

Border Hysteria and the War against Difference

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“Watch out locos! Godzilla in a mariachi hat could be an Al-Qaeda operative.”

In this piece, performance artist and writer Guillermo Gómez-Peña articulates a passionate defense of “undocumented” immigrants, post-national identity and a multiracial USA. This text-in-progress is part of the borderless movement of citizen journalism circulating in cyberspace.

I.

In October 2006, King George signed a bill authorizing the construction of an additional “border security” wall spanning one-third of the US-Mexican border. The plan was to build a concrete wall replete with floodlights, surveillance cameras, and motion detectors. On the front-page photo of Mexico’s daily *La Jornada*, George W. and a group of opportunistic governors and *politicos* from the southwestern states stand posed before a postcard-perfect Arizona landscape. The President sat at a table signing the bill, his sycophantic groupies fanned about him, gawking and gaping like backstage groupies. It was pure performance art for electoral purposes. The photo was published throughout Latin America and caused general outrage.

I asked myself: “Who is going to build that *pinche* wall—undocumented migrants hired by Halliburton?”¹

A month later, Congress approved the proposal—the same week they squashed *habeas corpus*. *Una mera coincidencia?*

Outside this country of the US everyone asks: “Why does the US need more walls and more isolationistic politics? Aren’t they isolated enough already?” But within our borders Washington incessantly chants: “National security! Homeland security!” More walls, laws, and border patrols!

The master narrative of US national security (as written by the neocons in collaboration with the mainstream media) reads: “Muslim radicals are out to get ‘us’; ‘illegal aliens’ are out to take ‘our’ jobs. We, victims of the wrath of history, are merely innocent bystanders. Our only crime is our belief in freedom and democracy.” This strategic deployment of the rhetoric of victimization and of heroism and of moral panic clearly justifies both the tightening of our borders and the militarization of our international policies.

II.

This is the new brand of immigration hysteria: bigger, better, whiter.

As the years have passed and the US has nurtured its citizens’ convalescence from post-9/11 shock, nativist newscasters, opportunistic politicians, right-wing think-tanks (FAIR), and citizen groups continue to portray Latino immigrants as the source of all our social and cultural ills and of our financial tribulations—even, at times, as distant relatives of Arab extremists.

Since 9/11, the semiotic territory encompassed by the word “terrorist” has expanded considerably. First it referred strictly to Al Qaeda and the Taliban, then to Muslim “fundamentalists,” eventually it engulfed all Muslims, and then finally all Arabs and Arab-looking people. In 2003, when a Palestinian friend told me: “We (Arabs) are the new Mexicans, and by extension you are all Arabs,” I realized how easily the demon mythologies of the brown body transfer from race to race, from country to country. Memories, like attention spans, are short and mutable. Color, like disease, is contagious...

Former Attorney General John Ashcroft forged the missing link between the War on Terror and Latin America. During his reign a Puerto Rican Muslim named Padilla was detained as he returned to the US from a “suspicious” visit to Pakistan. On several other occasions Mexican migrants were detained for an indefinite period of time without explanation or legal counsel. Their crimes? One of them wore a tattoo with the image of Bin Laden. Another one, a Mexican ice cream vendor, was seized while videotaping a government building in Fresno. He wanted to send a tape to his family back home “to show them the beautiful buildings of his host city.” These cases are heartbreaking and reveal a frightening political reality: the scattershot US war on terror has definite second front line, the US-Mexico border.

During a CNN “town meeting” on border issues conducted by anti-immigrant pundit Lou Dobbs, Republican Michael McCaul explained: “You know, after 9/11 the border is really a national security issue. We simply do not know who is coming into this country.” The implication of his warning was clear: How can we tell the difference between a migrant worker and an Arab Terrorist? Watch out locos! Godzilla in a mariachi hat could be an Al-Qaeda operative.

III.

It’s “zero tolerance” for brown-skinned immigrants.

The militarization of the border began in the early ’90s with the transparently obvious name “Operation Gatekeeper.” When the Border Patrol officially “lit up the border,” migrants were forced to travel through more treacherous desert terrain. More than 5,000 migrants have died while crossing or attempting to cross since then.

The Bush administration has taken this project to a new height of absurdity. The number of combined law enforcement personnel and the scope of high-tech military apparatus that monitors the border have increased exponentially since 9/11. This increase in devices of border surveillance is matched by the increase in the number of right-wing vigilante groups like the infamous “Minuteman Project,” who feel that their patriotic efforts to defend our borders are validated by the political mainstream and protected by the Patriot Act. Their frequent human rights violations are rarely prosecuted or even reported by the media.

Racist anti-immigration legislation is being implemented in small towns all across the country. It is now illegal in certain cities for landlords to rent rooms or apartments to “illegals.” The sanctions against employers who hire “illegals” have become much tougher and more frequently imposed. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) increasingly conducts raids (with overtly cruel names such as “Operation Predator”) in stores, bus and train stations, Home Depots, meat packing plants, restaurants, and nightclubs. “Concerned” citizens are also doing their part. Despite the fact that citizenship is not required for students of public schools in the US, some schoolteachers persist in

asking Mexican children for proof of their parents' citizenship. One state assemblyman has requested that school districts in his area provide him with the number of "illegal" immigrants in their classrooms. Certain banks are reporting to Homeland Security when a Latino, who wishes to open an account, does not have proper documentation. It is no exaggeration to assert that Homeland Security now runs the largest neighborhood watch program on planet earth.

What is the logical outcome of all this hysteria? The economy of these communities collapses as migrants are forced out of town. The state of Colorado has been so successful in expelling the migrants that sustain its economy that the governor is now considering replacing them with prisoners. Good luck keeping them in line, *pendejos!*

But this economic revelation does not discourage the likes of Lou Dobbs, Bill O'Reilly, Pat Buchanan, and Samuel Huntington. Obsessed with a mythical "war of civilizations" in which the US is losing control of its borders and rapidly becoming "Mexicanized," they rejoice in the following metanarrative: White identity, protestant Anglo culture, and the English language are under serious threat and the country must remove *all* external influences, close its borders entirely, and begin massive deportations of "aliens." It's now or never.

The restoration of the fabled monolingual White America that never was (but wishes it had been) is not only a crackpot project, it is, in fact, a genius plot for a sci-fi movie! One wonders if it is possible to imagine a US without Native American, black and Chicano culture; without blues, jazz, Tex-Mex, and Cajun music; without Latino, Creole, and Asian food; without writers and artists of color. Would it even be the US? Is there such a place on the map? Was there ever such a place?

Are we approaching the last days of an Empire, or is this merely the long, dark night of a democratic republic immersed in a severe identity crisis? How did we reach a "post-democratic" era and not even know it?

For the moment, post-9/11 America is in "lock down," rapidly becoming a closed society. Thanks to Bush's unilateral and isolationist policies, the US is completely alone in the world, facing the bizarre burden of having to defend and enforce "liberty and democracy" through violent means.

IV.

The Western Frontier reappears...

Immigration hysteria has always resurfaced in times of crisis. It's an integral part of America's racist history. But this time it's different. What characterizes this immigration debate is an absolute lack of compassion when referring to migrants without documents. The "aliens"—that is, the brown-skinned ones—are "criminals" by the mere fact that they are here "illegally." But the criminality that is a consequence of their location—being on the wrong side of the US-Mexican border—is now taken to be symptomatic of their broader "criminal" identity. They are treated with suspicion for being connected to or supportive of global crime cartels and terrorist cells.

The loaded terms such as "illegal alien," "alien," or the even more damning term, "illegal," are now synonymous with smuggler, border bandit, drug pusher, and gang member. The distinctions between "illegal" and "legal" easily disappear in the eyes of the racist. The brown face of evil morphs into the face of every "other" when the button of fear is pushed.

The incommensurable human suffering of migrants who move from their “proper place” without documents is a direct consequence of a failed global project, but their suffering appears inconsequential. The fact that hungry men, women, and children risk their lives by crossing the desert to make a few dollars to send back home remains insignificant. The fact that most of their earnings are sent across the border infuriates the nativists even more. For them, humanity stops at the border, “this” side of the border. Paradoxically, these self-styled “nativists” are of European origin, whereas their “alien” enemies are indigenous Americans whose ancestors walked this American land for thousands of years, long before the first border checkpoint was installed with the 1882 Exclusion Act.

Since the US-Mexico border is now perceived as the most vulnerable national security barrier and as the probable entryway of terrorists, to defend “illegal aliens” is to participate in anti-American behavior. If you dare to help them in any way—feed them or offer them a ride (not to mention a job or a place to live)—you may be breaking the law. For this reason, we can legitimately proclaim that human empathy and human solidarity are now illegal in the USA. Remember the outrageous treatment of the “No More Deaths” volunteers in Arizona (2006) who were prosecuted merely for giving aid to migrants in the desert whose lives were in danger?

When a caller recently told Bill O’Reilly, “I will never employ an alien or rent to an alien because I’m an American patriot and my job is to defend America,” the right-wing shock jock answered: “Good for you, Sir!” The absolute lack of empathy for those who are culturally different from “us” (the fictive white majority) permeates the mainstream media and its version of political discourse. When one US citizen is killed or kidnapped abroad the whole country becomes outraged. However, the monthly deaths of migrants crossing the border are rarely reported, and the daily deaths of Iraqi civilians remain impersonal numbers. They are “collateral damage” in the multiple fronts of the war against terror. The demonized brown body in the age of terror has no name or personal identity.

Pay attention to the tone and language of the immigration debate and one cannot help but ask: Has America lost its compassion (or rather the mythology of American compassion) for the underdog and its tolerance for cultural otherness? At what point did white people stop calling themselves immigrants? And weren’t they initially illegal too?

The damage that the Bush administration has inflicted upon our legal structure, civic culture, and our psyches is profound. Compassion has been replaced by fear: a generalized fear of otherness and difference. Fear is now our national culture, our subconscious, and our zeitgeist. This same fear helps to wage war and inflict torture on people who have come to this country for many of the same reasons as white immigrants.

V.

In a state like California, with a majority Mexican population, “the governor” openly praises the Minutemen. His off-the-record comments about the “hot-tempered” nature of Latinas match up with his public statements that indicate he does not want “aliens” to have driver’s licenses. He is clearly suspicious of their “alien” nature. He believes that forcing them to walk or to rely on inadequate public transportation makes them easier to watch by law enforcement officials.

Against all logic Arnold was reelected governor with one-third the Latino vote. Why? Did we vote for him or for the action hero? Have we Latinos become that depoliticized and alienated? Are our

psyches so colonized by trash culture that we have lost our political compass? Aren't we aware of the racist history of the GOP?

A brief look at Latino electronic media might give us some clues: When surfing Spanish-language TV channels, what do we find? A mediascape populated by hysterical celebrities and cyborg babes in micro-tangas speaking about...*nada*. Tabloid newscasts feature "the weirdest and most violent." "X-treme" and "uncensored" talk shows and "reality shows" strive to out-outrage their Anglo counterparts. It's embarrassing. Latino media has become an over-the-top cartoon of the US media that originally inspired it.

As a Latino artist I constantly ask myself: How do we fight this political despair and cultural loneliness we feel in post-9/11 America? How should we respond to the fact that Spanish-language media addresses the lowest common denominator when creating its programming and media content? Where can Latinos go to renew our cultural identity and political clarity? In the past we might have looked to local art spaces and community centers. But these cultural spaces are facing probable extinction due to severe underfunding of the arts and community centers and the services they provide.

VI.

The frightening post-9/11 political lingo has been normalized, and so have the fears and humiliation rituals shaped by it. George Orwell's bible of "Newspeak" and the cold-war jargon of the "Wetback Menace" are nothing compared to the linguistic artistry of the Bush regime.

Phrases like "Homeland Security" and "Patriot Act" are fascist terminology that closely resembles Nazi jargon. "Homeland Security" in German literally translates to the original name of the Nazi SS. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE, is now the new acronym for the border patrol. What a pitiful metaphorical choice! Is their objective to "freeze" all border crossings? Think about these terms! Isn't it clear that "National Security" really means security for a few middle- and upper-class whites and insecurity for the rest? Have we become so shortsighted that we can't understand that "ethnic profiling," now official policy and daily practice, is a euphemism for blatant and institutionally sanctioned racism?

As we build the "second border wall" we are sending an unambiguous message to the rest of the world: "The US DOES NOT wish to be part of the world community; leave us alone...or else!"

VII.

As the popularity of neocon policies decreases along with the mirage of national unity created by the phony patriotism of war, we become aware of a dramatic fact: We are a divided country, and divided we stand.

The internal divisions multiply beyond the popularized blue/red American schism revealing multiple Americas, fragmented communities and divided families. The "typical" Chicano family of today is also divided along conscious and unconscious ideological lines. Seated at the same family table one can find a soldier and an antiwar activist, a border patrolman and an undocumented uncle, an artist and a Hispanic businessman, a confused patriot and a lonely internationalist. Clearly, the post-9/11 culture of panic, militarism, censorship, and paranoid nationalism has permeated our psyches, daily interactions and personal relationships.

As critical artists, we are overworked and poorer than we were a decade ago; we're politically exhausted and scared shitless of the immediate future. It is no coincidence that in the last few years personal illness, breakups, and suicide have all increased exponentially against the backdrop of social, racial, and military violence. Understandably, our bodies and psyches are internalizing the pain of the larger sociopolitical body, and we are absorbing the fear and despair of the collective psyche. As Latinos, our brown bodies are also occupied territories in which other wars are taking place.

VIII.

The US-Mexico border is wider than ever.

As an artist engaged in binational cultural exchanges for 25 years, I have never seen my two countries more separated from one another. While Mexico is obsessed with its own postelectoral crisis, the US is obsessed with the War on Terror. While Mexico grapples with organized crime, the US grapples with its inner demons of terror. Indifferent neighbors, neither one is paying attention, much less talking to the other.

From the US side, Mexico is, at best, invisible, (post-9/11, Latin America disappeared as a regular news item); and, at worst, a Dantean inferno. From the local news to recent Hollywood movies and video games, Mexico is portrayed as an ongoing source of drugs, illegal immigration, senseless crime, and political turmoil, and nothing more. When discussing organized crime in Mexico, US pundits and politicians fail to understand the obvious: the guns that perpetrate that violence are actually made by US gun manufacturers and sold by US dealers. This too is an "inconvenient truth" of global significance. It's the same with drugs. The US distributors and consumers don't play significant roles in action movies—unlike in the real world. In public discussions no one acknowledges that violence and drugs are part of a systemic global problem. All sides are implicated. There are no good guys or bad guys in this film. (Gonzalez Iñarritu's amazing 2006 movie *Babel* made this case in a very poignant way.)

Strategic ignorance plays a major role in all this madness. Many "patriotic" Americans easily forget that it is thanks to "illegal" aliens hired by other "patriotic" Americans that the food, garment, tourist, and construction industries survive. They conveniently forget that the strawberries, apples, grapes, oranges, tomatoes, lettuce, and avocados that they eat were harvested, prepared, and served by "illegal" hands. These very same hands clean up after them in restaurants and bars, fix their broken cars, paint and mop their homes, and manicure their gardens. They also forget that their babies and elderly are being cared for by "illegal" nannies. Like the proimmigration aphorism stated so poignantly in banners during the major marches of 2006: "The giant wasn't sleeping; he was working."

The list of underpaid contributions by "illegal aliens" is so long that the lifestyle of many middle- and upper-class Americans couldn't possibly be sustained without them. Yet the Americans who are against illegal immigration (over 65 percent according to current polls) prefer to believe that their cities and neighborhoods are less safe and that their cultural and educational institutions have significantly lowered their standards since the "aliens" were allowed in. Current anti-immigrant discourses and practices exploit the image of hypersexualized Latinas coming across the border to have their babies, collect welfare, and overburden the environment, the public hospitals, and the schools.

The great paradox is that when it comes to recruiting noncitizens to go and fight in Iraq as foot soldiers, no one seems to mind who is illegal and who is not. Offering “postmortem citizenship” to undocumented migrants if they choose to enlist (as an alternative to deportation) is both hypocritical and inhuman. Incidentally, only 15 percent of those undocumented migrants who have accepted the Faustian deal have returned alive to enjoy their citizenship. In fact, the very first US soldier to ever die in Iraq was a Guatemalan migrant named Jose Antonio Gutierrez who spoke very little English. He died from friendly fire.

Are these contradictions articulated in the current immigration debate? Rarely. Why? Because it isn’t really a debate but rather a fanatic creed and an expression of much deeper fears.

IX.

“Please report immediately any suspicious behavior or package to the airport police.”
—Airport Public Service Announcement

What the anti-immigrant rhetoric doesn’t seem to acknowledge is that a closed border not only impedes people from coming in, but it also stops people from leaving. Isolationism works both ways. The internal panopticon affects us all. And isolationism in the age of globalization is a worrisome symptom of cultural entropy and political desperation.

Even worse, isolationism is self-perpetuating. The irony is that the exaggerated border enforcement designed to keep undocumented immigrants out and to make crossing much more difficult has actually made it so that immigrants stay within the US longer. Sometimes their stay becomes...permanent.

The new immigration laws, Homeland Security’s use of biometric devices such as retinal scanners for international visitors and human scanners for “certain travelers,” combined with the infamous precepts of the Bush Doctrine are effectively contributing to an international boycott of the US. All over the world, forums, dialogues, summits, business operations, and even art festivals are silently boycotting the participation of Americans. Anti-American sentiment is rampant throughout the world. When Bush left Guatemala, the last of seven Latin American countries he visited this year, Mayan shamans decided to “purify” their sacred archeological sites “to eliminate the bad spirits” left behind by the US president.

The US tourist industry is in disarray. European, Canadian, and Latin American travelers are having second thoughts when it comes to vacationing here. They simply do not wish to undergo humiliation upon their arrival. Even my Mexican family and friends are hesitant to visit me in California. My friend journalist Alfredo Araico told me recently, “I’ll wait for Bush to be out of office to visit you. I hope you understand, *carnal*.” He was simply giving voice to a very common feeling. The words “United States,” now interchangeable with the Bush era, are tainted by negative connotations of human rights violations, torture, unnecessary military violence, and the mistreatment of innocent immigrants.

What is the extent of this informal boycott? What is being done to combat it? Who knows? The media is not reporting it. They are too busy with the postmortem misadventures of trash queen “Anna Nicole,” Brittany Spears’s rehab regime, and Paris Hilton’s run-ins with the law.

X.

Let's face it, the War on Terror is also a war on difference: cultural, political, religious, racial, and even sexual. And the many targets of this war—Muslims, Arabs, Arab-looking people, Latino immigrants, people with thick accents and ethnic features—are being lumped into one single menacing form of otherness. The list goes on to include the poor and the homeless. Dissenting intellectuals, critical artists, socially conscious scientists, and activist gays are all being targeted. Those waging this war, “the new barbarians,” continue to multiply, threatening Western democracy from without and within.

Fortunately, the vast territory encompassed by Bush's infamous pronoun “Us” (as in *Us* against *Them*; *Nosotros, los Otros*) shrinks day by day as dissidence from the Right increases and the Left becomes more vocal. Democrats, now in control of the House and the Congress, are clumsily trying to recapture their political compass and undo some of the structural damage they've sustained since 2000. Do they have the necessary *cojones* to do it? Nancy Pelosi notwithstanding, do they represent a progressive alternative to the neocons? Incommensurable silence.

Here's an even tougher question: Can the mirror of critical culture be restored in the USA? I hope so—*We* hope so—with all Our hearts. But it would require the coordinated efforts of hundreds of progressive communities working toward this goal: to transform a culture of fear and isolationism to one of humanism and international cooperation. Can this be done without the participation of artists and intellectuals?

For the moment it is critical for US-based artists and intellectuals to speak up with valor and clarity. Our job has always been to side with the underdog, to question the discourse of power, and to contest the imposition of oppressive practices in the name of national governance. Today the master discourse embraces and promotes ultra-nationalism, isolationism, xenophobia, and censorship. This goes against our core beliefs: to make sure that borders and institutions remain open; and to cross those borders we are not supposed to cross. We, the artists and intellectuals—not politicians or soldiers—are the ones who must defend freedom and democracy. Clearly our notions of “freedom and democracy” differ dramatically from those articulated by our public officials. In fact, they are in stark opposition to the notions of those in power. And we must be prepared to promote and defend our beliefs. Our futures depend on it.

XI.

During a recent debate I had with a nativist, he asked me to provide him with a strong reason why the US should not close its borders with Mexico. My answer was as follows:

To me, the “problem” is not immigration, but immigration hysteria. Immigration is a byproduct of globalization and as such it is irreversible. One-third of mankind now lives outside their homeland and away from their original culture and language. The existing nation-states are dysfunctional and outdated. And the legal structures that contain them do not respond to the new complexities of the times.

His response to my answer was: “I don't understand a word of what you are saying. The fact is that the aliens are here illegally.”

I continued:

To me immigration is not a legal issue but a humanitarian and humanistic one. No human being is “illegal,” period. All human beings, with or without documents, belong to human kind, our kind, and if they require our help, we are obliged to provide it. It’s called being human. Period. In this context, nationality becomes secondary. Their pain is ours, and so is their fate.

“What do you mean by that?” he asked contentiously.

“Just as I became an immigrant one day, you yourself might become one in the future.”

He looked at me with perplexity and disgust and after a long pause, he said, “*You people are determined to destroy us. What have we done to you?*”

At that point I realized there was not much space for intellectual negotiation with him. His arguments were strictly emotional. He was fighting for his life, his inner country, and his sense of belonging to an imaginary world. He was the real alien, lost on a multiracial and multicultural foreign planet where border culture and hybridity are the norm.

I finally answered: “You know, *señor*, immigration to the US is the direct result of the economic and political behavior of the US toward other countries. Most immigrants, including myself, are unconsciously searching for the source of our despair. I think I found it just now. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

—*from the Borderless Americas, July 2007*

1. See *New York Times* (2006).

References

New York Times 2006 “\$5 Million Fine for Hiring Illegal Immigrants.” *New York Times*, 15 December:A38.