

Analysis of Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez Peña's 'The Couple in the Cage: A Guatinaui Odyssey'

Rachelle Sanicharan

University of Toronto

FAS Canadian Studies Specialist

ABSTRACT

The performance *The Couple in the Cage: A Guatinaui Odyssey* by Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez Peña presents a piece mainly featuring two people where presented as a couple, from a fictional island called Guatinaui. The piece performed throughout the world from 1992 to 1994 and in a film in 1993, is narrated from the perspectives of colonial experts who guide the audience through the supposed features of the island, its peoples and the roles the couple played in society. The performance was a response to the quincentennial of Columbus' arrival in the Americas and sought to highlight parts of this history that are often ignored. In this way, one of the main objectives of the performance was to demonstrate the general idea of the Other, and how people from developed countries viewed indigenous communities.



Keywords: Caribbean, Guatinaui Odyssey, Performance Art.

BIO

Rachelle is a fourth-year student as a Canadian Studies Specialist at the University of Toronto. She is an Indo-Guyanese Canadian woman who has a particular interest in researching, recording, and preserving her Indo-Caribbean culture.

© 2021 Rachelle Sanicharan

Caribbean Studies Students' Union, Canada - <https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/cquilt/>



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.
To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>

The performance *The Couple in the Cage: A Guatinaui Odyssey* by Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez Peña presents a piece mainly featuring two people where presented as a couple, from a fictional island called Guatinaui. The piece performed throughout the world from 1992 to 1994 and in a film in 1993, is narrated from the perspectives of colonial experts who guide the audience through the supposed features of the island, its peoples and the roles the couple played in society.¹ Throughout these performances—including some at reputable museums and similar [academic] venues globally—the audience did not know that the couple in the cage that were being showcased, were conducting a performance piece. The performance was a response to the quincentennial of Columbus' arrival in the Americas and sought to highlight parts of this history that are often ignored. In this way, one of the main objectives of the performance was to demonstrate the general idea of the Other, and how people from developed countries viewed indigenous communities. This includes considerations for the gaps in Eurocentric conceptualization of authenticity, identity, and multiculturalism in a world that still views the 'Other' as people who need to be subjugated—often caged, controlled, and treated like animals.

The performance allows for one to gain a deeper understanding of authenticity and how it is presented and perceived in the world. Something that was apparent throughout the film was the reaction of observers of the performances around the world really believed the story that was being told, and appeared to enjoy visualizing the entrapment of these two people from an undiscovered island. The performance demonstrated art as “a form of studying the West's construction of itself through its construction of the Other.”² This was clear as the film demonstrated varying positionalities highlighting those who had a problem with two human beings being kept in cages and being treated like animals, and people of colour who related the exhibit to what their ancestors went through.

Whilst there were those who shared their disgust for such an exhibit, there were others who took photos with the two disguised performers, even going as far as to pay for the woman to dance for them or for the man to tell a story in what was presented as the language of Guatinaui. In response, the performers did things like listing cities and places while mixing in Spanish and made up words. These actions demonstrate how the label of Other was used to justify the treatment the two performers received. In addition, the cage had things such as a tv and a radio. With these tools, the performers made a mockery of the whole ideology of the piece by

¹ Coco Fusco and GUILLERMO GÓMEZ-PEÑA: *The Couple in THE Cage: Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West.* Classroom - Art & Education, December 1, 2018. <https://www.artandeducation.net/classroom/video/244623/coco-fusco-and-guillermo-gmez-pea-the-couple-in-the-cage-two-undiscovered-amerindians-visit-the-west>.

² Behar, Ruth, and Bruce Mannheim. “The Couple in the Cage: A Guatinaui Odyssey.” *Visual Anthropology Review* 11, no. 1 (1995): 118–27. <https://doi.org/10.1525/var.1995.11.1.118>.

dancing to Rap music and watching TV. The idea of authenticity was pushed aside because of how they were being presented by ‘experts.’³

Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez Peña used parody as a key feature of the performance, ‘othering’ themselves for the audience, but the viewer of the film too sees the ‘colonial gaze’ and responses of the audience which too becomes a part of the art in the film.⁴ This really allowed for a full picture of what was happening during the performance, and the mindset that people had when visiting the exhibit. Some people did question the legitimacy of the exhibit, but most people believed its content because historically, people being presented in cages is something that Western countries have done many times before. Sadly, many did not protest that two people were in cages, and instead actively participated, feeding them like they were animals and photographed them as if they were objects—paying to do so. This demonstrated the skewed perspective the western world has of people labelled as the Other which leads to them being treated as less than a person.

The idea behind creating such a performance that is shown globally, is to demonstrate the skewed perception that people have and to highlight the historical and contemporary labelling of people as the ‘Other’ or subaltern. It is still very present in society today beyond the exhibit and its

performance with people of colour often being asked where they are from, simply because of the colour of their skin, or being labelled as exotic because of their race. Similarly, this othering also occurs with cultural displays that are seen as antithesis to western dogma. In the film’s demonstration of people being hesitant when approaching the cage, it also reminds the viewer that the othering that occurs in broader society is often based on fear. Unfortunately, today, we still see how the “West” still fears the ‘Other’ and how they still seek to control and ‘cage’ people, even if it isn’t as apparent as it is shown in this performance.

The performance, *The Couple in the Cage: A Guatınai Odyssey*, addresses notions of authenticity by showcasing how the idea of the Other is presented to people throughout the world and how the story of the fictional characters was enough to convince many people that a new island and ‘type’ of people had been discovered. For many of these people that was enough to justify why these people were in cages, and that in itself demonstrates how othering often strips people of logic, morals, and humanity.

³ Coco Fusco and GUILLERMO GÓMEZ-PEÑA: *The Couple in THE Cage: Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West.* Classroom - Art & Education, December 1, 2018. <https://www.artandeducation.net/classroom/video/244623/coco-fusco-and-guillermo-gmez-pea-the-couple-in-the-cage-two-undiscovered-amerindians-visit-the-west>.

⁴ Stith, Nathan. “The Performative Nature of Filmed Reproductions of Live Performance.” *Theatre Symposium* 19, no. 1 (2011): 81–90. <https://doi.org/10.1353/tsy.2011.0009>.

Works Cited

- Behar, Ruth, and Bruce Mannheim. "The Couple in the Cage: A Guatinaui Odyssey." *Visual Anthropology Review* 11, no. 1 (1995): 118–27. <https://doi.org/10.1525/var.1995.11.1.118>.
- "Coco Fusco and GUILLERMO GÓMEZ-PEÑA: The Couple in THE Cage: Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West." Classroom - Art & Education, December 1, 2018. <https://www.artandeducation.net/classroom/video/244623/coco-fusco-and-guillermo-gomez-pea-the-couple-in-the-cage-two-undiscovered-amerindians-visit-the-west>.
- "The Couple in the Cage." IMDb. IMDb.com, October 10, 1993. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0301136/>.
- L'Clerc, Lee. "'The Couple in the Cage: A Guatinaui Odyssey/ recording_1.' ." Lecture, n.d.
- Stith, Nathan. "The Performative Nature of Filmed Reproductions of Live Performance." *Theatre Symposium* 19, no. 1 (2011): 81–90. <https://doi.org/10.1353/tsy.2011.0009>.
- Taylor, Diana. "A Savage Performance: Guillermo Gómez-Peña and COCO Fusco's ' Couple in the Cage.'" *TDR/The Drama Review* 42, no. 2 (1998): 160–80. <https://doi.org/10.1162/dram.1998.42.2.160>.