

Notes From Technotopia: On The Cruelty Of Indifference

*An anti-gentrification philosophical tantrum
by Guillermo Gómez-Peña, 2015*

(In his most recent philosophical tantrum, performance artist and poet Gómez-Peña reflects on the dangers of the ultimate “creative city,” and what it means to become a foreigner in his own neighborhood, waiting for the much touted eviction notice.)



Artist credit: John Cristicello

Dear Ex-local artist, writer, activist, bohemian, street eccentric, and/or protector of difference...

Imagine a city, your city and your former “hip” neighborhood, being handed over by greedy politicians and re/developers to the *crème de la crème* of the tech industry. This includes the 7 most powerful tech companies in the world. I don’t need to list them: their

names have become verbs in *lingua franca*; their sandbox is the city you used to call your own.

Their Faustian iDeal involves radically transforming your city within a few years into an unprecedented “creative city,” a bohemian theme park for the young techies and “hipsters” who constitute their Darwinian work force. It comes with dormitories, food courts with catchy theme bars and entertainment centers. Sounds like science fiction, que no?

Imagine that during the reconstruction process, the rent - your rent - increases by two or three hundred percent overnight. The artists and the working class at large can no longer pay it. You are being forced to leave, at best to a nearby city, at worst back to your original hometown. The more intimate history you have with the old city, the more painful it is to accept this displacement. You have no choice.

While you hang on by a thread waiting for the eviction notice, every day you continue to lose old friends and colleagues you might never see again. They were less lucky than you and got evicted earlier. Heartbroken and exhausted, you spend a large part of your civic time attending anti-gentrification demonstrations and collaborating with other artists and activists in anti-eviction actions and techno-artist projects, but still it only gets worse by the day. The number of dramatic eviction cases increases constantly and both the diminished politicized citizenry and the progressive media begin to experience compassion fatigue.

As your community rapidly shrinks, so does your sense of belonging to a city that no longer seems to like you. You begin to feel like a foreigner and internal exile: freaky Alice in techno-Wonderlandia; the Alien Caterpillar who inhaled. Unless you own your home and studio, as a renter, your hours “here” are numbered and you carry this feeling of imminent orphanhood like a very tight and stylish noose around your neck. After all, you perceive yourself as a dandy.

Imagine that all the classic and familiar places in your hood including funky, decades-old Latino restaurants and immigrant bars

full of memories and ghosts, barber & specialty shops, bohemian sex clubs, experimental art galleries, indie theaters and bookstores –yes, shops where bound books are sold, -- the emotional spaces which have been your main source of inspiration, creativity and community -- are also forced to close because the *pinche* greedy landlord tripled the rent overnight or some millionaire bought the building or the entire block to rent out micro-units to airbnb. And all the new laws and acts protect him. Your imagination becomes a painful exercise in forced tolerance and providential acceptance.

In a few months, these wonderful places that for decades provided the city with a strong cultural identity are destroyed and reopened as (get ready) homogeneous “live/work/play” spaces, “micro-condominium” buildings and tech plazas in the works. Coño! The new city begins to look like a generic global metropolis imagined by Italo Calvino. To make the lives of the transient work force somewhat pleasant, hundreds of similar smart cafes, trendoid restaurants, overpriced “eateries” and “celebrity bars” open up in each neighborhood. Even the last standing old-school dive bars are being “discovered” (a euphemism for taken over) by the transplants via their Yelp or Foursquare mobile app. But you, no matter how long you lived here or how much you have paid in rent – even if it is enough to own your hipster remodeled Victorian upper unit - You are not welcome.

You hit the streets again: What you used to call an average priced dinner is way above your price range now. Your sacred \$4 night cocktail, now served by an aloof “celebrity bartender,” costs \$15 and your daily *jugos* and *licuados*, now called “cold pressed gluten-free organic cleansing juices,” go for \$12 in a “recyclable sustainable” bottle. But don’t worry: Remember that this is just a perverse exercise of radical imagination, or rather, a psychomagic challenge to deliver your daily dose of survival humor.

Imagine that your own building, a legendary (ex) artist building is now just another revolving airb&b miniunit for zombie techies who make well over \$200 grand a year, but behave not unlike obnoxious teenage frat boys. If you are the only one of 3 Mexican tenants left, when you open the front door for a new neighbor, they either perceive

you as the building's janitor or report you to the manager as a "suspicious character." And yes, in Technotopia: your new identity is that of "suspicious character."

The nightmare unfolds: Full of Maseratis, Ferraris, Porsches and Mercedes Benzes, the private parking lot is now protected with barbed wire fences and a digital display keypad encoded by microchips; and so are the "vintage bike" racks and trash containers. Video surveillance cameras are omnipresent. The new management wishes to keep the homeless, the day laborers and the "scary" young "people of color" at a distance...that is, before the cops get them. They are unpleasant memories of the old city of sin and compassion; kids from former distasteful and economically disadvantaged, at-risk neighborhoods.

The newly empowered cops drive around the hood looking for (criminal) "difference." The homeless and the "gang bangers" aren't the only ones being removed from the streets to make them safe for the new dot.com cadre. With them go the poets, the performance artists, the experimental musicians, the frail transvestites, the politicized sex workers, the gallant mariachis, the cool low-riders, the urban primitives, the angry punks, the defiant radical feminists and the very activists who used to protect us all from the greedy landlords and politicians who conceived of this macabre project.

It's the latest American version of ethnic and cultural cleansing. It's invisible to the newcomers, and highly visible to those of us who knew the old city. The press labels it "the post-gentrification era."

"Prehistory is only 7 years old and nostalgia is pure style, a bad selfie of a fictional memory."—Anonymous tweet.

There are suspicious fires happening constantly, in apartment buildings and homes inhabited by mostly Latino and black working class families. And you cannot help but to wonder if landlords and redevelopers are setting these fires? *"Is there a secret garden of violence in the heart of techno-bohemian paradise?"*—Anonymous tweet.

You also begin to wonder, who are these random people and newly evasive neighbors taking over your neighborhood?

Metaphysically speaking, where did they really come from? And how long will they stay? Are they merely browsing in the mythological backyard of Technotopia? Will they return to the suburbs when the Chicano intifada begins?

Day after day, allured by the new digital bonanza, hundreds, thousands of new people arrive, unfamiliar people, without manners or style, social or historical consciousness; mostly middle and upper class white people from the suburbs and small cities from throughout the country, along with some wealthy foreign entrepreneurs and programmers from similarly upwardly mobile techno cultures. Undistinguishable from tourists, so many of them look like they were just dropped here by a UFO straight out of a Minneapolis or a Houston suburb, complete with their yoga mat, mobile gym and tech gear bearing the logo of the company they work for; their designer dogwear and strollers, all glued to their smartphones to the point where they can't even acknowledge your presence as you pass them on the street.

Soon, these normative looking humans will destroy their very object of bohemian desire; the multicultural fetishes which attracted them "here" in the first place. And they will one day wake up to an ocean of unbearable sameness. The good thing is, they don't know it yet, and they probably wouldn't notice anyway. And if a few of them know it, let's face it, they don't give a shit. They're all "comfortable" and exalted. The whole city is catering to their desires. Besides, they've got 25 posts per day on their digital agenda and hundreds of superficial tweets to write.

What these cyber-adventurers have in common is that they are in a hurry, determined to make lots of money...mañana! Their neo-colonial dreams must be attained instantly. It's the latest San Francisco Gold Rush, the 2nd digital bonanza, a true new Wild West. It's definitely the last chapter in savage capitalism, and they wish to be cast in the biggest, hippest reality show ever!

...But dear reader/audience member, don't take it personally, you are

always an exception to the rule. You are somewhat different. –Tweet.

Upon their arrival they are willing to take any job on their way to a better one, displacing the working class, which made the city function for decades. They are even willing to be waiters, gardeners (as long as they are referred to as 'landscape designers'), house cleaners (or rather 'facilities personnel') and even nannies & dog walkers to the rich and famous. The difference between then and now is they charge 3 times as much, and have no sense of labor ethics or a culture of service. After all, it's just a temporary job on their way to Utopia 5.0.

Their dream begins to come true as they ascend in the instant socio-economic pyramid of the new city. They hit the jackpot. They get their official membership card to the bohemian theme park on an app and they begin to share in a post human culture.

"In this imaginary city, we no longer have citizens: we have self-involved 'consumers' with the latest gadgets in hand." --Tweet.

It's a virtual mob, not an informed citizenry, and they are slowly taking over every square inch of space and oxygen. Their navigation and communication devices are installed in their iPhone or iPad. And so are their identities, hollow dreams, "real" experiences; their nuvo-families, and all of their fictional memories.

You have seen these strangers: they seem to belong to micro-communities of 2 to 5 people. When they are not at work, they go to smart cafes...to work more. They rarely make eye contact with anyone. They walk staring at their mobile communication devices in search for an anxious, "spontaneous" human connection by following a GPS map to their next appointment. They also stare at the screen while having dinner with colleagues because they're "checking in", messaging someone on Facebook, or taking a selfie with a famous person they will never see again. They even do this while listening to live music at a club. When driving, they have no etiquette. They get easily irritated by the unbearable traffic they themselves created and behave like the bad drivers they imagine reside in the Third World.

They rarely attend artistic activities. They'd rather go to exciting themed events and parties sponsored by companies. And they go to network, not to make friends, flirt, or find a lover. With the exception of sporadic online speed dating on Tindr or Ok Cupid, their sexual life is "frugal" for the lack of a meaner word... On their wildest nights, nothing ever happens out of the ordinary. Their most exciting days are Pride, Dia de los Muertos and Burning Man, where they get to be extreme tourists.

"But dear reader/audience member, don't take it personally, you are always an exception to the rule." – Tweet

For the poetic record: They are mostly "white," (meaning gender or race illiterate). 70% are male and have absolutely no sense of the history of the streets they are beginning to walk on. In the way they behave, they make you wonder if they know, geographically and culturally speaking, where they are located and if they are even aware of the profound impact of their presence in the lives of the older inhabitants? Last night at a bar one of them felt compelled to confess to me he was angered by a "racist poster" he saw outside: The photo of a handsome mariachi with a gun: *"Gringas si; gringos no."* I felt sorry for his lack of humor.

"In the way these vatos behave you begin to wonder if they exist in the same city you are or in a parallel quantum reality you are making up?"-Tweet

In fact, they are easily annoyed by "difference" and have no problem letting you know or confessing it online. Verbigratia: *"Don't believe the hype: This neighborhood is not a safe place! There's still way too many Mexicans, hookers, lesbians & street freaks. Don't come to live here!"* In the "creative city", racism, sexism, homophobia and classism are passé...

I continue citing my poetic field notes: "These techno-vatos have no sense of philanthropy. Their savings are to be spent in gourmet food, gadgets, clubbing, fancy apartments and very expensive puppies, like French bull dogs, Italian Greyhounds, and Pomeranians

... It's a solipsistic frontier economy. And if you are mildly politicized you cannot help but to wonder, If each one of them prosperous locos would donate 5 % of their income to a social cause, we could improve housing, social services and schools for the poor, and the yearly art budget for the Arts Commission...but in this Darwinian age, that would be considered old-school communism, not venture capitalism...*"Here", the future will come in a few days and the money they make must be spent in the immediate process of getting there. But 'there' is actually nowhere*"—Tweet.

Besides, the mandate of the city fathers, in cahoots with the developers and new entrepreneurs is to create by any means necessary a city for the white rich. Our ex-major Willie Brown, paradoxically a black "progressive democrat" put it succinctly once: "we want to create the Monaco of the U.S., and if you can't afford it, you can leave!" Thanks, Brother Willie!

Well, it already happened...and yes we, the holders and perpetrators of cultural difference, "can't afford it" but here's the thing: We are doing everything possible to stay and remain a nuisance to the new urbanites and the greedy landlords and politicians who invited them.

By now, I am clearly experiencing philosophical vertigo and political despair. The symptoms are devastating questions in my diary:

"Are we the artists and activists left, merely stubborn? Are we delusional and engaged in a losing battle? Are we waiting for the San Andreas Fault to open up or for the Mission shamans to conjure up the collapse of the new economy? But what if all the Mission shamans have already been evicted? Will the city get so unbearably expensive that the leaders of the tech industry themselves will decide to relocate to another place? If only we stick around a little longer... Is it too late to talk about this? Is someone somewhere online reading my words?... Hello?

(...)

3 pages later my questions continue: “Should I attend tomorrow’s anti-gentrification march or is it time to finally pack up and go back to Mexico City? I wonder what is worse, overt organized crime or the gentler forms of organized crime in Technotopia? What is more violent: the menacing gaze of a homeboy or the absolute indifference of a techie? Dangerous difference or dangerous sameness?”

During the revision of the final draft, I become fully aware of my poetic subjectivity. I know that my words are somewhat careless, partially unfair and devastating but I can’t help them. I am not a journalist. I am a performance artist and a poet, and my city has been taken away from me. It really hurts to walk the new streets of my refurbished ex-bohemian city. What can I say? I am deeply affected by the cruelty of indifference of its new population and I get sad when I stare at this unbearable ocean of cultural sameness and boring techno-normativity. I miss the grit, the funk, the unexpected, my dozens of close friends who have left for good. Am I repeating myself? Do I need to add a dictionary?

Dictionary (in progress):

Creative: A euphemism for successful

Here: Nothingness

Hipster: No one really knows. You just think you know. If you think you know, you most definitely are not one.

Local: Someone who used to live “here” when here was a place

Eviction: A euphemism for the eradication of difference

Google bus: A travelling gas-guzzling half-full office with chairs and no cubicles

Networking: A safe alternative to making actual conversation

Radical: An adjective for a franchise

Technotopia: San Francisco sans difference//A-critical techno-utopia

Underground: Another franchise

Vintage: 2nd hand object or a previously worn item of clothing sold for over \$100

White: A bizarre state of mind that makes you attribute race to others with darker skin

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