

Latin Canadians?

Under the Radar

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In the wake of the latest round of WTO negotiations in Cancún — that most Americanized of Mexican vacation spots — some thoughts on how we as Canadians see Latin America.

I just discovered the work of Guillermo Gómez-Peña, a Mexican transplanted to the U.S. who creates internationally renowned performance pieces on themes of dislocation, cultural hybridity and multiple oppressions. His work is fraught with symbols, absurdities and vicious puns. In a 1996 compilation of written work with transcripts and recreations of performances — entitled *The New World Border* — Gómez-Peña sets out such new cultural types as Chicanos (second-generation Mexicans living in Canada, or children of Mexican and Canadian parents living in the U.S.) and Can-aliens, who are undocumented Canadians. He speaks of the Free Taco Agreement — an “innovative” economic initiative designed by The Chicano Secret Service to produce and distribute free tacos to starving and deterritorialized gringo minorities.

In 1995, when Gómez-Peña took his act to Toronto’s Dufferin Mall, where he exhibited himself in a cage as an exotic, multicultural ethnic product — his costume a hodge-podge of details from various cultures of the Americas — for export by the fictional company Mexarcane International.

Gómez-Peña uses humour to approach the chaos of our hybridized, globalized lives, as well as to highlight the most flagrant injustices of this world, open as it is to money but closed to people. He also drags the skeleton of the past out of its stinking closet: signature pieces — which have aroused indignation among animal-rights activists — are the dead chickens that hang above the stage at a Gómez-Peña show. They are there to remind us of *pollos* (chickens), the name given by white supremacist Americans to the Mexican migrant workers they lynched in the Nineteenth Century. According to Gómez-Peña, the term is still used across the southwestern U.S.

Gómez-Peña is all for making fun of categories, and of one group’s right to claim the “authenticity” that gives them the exclusive right to talk about themselves and their issues. Still, he warns that Americans and Europeans, “In their desire to help, [have] often unknowingly become ventriloquists, impresarios, flaneurs, messiahs, or cultural transvestites.” He goes on to suggest that we need to “replace these problematic relationships with more enlightened ones, not to scare or punish potential allies.” He cites a Canadian, artist Chris Creighton Kelly: “Anglo-Americans must finally go beyond tol-

erance, sacrifice and moral being in the world. Their commitment to cultural equity must become a way of being in the world.” Gomez-Pena adds that, “In exchange, we artists ‘of colour’ will have to acknowledge their efforts, slowly bring our guard down.”

Then there is NAFTAArt, a Gómez-Peña invention that doesn’t exactly trip off the tongue as easily as some of his others. Nevertheless, it expresses an important idea: he says it’s “a cultural initiative of all three NAFTA countries in which art is utilized as a form of conservative diplomacy, and also to create conflict-free national images in order to seduce foreign investors and cultural tourists.”

But here in Canada, where — despite significant and growing immigration from Latin America; despite large numbers of migrant labourers who come from Mexico and the Caribbean to grow crops on Canadian farms; despite negotiations of trade agreements that tie us into continental and even hemispheric systems — we are still far less aware than our immediate neighbours to the south of the importance of Latin America. Where, in fact, is the Latin American presence — of any kind — in our news media? Whether you’re a Can-alien, a Chicano, or any other hybrid, it’s slim pickings.

A conference in 2001 at Carleton University looked at representation of regional Latin American issues in the Canadian media. Participants, who included prominent members of Canadian T.V. and radio stations and newspapers, found that although there has been some recent increase in coverage and, hence, awareness among Canadians of issues relating to Mexico and NAFTA, regional coverage is generally limited, sporadic and superficial. Coverage of events like the meetings to discuss the proposed Free Trade Area of the Americas fail to provide historical or current context. Entire regions in conflict are invisible in our media (Colombia was one case study). According to Bob Carty of the CBC, of a sample group of some 1,400 recent international pieces aired by the CBC, only 60, covering only eight distinct issues, were related to Latin America.

As participants suggested at that panel, we need to seek to increase coverage of the Caribbean, South and Central America and Mexico through, media commitment and public demand to be made more aware. While that on its own is a formidable task, we must at the same time beware of NAFTAArt and other sneaky tricks that make clean, conservative cultural custard out of (forgive me for closing with this graphic metaphor) the dead, hanging chickens of truth.