

## IN TIME OF PLAGUES

A conversatorium between Andrea Pagnes and Guillermo Gómez-Peña

EM TEMPO DE PRAGAS

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#### **Abstract**

From February 2020 to August 2021, Andrea Pagnes has been in continuous online dialogue and poetic exchange with poet and performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña. The present text is an edited extract from their virtual encounters, digitally grown poems and online performances between them, which later merged into a video work by Verena Stenke (VestAndPage). Their words have developed as a chronicle response to multiple pandemics, including COVID-19, the viruses of racism, colonization, confinement, forced displacement and mental illness. Their poetic and philosophical considerations attempt to shed a radical, poetic light onto the abysses of our times, such as white supremacy, oppression, violence, digital isolation, death and ultimately: the survival of it all through art-making.

**Keywords:** pandemics; performance art; virtual self; social critique; apocalyptic times.

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#### **Resumo**

De fevereiro de 2020 a agosto de 2021, Andrea Pagnes esteve em constante diálogo e troca poética, on-line, com o poeta e artista performático Guillermo Gómez-Peña. Este presente texto é um extrato editado de seus encontros virtuais, de poemas e performances on-line cultivados digitalmente entre eles, os quais posteriormente fundiram-se em um trabalho videográfico de Verena Stenke (VestAndPage). As palavras dos artistas se desenvolveram como uma resposta crônica a múltiplas pandemias, incluindo a COVID-19, os vírus do racismo, da colonização, do confinamento, do deslocamento forçado, e das doenças mentais. As considerações poético-filosóficas dos artistas buscam lançar uma luz radical e poética sobre os abismos de nosso tempo, como a supremacia branca, opressão, violência, isolamento digital, morte, e, em última instância: a sobrevivência a tudo isso através da criação artística.

**Palavras-chave:** pandemia; arte performática; eu virtual; crítica social; tempos apocalípticos.



## Introduction

After their last in-person collaboration at the VI *Venice International Performance Art Week* in January 2020, as the SARS-COV-2 broke out in February-March 2021, Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Andrea Pagnes engaged in an intense, online conversation on a weekly basis. The two artists exchanged impressions, feelings and thoughts on how to respond through art-making to the new reality, its contours so increasingly dramatic. They discussed issues stifling the Americas and Europe, focusing on sociological problematics of our contemporary societies, particularly regarding perceived injustices and collapsing power structures which the COVID-19 pandemic made more evident.

With government restrictions to stem the contagion, forced isolation, and the closure of all spaces dedicated to art, it became challenging for independent performers to guarantee financial support to survive. Hence, the priority was to find ways to reinvent themselves inhabiting cyberspace to keep their creative flame ablaze, strengthening their collaboration and proactive dialogue, albeit virtually, on crucial issues of the present so as to imagine future productions.

From their online encounters and virtual performative interventions over one and a half year, in March 2021, Pagnes and Gómez-Peña, in teamwork with Verena Stenke, began to compile a four-handed *conversatorium*, which they developed until August 2021, with the idea of skewing a chronicle of the time.

In editing the conversation (an extended excerpt is presented herewith subdivided into ten sections), the unmistakable poetic style of Guillermo Gómez-Peña, dense with aphorisms, puns, jokes, interjections and neologisms in Spanglish, has been accurately maintained.

The images accompanying the text are frames taken from the video work that later merged as the IV episodes of the *momentum* series by *VestAndPage*<sup>1</sup>.

## Conversatorium

*Colonial Aftermath Baking in the Oven*

**Andrea Pagnes:** Dear Guillermo, twelve painful months have gone by since the last time we have been together. Today, here in Europe, the term “lockdown” still reads more than freedom. “In quarantine”: the most in vogue algebraic expression. Facemasks are still

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<sup>1</sup> How to Survive the Pandemics? Andrea Pagnes in a poetic exchange with Guillermo Gómez-Peña. *VestAndPage*, Momentum IV, 2021. Disponível em: <https://www.vest-and-page.de/post/how-to-survive-the-pandemics-in-exchange-with-guillermo-gomez-pena>



sought-after garments at plenty. We can't hold one another. We are far apart. Even singing has become a dangerous activity.

Meanwhile, governors and city majors tighten anti-crowding policies and prohibitions. Poets, too, they know. What it was, they can't change - those who have lost their jobs and homes; those who have lost their lives and are no more. And yet they can condition. Even if barely, it's still something. Is hope-in growth legitimate, at least? Thus, poets turn to what is adrift and, in not finding it, are forced to voice what needs to transpire.

Today, while the pandemic continues to escalate, we stage ourselves against virtual backgrounds that exude a whiff of funeral parlours. Spectatorial patients vs melancholic contemplation: brief encounters on LCD screens before switching them off and leaving the conversation. In a while, we will perform this same repetitive action. Web-caged routine: the new condition to prolong the agony of transforming into internet-based performance artists without forewarning. Dialectically, technological luminosity slippers mobility from site to site. The desire to hold the freedom of physically moving now appears antiquate. This moment requires us to think about the unthinkable within the heartbreak of generational traumas and decades of prolonged crisis. Performance has often been described as a mode of healing and critical care, and a means to save the past's ruptured records from understanding our present better. Sometimes we should deconstruct definitions with a sledgehammer.

**Guillermo Gómez-Peña:** You know, everything I loved: international touring, crossing borders, working “in community”; 2-day parties; I can't do anymore. How do I reinvent myself to bear this impossibility? Let's give it a try right now. Take one! Yes. These “12 months that changed the world” were also 12 months of facing our inner demons. My heart is broken for the world. How to heal it without doctors? Can I heal it through my writing and my art?

For over one year, I have languaged my fears and hopes in the form of inventory poems and aphorisms - *poetuits*, which eventually became rantings, as a road map to learn how to cross the daily border between despair and hope.

I don't know how to name this type of performance literature: Poetic journalism or vernacular philosophy? Liveblogging on zoom? My only regret is that my dear virtual audience cannot talk back to me. *Ni pedo.*

But don't call me out. Instead, let's practice our civic will. *Comenzamos.*



The borders between the old normal and the new uncertainty; between daily despair and *esperanza* – hope; between the metropolis and the necropolis; like you, I cross these borders every day.

Tonight my ancestors are on fire. They are sampling the playlist of my entire life, and whiskey is my only consolation.

In August 1492

Columbus departed from the Port of Palos

In 3 state of the arts *caravelas*:

La Pinta for the prisoners

La Niña for the child molesters

And la Santa María for the religious fanatics

Columbus arrived in the #Americas with no documents

Don't we all secretly wish he had been deported right away?

Image 1 - Nautical chart - cut chest on Columbus routes.  
Still from the video “How to Survive the Pandemics?”, VestAndPage, Momentum IV, 2021.



Source: Andrea Pagnes, 2021.



*On Memory Exercises*

**Andrea Pagnes:** Quick exercise of recall. Memories, freshly baked. Viruses know no border. No wall can stop them. The living ones experience loss and threat and are dying with the dying. Increased feeling of being at the mercy, vulnerable. Physical violation is almost understandable - the pervasive fear of death. Pandemics have existed since the dawn of humanity. They break out, exterminate, shape the collective memory. They also accelerate innovations, they say.

Reports: Overwhelmed local health care facilities and provisory shelters unequipped to the task. One dead person for every thousand inhabitants is buried hastily without anointing, blessing, or rites. Shortage of food and medicine. Recession. Hardship for many. Wealth for a few. These are lethal times. Death makes no distinction - the apocalyptic horsemen. Social blind spots become areas of ash and fire. Stand by the sick and the elderly. Choose who must die first. Avoid places where you are not needed. Wait your turn for the vaccine. Does it work? Tomorrow it will be all history. Or maybe not. Side effects. Collateral damages. Encouragement. Across countries. Across all times. Plagues are a challenge for faith. There is no raging God who educates people, only the conflicts we cause. Powerlessness catches even the most energetic now and then. It penetrates the cracks of public debates - underground resistance with no incense smell, for it has long since ceased to serve life. Artistic practices that simply assess reality and reach conclusions are not enough anymore. A crisis should be tackled at its origin, not for its symptoms. Which tradition will last and which disguise? Which authority is legitimate and which is only presumptuous?

**Guillermo Gómez-Peña:** Remember the Trump Era? Here is an essential question:

Who would have ever imagined that the 3 scariest viruses (Señor Trump himself, COVID-19 & institutional racism) would cause interphase on planet earth at the same historical time?

Dear imaginary reader:

Let's Make America Great Again;

No...let's

Make America White Again; no...

It was never white to begin with

Let *ooosssSSS*

*Maik Ammerrrrrrrikkka Rate A hen?*

No, no, glitch! Let's reboot!



Dear reader, let's...mmm

I'm reading from the chat room---

Make America Native Again;

Make America Mexico Again;

Make America Think Again; read Again

Make America Sexy & weird Again;

Make America...Make America...mmm

Borderless again. That's it.

T-SHIRT IDEA: No human being is illegal on stolen land. Keep on crossing!

### *On Listening Language*

**Andrea Pagnes:** Borderless, yes, but in reality, look at what we have got: matchboxes for trees, barbwire, iron walls and open drains. To undertake a process of liberation, we need to welcome and learn from hundreds and hundreds of people, sustain their original voice: the voice that resonates and rises through each body carrying raw energy and empathy as it builds, sparking tiny revolutions and feasts. The voice that delves into the unspeakable and reveals truths horrific to hear: stories of massacres, separation, starvation; stories which are impossible to ignore, urgent to be shared, but that the Neo-nationalists conspire to erase.

So, now it is time I listen and learn, as today I am not much less ignorant than I was then:

About deportation and the "Defence of the Race" that the German-Nazi and Italian fascists theorized.

About gulags, mass graves and all those places born from hatred. About hate as the result of frustration when the ideal of democracy is betrayed, sneaking inside the *World Wide Web* as a livid slime, a social disease, a collective phenomenon manifesting towards those perceived as different from oneself.

Now it is time I listen and learn. Today I am not much less ignorant than I was then:

About anti-Semitic regurgitations, Islamophobia and anti-immigrant sentiments sickening Europe. About the policy of terror pursued by Western governments supported by media disinformation to manufacture consent.

About rich powerful states' coalitions and their continuous deliberate acts of war at Middle East countries' expense to exploit their natural resources, vast scale atrocities, millions of people's lives ruined, their homes, cities and lands devastated.

About policies that respond to our specious Western self-righteousness when we pretend we do not know what is happening and do not take our stance against what is unjust.



About Libya, a country transformed by the Western alliances into a hub of slave markets where immigrants are bought and sold as property.

Now it is time I listen and learn, as I am not much less ignorant than I was then:

About White profit = White guilt = White fragility. History constructed. Unforgivable crimes. Systematic stains of hegemonic imperialism. About pervasive racism and racial segregation, virtue signalling and hypocritical compliance are often emotionally idle, indulgent, culturally clueless pleas for moral validation but without self-reflection or accountability.

There are no races, but racism does exist. Here in Europe, it entails migration, stale laws on citizenship, illegal hiring, deportation and rejection. In Europe, George Floyd doesn't die under a cop's knee. He drowns in the *Mare Nostrum* to reach the shores of hope, or someone shoots him in a farmer's field in South Italy: he has come from Africa, the Middle East, South-East Asia, Eastern Europe. He can be Italian but carrying an uncomfortable ethnic label forever: Roma, Jewish, Eritrean, Kosovar, Albanian, Bangla, Maghrebi.

So, now it is time I listen and learn, for today, I am not much less ignorant than I was then:

About who had never lost hope even in the face of the harshest adversity, because for them to lose hope was never an option, even when they knew it would have eluded them.

At least, I have the language to say that. Do I?





Image 2 - Waving a white flag.  
Still from the video “How to Survive the Pandemics?”, VestAndPage, momentum IV, 2021.



Source: Andrea Pagnes, 2021.

**Guillermo Gómez-Peña:** Language is ill. *El lenguaje esta enfermo*. Politicians and corporations have infected it.

The writer must heal the word - one word at a time.

The artist must heal the world - one action at a time.

Remember Marcos conversing with Saramago?

They reached a conclusion: The revolution is - the word.

As I was saying:

Immigration is a major problem in America:

It started in 1492.

Looting is a major problem in America:

It started at Plymouth Rock...

Oh, and I almost forgot:

Amnesia is a VERY serious problem in the Americas as well.

Today, I AM an ageing wolf

howling at the full moon

Waiting for better times

while downing my second whisky (howling).



*On Myopic Fears*

**Andrea Pagnes:** Well, Guillermo, you know: if tonight, in my dreams, I stumbled across an ageing wolf, I'd shout, "I missed you". Zeitgeist and nature are confronting us in a wild fashion. Humankind's materialistic logic has proved to be a harmful failure. The trinomial: to have - possess - exercise power doesn't go further than half the way. It makes people myopic.

Conversely, the spirit awakens where the second half of the route begins: radical tenderness to transform the weight of insecurity towards the future into regenerative rather than degenerative, notwithstanding the present seems squeezed between a past thrusting forward and a tomorrow ricocheting backwards like a blunt bullet.

The common idea that human beings act on hypotheses drawn from experience, whose validity can otherwise be questioned, makes little sense now. The future bounces backwards but has no form yet: we know nothing of it. But if we look at forest devastation, climate change, pollution, wars, poverty, mass migrations, we can forecast a future in which worse things than today may happen.

Meanwhile, it has been more than one year since I lived confined in my studio home that plays the double function of shelter and cage while seeking original aesthetics as an uncompromising creative energy force.

For months, we have heard the same question:

How can art help lead us into a post-pandemic world? Is it all?

Nothing creates itself, and nothing is autopoietic or self-organizing but springs from collaborative processes. Today, with you, in companionship isolation, I attempt drawing on the *poiesis* that characterized our experience working in collaboration, even though I will arrive where I have started. It will always be a new beginning.

**Guillermo Gómez-Peña:** I remember...

First was the lockdown & the irrational fears

Then came the martial law & the "stay@home" order

Followed by weekly COVID tests & the new prohibition:

No outdoors cafes or bars; no parks or beaches;

No "homeless" or "illegal aliens" on the parking lots

Quote on quote

No "indoors guests or family gatherings"



And the rooftops and back alleys were suddenly off-limits  
Every city was a ghost city, remember?  
And the criminals returned  
Then came the mystery fires & the floods  
And our friends & relatives began to die  
And it started raining in the hallways of my building  
& the tears kept running down my cheeks  
It was the End of the Empire  
Planet Earth had had enough  
She tried so hard to make it work  
And then - as if this weren't enough - finally came the ice storms  
And I got frostbite on my fingers.  
It was the beginning of a new film.  
Essential question: What will be the new media obsession after the Vaccine Olympics?  
The International Mental Health Crisis?  
The Kardashian pop trend of cuddling with ghosts and paranormal lovers?  
*No manchen.*

*On Survival Personas*

**Andrea Pagnes:** We perceive reality by listening, observing, sensing, feeling. We transform ourselves, inspire each other, and become together by taking action.  
We perform thorough mediated cultural modalities, including aesthetic reflections, to re-imagine our life.  
We capture hidden, mediated public transcripts of the normative to which we respond, performing to counter power-knowledge and disrupt the victim-executioner vicious circle.  
We navigate through situations trying not to get adrift and drawn. This way, we keep our sense of hope ablaze. But hope as a choice or a drive?  
The tricky thing about hope is not to confuse it with optimism.  
Optimism presupposes confidence in a future not yet known. It is a specular image of pessimism. Pessimists assume they presume a future that doesn't even depend on them.  
Conversely, hope is a sense of possibility to the uncertainty of a tomorrow yet to come.  
Those who lived hoping, it cannot be said, died.  
We are the chronicles of our time as we belong to it.



There is no connection but a lazy habit of arbitrary judgment whose political consequences may be dramatic when deep listening fails.

**Guillermo Gómez-Peña:** You know *loco*, time in lockdown is so *pinche* strange: Time is constantly stretching and compressing. History starts when you wake up and ends when you go to sleep. And the rest is academic discourses, random dreams and unconscious desire.

Depending on who we are today and where we live, I feel that if we wish to combat philosophical despair during the lockdown, we have to choose to perform a meta-fictional persona.

Here are some of my favourite ones:

You are an astronaut on an uncertain mission with no way back

You are one of the characters on Gilligan's island

You are training at a survivalist camp

You are locked in a maximum-security prison awaiting your sentence.

You are a political dissident under house arrest

You are a zoom video pirate, and you broadcast your paranoid worldview every night.

Every day is "Black Friday", and you are learning how to shoot in a survivalist shooting range ...especially if you are white.

*Pausa dramática...*

For the moment, you are still an artist, a musician or a poet, and all your gigs have been cancelled for the foreseeable future.

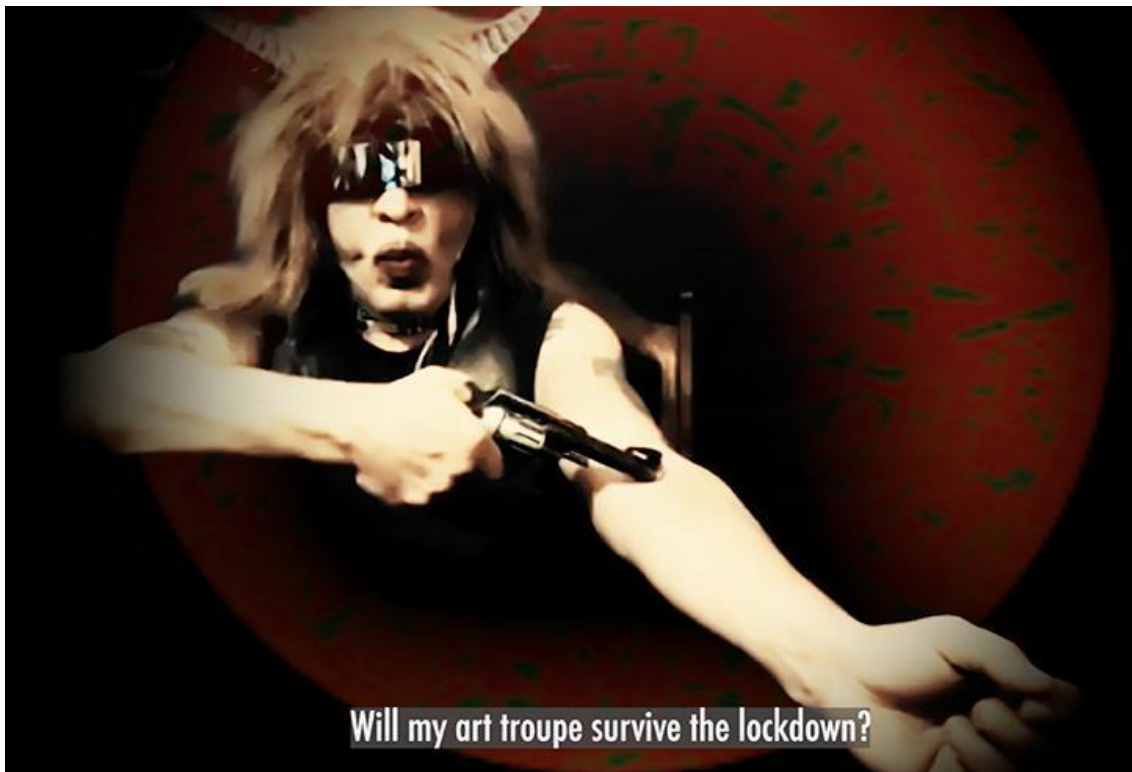
Cabin fever: Humans aren't supposed to exist in extreme isolation.

Isolation leads to despair and violence.

Get out once a day, recapture the public space but do it slowly and responsibly.



Image 3 - “Will my art troupe survive the lockdown?” (Guillermo Gómez-Peña).  
Still from the video “How to Survive the Pandemics?”, VestAndPage, Momentum IV, 2021.



Source: Andrea Pagnes, 2021.

### *On Essential Questions In Digital Capitalism*

**Andrea Pagnes:** In the digital capitalism era, who is it that creates the myths? And which stories will we tell ourselves to get to tomorrow? Through data collection, artificial intelligence determines planning, decision-making processes, governance, control, economic-financial organization models, and value creation. Soon, it may also forecast the human transcendental spiritual experience parameters - Apocalypse in white gloves. Billions of fingers fumble anxiously to type WhatsApp messages, taking selfies, tweeting, snap-chatting and tik-toking the brain out, obsessed with creating identity and personality. Diversity of viewpoints. Relativity of truth. The result is: the mechanisms of the world are understood less. Perhaps, the marginalized, those with little or no access to the Internet, may save themselves, propelling radical visions to question the supposed trust and neutrality of cybernetic logic.

**Guillermo Gómez-Peña:** Today’s “essential” questions during the lockdown. September 2020.

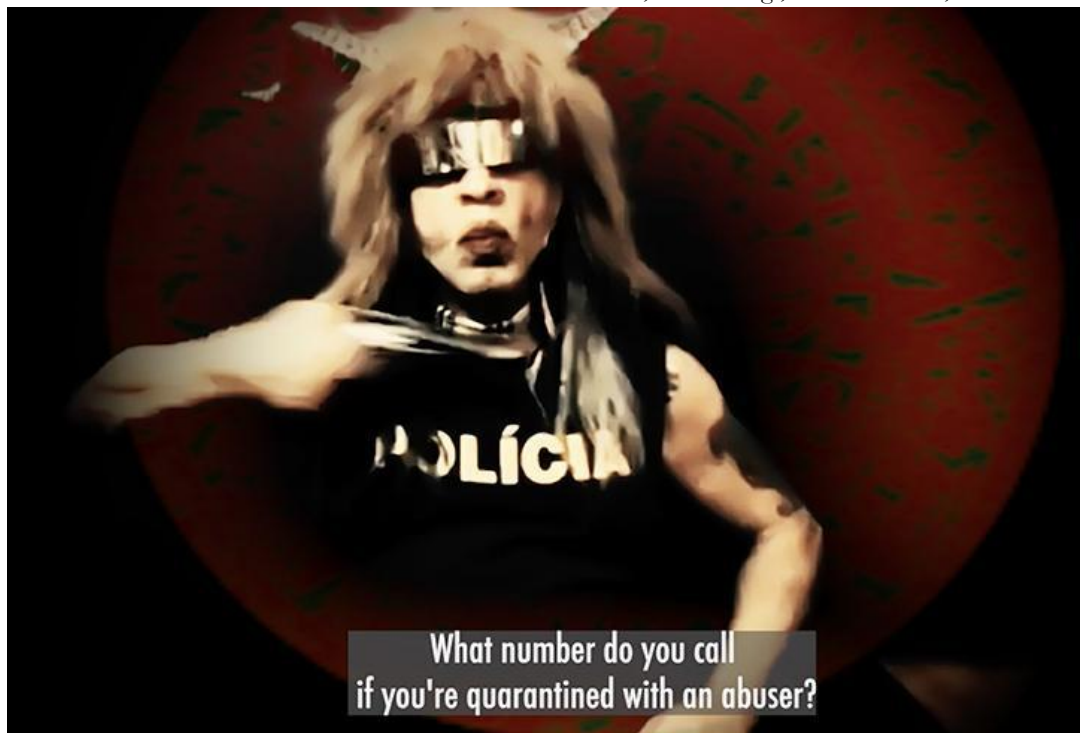
Sitting alone in an outdoor rebel bar located in the infected heart of the *Mission District* of San Francisco – that’s a good line, I’ll keep it; I write down the essential questions of the



day while downing my third whisky. Don't judge – it's only a literary trope!... What is “essential” right now? Why are artists, poets and musicians not considered “essential workers”? How do you “embody” your practice online if you are a performance artist or activist? What is public space in times of lockdown? How do we cross the digital border with our wounded bodies & frail minds? Have we already become “the society of walking zombies” envisioned by Henry Giroux? Are we finally realizing the 7th Generation Prophecy of the Lakotas and the Hopi People? Will my art troupe survive the lockdown? Will we have to declare bankruptcy down the road, like my brown & black neighbours next door?... *Hmmm...*

Is sex work considered essential? Is love an essential reason for loitering or travelling? If you live by yourself, who do you cuddle with? Your dog or a paranormal entity? Is your only hope *zoomasturbation*? What do we do when your partner becomes an iPhone zombie and you, an anti-social monster suffering from acute existential agoraphobia? And then, there's no third room to hide in? What number do you call if you are quarantined with an abuser? How do you remain sane when you don't have other humans around to remind you of your limits and im/slash/possibilities? Is it possible to domesticate your inner demons and fears while facing the daily abyss of lockdown? Buddhist gift: Congratulations! Dear American citizen: You have been awarded a trip to... exactly where you are!

Image 4 - “What number do you call if you're quarantined with an abuser?” (Guillermo Gómez-Peña). Still from the video “How to Survive the Pandemics?”, *Vest.AndPage*, momentum IV, 2021.



Source: Andrea Pagnes, 2021.



**Andrea Pagnès:** A question I have is how to position the human being with worlds that have yet to emerge. An invariable certainty is tracing a real or imaginary line in space or time that separates one person from another. Eine Grenze, un confine, una frontera. A border can be qualitative, quantitative, but also speculative. The pandemic has framed boundaries between nations and people much more tangible for everyone, regardless of their status. It has enforced the hierarchies that define who is allowed to cross (and also violate) which border. Borders function in a state of simultaneity, phantomlike, but they are factual. Tightening them has strengthened back the dark side of globalism and the many violent aspects it implies. To reverse this toxic trend, new aesthetic visions and Live-Art-making processes may open up upgraded cartographies of solidarity across borders to sabotage the superimposition of political, cultural, or other non-geographical divisions regardless of the fictitious representation of geographical areas. They can link differences and diversities in time and space. Through linking, we can seek convergence. Nature and history show us how borders continually change. Lands merge and split; walls are built and torn down. Empires rise and fall. Hardening borders contribute to the formation of implosive political contexts. Art has the potential to subvert violence and separation by promoting proximity, human relationships between people and people, spatial relationships between people and places, which, from time to time, are lost, limited, or rediscovered. These days, I often think of the biological contagion as a metaphor for physical-emotional interconnection, cultural contamination between people, their places, spaces and ideas; the transmission and delivery of knowledge through inspiration, iteration, replication, mimetic, reference: no copyright but copyleft.

*On Colonial Psychosis*

**Guillermo Gómez-Peña:** Ay! Those *Proud & Boogaloo boys* from “White America”;  
Rambunctious puppets of the NRA, *que pedo traen?*  
Those Neanderthals from the deep South;  
The Oath Keepers; the MAGA people, *sin magia*,  
red neck cartoons of the Nazi youth on YouTube  
*que onda traen esos gringos macabros?*

*Coño!*

They truly, TRULY believe they are heroes

In an imaginary “Race War”,

A Holy War, a Fox News Original:



“The Second Civil War!”

– they scream like Yosemite Sam;

(Chanting)

War, war, war, war!

Trump! Trump! *Trompasssssssssss!*

A pathetic “war” against their fictional identities

& cultural ignorance...

I just don’t get this ancestral trauma narrative shit;

Repeats *en loop* obsessively

Like a boring inventory poem...

1492,

1512,

1620,

(Any other significant date?)

2020?

*Hmm...* fact is...

500 years of colonial psychosis

Xenocide, slavery, lynchings, bounty hunters,

Broken treaties; broken families; broken bones

The history of American Cinema

“Once Upon a Time in America”

7 generations of war veterans

Hardcore drugs; domestic violence,

A historical trauma they simply can’t verbalize

With their extremely X-TREME-LY LIE brief vocabulary

Problem? You can’t talk to them

They get all weirded out by the complexity

Especially if you have a thick accent like mine.

*Ay*, America,

One nation under...educated & overfed.

Postscript: Like Plato, I’m beginning to think they’ve got the government they deserve...

and of course, all the guns and bibles they need to fight their imaginary enemies.

Dear white supremacist: Let’s settle this historical quarrel: Let’s take a DNA test right now:

*Ich bin ein Mexikanisch* Monster in Berlin.

*Orale guey!*





Translation: Why do US cops always aim for the heart or the head and not the legs or the arms?

Is this what they have been taught? Who taught them? Why?

More advice to the white left:

Stop speaking for us *carnales*

Develop a more humble supportive role

Bite the (silver) bullet

And become a human shield in the next protest

Go!

Image 5 - "Abolish White Supremacy" (Guillermo Gómez-Peña).  
Still from the video "How to Survive the Pandemics?", VestAndPage, Momentum IV, 2021.



Source: Andrea Pagnes, 2021.

**Andrea Pagnes:** Backdrop: extreme austerity, surveillance, gentrification, privatization of public spaces, streets as increasingly contested political zones. Observing these present facts, we may predict a near future with particular specificity, although the past may be useless as a guide. Also, it is impossible to establish precisely how much time can pass from today to the near future. Still, it does not mean to take action and nurture expectations - always present time points - for the future and that, if wrong, we can correct them. For instance, to amend acts of wrongdoing and injustice that people have done to other people



in the past, causing them to suffer. Reparation is a duty, but little can be learned from history when interpreted by the way too general. All events are unique.

On the contrary, the assumption that past, present and future are not separable implies they regularly contaminate one another and that parts of them coagulate, generating conceptual frameworks of positive expectation for a progressive, constructive change. I think of a non-linear infinite present where constant resistance acts can overcome resistance itself to not crush into the hypocritical consumerist logic's grind and the illusion of total transparency. As you told me once, "We don't need simulacra. We need to join forces creating spaces to nurture freedom, that one that sparkles from our bodies when we act not as isolated individuals". Indeed, we become when we are together, sharing our wounds with gentleness and care, two extraordinary forces of resistance within ethics and politics having the potential to reverse situations, subvert norms, defeat prejudices, and that can also manifest where least expected: amid danger, humiliation, and cruelty, functioning as an antidote against them.

*On Our Virtual Selves*

**Guillermo Gómez-Peña:** Looking At My Naked Self In The Mirror During Lockdown  
Gómez-Peña, 2021

Who are you today? - I ask my reflection

(Multiple voices respond from within)

I AM... I am... I am

I am the colour of my skin, my DNA, my cells...

"Brown" to the core all the time

"100% Frontera"

I am what I say, read & write

What I eat, shit & shop,

The movies & news I watch

I AM...

The place I was born & raised

*Santa Maria de los Destrapados*

And all the places I have ever been,

Including cyber-space

Including all of the partners and friends I have ever had

And every performance I have ever made



Including this one

Countdown

10-9-8-7-6-5-4-3-2-1

But, I am also...

1.-a dog,

2.-a tree,

3.-a hummingbird,

4.-an insect...

5.-the spider that bit me this morning

6.-a community of germs and viruses

7.-stardust

8.-an archival memory bank

9.-an ever-morphing ID; *Bourne* identity match

10.-Internal exile; a cyber “wetback” in house arrest,

And my passport is a fictional document written in a language I did not choose.

Postscript: No, I do not suffer from MPD or PTSD. Not that I know. My blood type is “A Negative.”

Remember GP, *Mad Mex*, when there are no more places to go, no more islands to hide on or discover, or if you are white to “re-conquer” when there are no more placebos or instant utopias, no more Irish whisky or decent Colombian cocaine, no more sex parties or performance extravaganzas, no more flags to wave; borders to cross, no more, no more... NO MORE. When all this happens, there is an incommensurable pause... Then, you begin to search for your inner island, a place equidistant from Greenland and Formentera; Tasmania and Tuvalu, Gorgeous land, inner *tropicalia*... There, wherever ‘there’ exists... The weather is sunny and breezy all year long. There are no corrupt politicians or corporate elites; no armies, *migras* or police departments, Not even a lonely poisonous snake. On my island... They have never heard of President Trump. There are no racists or crime cartels, suspicious pandemics, unemployment, homeless people, paper money, dogmatic churches, *manicomios*, prisons, broken schools, and not even a capital art world. It is the negative space of my imagination--I continue blogging from my imaginary iPhone: ...Education, dive bars, and medical services are all free, and everyone’s nude and gorgeous, Even the not-so-gorgeous by Western standards: The brown, the abundant, the tiny, the humongous, the strangely-shaped. And everyone makes art, strange art, inexplicable arte. And everyone speaks 4 or 5 languages, including Papiamento. This wonderful island of my *Imagi/Nation* is called... performance art, for the lack of a better word.



**Andrea Pagnes:** It is May 2021. We should *Tipp-ex* the Orwellian geo-political representation of the entire earth's surface, draw a new *c-Art-ography* and transfer it to a "magic 8 ball". In the last weeks, Russia has been amassing troops on the border with Ukraine, fomenting an escalation in the combat zone of the Donbas region. What is the goal of these actions? How likely is a large-scale military invasion?

Science fiction has adopted sociological and cultural factors that provide manageable interpretations of the increasing complexity of an unstable, social and intellectual reality from the sixties onward. It has raised legitimate doubts about the myth of progress and its limits, describing possible futures as similarly iconoclastic and dystopian. In the reality-virtuality continuum, different cultural narratives intertwine and transform into impalpable foam bubbles, incubators of old and new social mythologies that evaporate rapidly - tricks of the tail of the post-semiotic society. Presuming to subvert the present state of things through time-based media operations might be insufficient. Most common symptoms of chronic electronic screen fatigue resulting from eye strain: asthenia for no apparent reason, asthenophobia, blurred/disturbed vision, dizziness, DPTSD (Digital Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), dry eyes, headache, loss of clarity, melatonin deficiency, nausea, neck pain, gradual memory loss, migraine, sense of heaviness, tiredness. Insomnia. My soul is worried. My flesh is tense.

#### *On Heterotopic Waiting*

**Guillermo Gómez-Peña:** People ask me, Gómez-Peña, what are you waiting for? You mean, what are we all waiting for? How to begin? We're waiting for better times: waiting for the Wi-Fi signal to improve, the eviction letter or the last call for the best results to arrive. Waiting for the new symptoms to finally emerge. Waiting for that afternoon nap that will never come because we're already dreaming and playing video games inside a video game inside a much-touted post reality. You are waiting. I am waiting for your permission to open my front door, waiting for the next CNN town meeting on the Coronavirus craze or the "Vaccine Olympics" results. Waiting for the latest casualty of the call-out culture to scream with rage at our planet. We are waiting - waiting for today's *bizarro* news to contradict yesterday's news, to confuse what other networks are saying that the politicians are saying. We are waiting for more trolls, hackers, and zoom bombers to crash our virtual rants. I say: bring them into the meeting room. I've got my ultraviolet sword, my ceremony, my *chiles*, my poetry.



And when no one is watching, I walk and dance with my shadow across the city. I am unconscious. Scary me. I am waiting for a last bullet. I am myself *la bala perdida que me persigue*, a drone, a white supremacists drive-by, a bounty hunter on *esteroids*, a ghost lawyer to destroy my dream. America, America. America is a fictional country. But we forgot. Yes, gringos be tripping forever. And when no one is watching, I am waiting for the midnight church bells so I can fly again. Waiting for more and more borders to open up tonight. Waiting while writing while cooking in lockdown, while waiting for my close friends, while cooking for the so-called homeless and the migrants and the criminals. Just because I happen to have a roof by some twist of faith. I happen to have a stove, and my electricity is on. So I am waiting, still waiting.

Waiting for their collective fear to turn into more violence. Waiting for the next splash of blood, more police brutality to remind me I am brown, waiting for the I to turn into we again, the way we used to be waiting, waiting for all of us to return to normality when we all know that the all normal, remember, was the problem in the first place. We're all waiting for stranger news, bears chasing skiers, enormous predatory fishes appearing in the LA River, rattlesnakes in your bathroom. Waiting for distant love news from Brazil or Formentera. Waiting while writing nonsensical poetry, while waiting for the president to inject lies soul into your brain, for the anti-maskers to kill more black or brown liberals in the supermarket. *Hmm*. Waiting for the locksmith, the surveillance cameras and the drones to finally enter your window. I know it's hard to share this news. But you keep asking me. What are we waiting for? Well, I have to confess to you that we are all waiting— still waiting for the next test to come out negative, for a miracle vaccine, maybe in Russia or China or Tijuana. Sputnik, Wuhan, Moderna, la Cubana, Capoeira, Santa Muerte. Waiting to cross successfully the “before and after border” between the necro- and the metropolis. While waiting impatiently for my next online performance tour to the end of Western civilization. A trip to say goodbye to every person I've ever met and loved: a long trip back to their origins. The garden of my youth, my grandma, el *Sur*, *la herida infectada*.

Next poem.



Image 6 - “Santa Muerte.” (Guillermo Gómez-Peña).  
Still from the video “How to Survive the Pandemics?”, VestAndPage, momentum IV, 2021.



Source: Andrea Pagnes, 2021.

**Andrea Pagnes:** The PC screen acts like a heterotopic mirror: disturbing, incompatible, contradictory. We visualize ourselves where we are not, in a world within other worlds, reflecting and yet upsetting what is outside. It is an unreal space that opens up behind its surface. It is a mirror of loneliness that gives the illusion to connect all the other areas surrounding it, but it neutralizes or reverses the set of relationships they designate. Tomorrow I will go back and donate my blood at the local hospital. It is my way of burning Chrome down.

**Guillermo Gómez-Peña:** ...And “you” dared to ask me last night what I miss from the pre-COVID era. *Ayy!*... It was like a ghost stabbed my already broken heart! Broken for the world; broken by “you”. I miss, *hmm*... I miss... I miss freestyling and jamming with other poets, musicians and performance artists. I miss performing, touring, crossing borders, making art with my whole body and my hair on fire on a daily basis in proximity to other incandescent *Bonzô* “humans”. I miss living without fear of contagion, without fear of the immediate future, because the future does not exist anymore, and time is just a convention invented by Rolex or Timex. The new normal is apocalypse, genocide, ecocide, *othercide*. I miss my “daily human contact” (its sound *so pinche* corny), the boisterous laughter and



outrageous behaviour of my artist friends, my daily spiritual family, playing and partying as hard as we work. I miss conspiring in seedy bars, chance encounters, hosting deviant salons in my living room. I miss 24-hour parties, sharing food, drinks, smoke, mysterious substances, bad poetry, uncensored live art, the one that makes Christians cringe and “white liberals” get all eroticized... I miss “real experiences”; random vacations bumping into strangers while walking the streets of a scary city for the first time, and getting lost. I miss arriving at a museum, theatre or abandoned building for the first time; setting up, rehearsal, tech time, the sexy backstage life, naked bodies, an unpredictable performance; of course, the after-party at the old bar down the street; *la parranda sabrosa*. And then walking back to the hotel at 4am arm in arm with my *loca*, our make-up running down. *Ahi!* I miss that feeling so much! I miss “street life”, the public space, crowds causing trouble on the street in full costume. I miss guerrilla interventions, crushing public plazas, malls and government buildings as a performance exercise, as an afterthought, scaring the hell out of the puritans and the conservatives, confronting the cops in drag, confronting the old normal and the familiar, which is now totally abnormal, and the unfamiliar is the norm. And the new normal is “Armageddon”, the end of empire, a train crash, or daily massacre, ice storms in the tropics, and there are no rules, which is precisely the language I am an expert; the embodied language of poetry, live art, jamming, and thinking while dancing...

*Ahi.* I miss my *mueritos*. I miss my loved ones, James (Luna), Rene (Yanez), Felipe (Ehrenberg), Miguelito (Algarin), Jorge (Rojas), Natasha; all casualties of radical art and true freedom... I miss my *padrinos* and *madrinas* who accompanied me while touring the scary American night, as we were all going through the “Big Smoke”. Well, enough tears for tonight. Post-data: I miss YOU! Not YouTube! YOU!. And I am missing myself. Nowhere to be found. *Mad Mex* missing in action. Wait, am I already dead? *Hmm*. I better change hats and eyeglasses and adjust my mike.

Next poem.

#### *On A Radical Citizenship In Violated Landscapes*

**Andrea Pagnes:** The web is a spectral space where bodies, images and sounds fester and mingle. A multitude of zombie-avatars aliment a tech-pornocracy of forces that insist on existing without being. Files of lost futures that fail to happen. Virtual rooms for temporary reunions in time-windows that break apart. Ubiquitous interplays of Q&A that tension the idea of open history, struggling to heal the colonial unconscious about all culturally divided and fragmented. Cyberspace is a simulated space based on rational principles and rooted in



economic motivations. It exists only potentially. Public spaces are the same. I wonder, therefore, where we are indeed free as artists and human beings. Within the four walls of a studio, in front of a PC, or wandering the outside world? The word “space” already contains a paradox: on the one hand, it refers to demarcation, on the other, to infinity. We create imaginary environments that define, represent, or generate new identities outside society’s normative frameworks when we perform. We open personal spaces that flow into public ones since they have a normalizing power with a substantial psychological and social impact. We try to respond, resist and free ourselves through making art. Thus, we should continue to perform our violated landscapes, fragmented beauty, those inside and those outside.

**Guillermo Gómez-Peña:** It’s time for Angloamerica and Europe to be quiet, tender, humble and listen, listen to nature and so-called people of colour. It’s your only possible redemption.

Psychomagic performance number 69: Be a Matriot, not a Patriot. Believe in people and land, not in government or corporation. Walk the walk. Write the poem. Perform the performance!

Radical citizenship number 1: Live every day as if the laws and institutions that contradict the International Declaration of Human Rights didn’t exist.

Radical citizenship number 2: “Live every day as if your hair was on fire”. Is this a Zen aphorism or a performance command?

Human Right no. 69: Live every day as if fear didn’t exist; as if Trump and the Patriot Act never existed... As if “COVID 19” was a sci-fi novel... As if America was a true social democracy. As if art was an integral part of our lives.

*Predicamento:*

As orphans of 2 or more nation-states, we’ve got no government to defend, no flag to wave.

We’ve only got one another and our audiences. Ah, and I forgot, our constitution is a poetry book.

Rebellion number 69: No. I will no longer be a shaman for “the Karens”.

Rebellion number 213: I will no longer be the MC for your “Hispanic Heritage Month”, the poster boy for your Taco Tuesday or the Mariachi for your Bachelorette or Chihuahua Gender Reveal Party: “Please remix me and let me go! For I don’t love you anymore...”





**Andrea Pagnes:** Guillermo, Maestro, what is giving you hope during this time of multiple *pandemias*?

**Guillermo Gómez-Peña:** Well, during my multiple insomniac nights, there are a few certainties that give me hope: my studio, the humour and the intelligence of my friends and my artistic practice, which I extend to my neighbours in the form of food and books... but this hope is being challenged by the multiple *pandemias*.

*Hmm.* So, say on a good day, I feel hopeful. My home feels like a real art studio, and I have intimate conversations with friends, one on one, on zoom or on the rooftop, and my neighbours seem to care about each other. On a bad day, I dread zoom, my home is filthy, the neighbours are fighting with one another about the politics of masking and vaccination or recycling or the colour of their skin, and my Covid test results are late.

On a good day, I feel I'm learning slowly to live by and with myself, rediscovering the importance of reconnecting with ancestry, family, and old friends. And my writing flows like magma out of my fingers. On a bad day, I wake up, and there's no food in the fridge, and the Internet is down again. I try to write, and nothing interesting comes out. Then my only hope is to bike or scoot around for hours in the hood.

When I return home, I simply drink too much and watch old French or Japanese films. *Es una chinga*. One day I wake up, am very hungover, and dance for a vision. I successfully renegotiate my debts with the landlord, the bank, and the internet provider. But later on, the evening abyss is formidable. My godfather dies just like that. And my only hope is to revisit more weird black and white films and poetry books.

The next day, I receive more devastating news: another friend or a relative has been hospitalized from COVID or died of an overdose. *Coño!* How much can you take?

On a good day, I believe I am a witness to the End of Empire. Today is a good day, and tomorrow, this text will be different.

Okay, time to wake up. Time to review my quintessential COVID Activities Checklist:

Time to check on my neighbours and my elders

Time to get another COVID test, the fourth one this month

Time to join another Zoom room

Time to doom scroll until my eyes bleed

"Time to stretch and call a friend", - says my Echo-Alexa

Time to bike ride while Mexican, shop while Mexican,

*A-dios culebras.*

I put on my safari hat, explorer glasses and turn off the computer.



Image 7 - "Turn it off" (Guillermo Gómez-Peña).  
Still from the video "How to Survive the Pandemics?", VestAndPage, Momentum IV, 2021.



Source: Andrea Pagnes, 2021.



## Authors

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**Guillermo Gómez-Peña** is a performance artist, writer, activist, radical pedagogue, and artistic director of the legendary *La Pocha Nostra* performance troupe. Born in Mexico City, he moved to the US in 1978, and since 1995, his three homes have been San Francisco, Mexico City and the “road”. His performance oeuvre, 21 books and numerous lectures have contributed to the debates on cultural, generational, gender diversity, border culture and North-South relations. For over 30 years, he has been staging seminal performance art pieces, forming and inspiring artists worldwide. His award-winning solo performances mix experimental aesthetics, activist politics, Spanglish humour and audience participation to create a “total experience” for spectators, readers and listeners.

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