage onto the audience in an attempt to gauge its habits and belief systems. As culture becomes less a synonym for performance than its field of work, and as performance complicates our understanding of cultural practice so that we recognize the rehearsed and produced and creative nature of everyday life, perhaps we may be excused for wondering who the artists are, who the ethnographer, who the dupe, who the closet colonist. Who, ultimately, pulls the performative strings? Who is positioned where in this most uncanny, postmodern drama of cultural encounters?

Notes

1. On an island, in the middle of nowhere:

   (Airplane noises. Like a trapped and frightened animal, the ARCHITECT looks for a refuge. [...] Explosion. A bright flash of flames. Trembling with fear, the ARCHITECT, his face against the sand, puts his fingers in his ears. A few moments later the EMPEROR appears. He is carrying a large suitcase. He has a certain forced elegance. He tries to keep his composure. He touches the ARCHITECT with the tip of his cane.)
   EMPEROR: Help me, sir! I am the only survivor of the accident.
   ARCHITECT: *(Horrified)* Fee! Fee! Feegaa! Feegaa! Fee! Fee!
   (For a moment he looks at the EMPEROR and then runs off as fast as he can. Blackout.) (Arrabal 1969)

2. See also Rey Chow's discussion of Spivak's essay in *Writing Diaspora*, "Where Have All the Natives Gone?" (1993).
3. The essay cited here, "The Other History of Intercultural Performance," was first published in *TDR* 38, 1 (T141), Spring 1994.
4. "Genealogies of performance," Joseph Roach explains, "document the historical transmission and dissemination of cultural practices through collective representations" (1995:48).
5. For a discussion of the ethnographic fairs see Fatimah Tobing Rony's *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle* (1996).
6. *Relajo* is "una burla colectiva" (a collective prank), an act of sardonic devalorization, or what the late Mexican intellectual Jorge Portilla, in *Fenomenologia del relajo* (1984), calls "desolidarization" with dominant norms in order to create a different, rebellious solidarity—that of the underdog.
7. The comment was made during a discussion following my lecture, "A Savage Performance," in the "Performing Identities" lecture series, Center for Ideas and Society, University of California, Riverside, 28 February 1997.
8. While Fusco and Gómez-Peña had intended to play "the identity of an Other for a white audience" (1995:37), it never occurred to them that they would be taken literally. In an essay written after the experience, Fusco notes that more than half of their 150,000 spectators believed the Guatinauis were "real." This was in spite of the fact that the information on the walls around the cage specifically set the piece in a tradition of a representational practice—nonwhites and "freaks" have been exposed for centuries.
9. See the video by Coco Fusco and Paula Heredia, *The Couple in the Cage: A Guatinaui Odyssey* (1993).
10. Applying terms such as "real" and "authentic" to cultural behavior has been continually problematized by people such as James Clifford (1988), Richard Schechner (1985), Ella Shohat and Robert Stam (1994), Fatimah Tobing Rony (1996), and many others, and therefore requires no further elaboration here.

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The Ethnographic Burlesque

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett

The Couple in the Cage restages repudiated modes of ethnographic knowledge and display. The flyer announcing the video explicitly positions the staging in tabloid terms by faking the front page of the fictional *Natural Enquirer*. Indeed, the "ghosts of history" that the piece unleashes are still palpable in tabloids and tourism, which can be said to be "museums" of repudiated anthropological knowledge, as is *The Couple in the Cage*. Rather than offering a critique of contemporary (or even modern) ethnographic theory and practice, *The Couple in the Cage* uses the ethnographic burlesque in the service of a shameful ethnology, practices associated with the early history of ethnographic writing and display and with popular entertainment.[1] Before the advent of public museums, such displays were largely in the hands of commercial showmen, who combined edification and amusement in various ratios (Altick 1978).

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