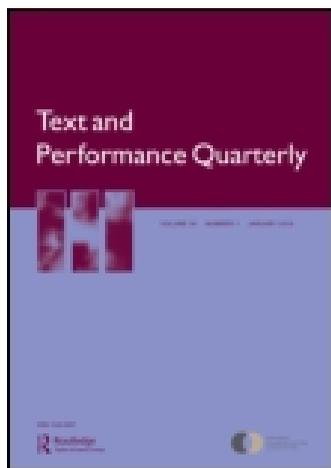


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# “Who’s the Crack Whore at the End?” Performance, Violence, and Sonic Borderlands in the Music of Yva las Vegass

Elías D. Krell

*This essay amplifies sonic borderlands as a sonic lens for the intersections of performance and violence in the music of Yva las Vegass. Foregrounding voice, sonic borderlands is a theoretical and experiential marker for identities and bodies that occupy geographic and discursive borderlands. The research intervenes in a genealogy of the utopic in queer performance, demonstrating that it is precisely in performance that some subjects encounter the most physical and psychical violence. Extending queer and transgender of color critique into the fields of ethnomusicology and performance studies, the discussion conversely brings theoretical frameworks in voice, performance, and music, into Latino/a studies, Black feminisms, disability studies, and queer and transgender of color critique.*

*Keywords: Borderlands; Voice; Violence; Latinidad; Transgender*

This essay amplifies sonic borderlands as a theoretical framework for listening to the intersections of performance, violence, and identity/power.<sup>1</sup> Foregrounding voice, I offer sonic borderlands as a unique mode of approaching music performance within performance studies. Privileging the everyday as a site through which to examine

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vectors of power that Yva las Vegass—a queer, transgender, and Latin@<sup>2</sup> folk/punk musician—encounters, this essay contributes to recent scholarship on borderlands and Latino/a performance by extending Richard D. Pineda’s assertion that “understanding immigration and the immigrant experience through a performance studies lens offers new insight into Latina/o cultural identities” (187) into feminist, transgender, and critical disability frames. Inspired by Gloria Anzaldúa’s assertion that “a borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary ... in a constant state of transition [in which the] prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants” (25), I ground sonic borderlands in the everyday lived realities of my research subject and in specific musical examples. An aural epistemology of borderlands opens into a wider sphere of feminist of color queer theorizing, highlighting the stakes for subjects who are unlocatable along intersecting vectors of race, gender, class, ability, and geographic belonging. Using sonic borderlands to center the body as a locus for the imbrication of identity/power and performance/violence in music performance, this discussion intervenes in performance studies’ genealogy of theorizing the liberatory or utopic in/as performance (see Muñoz; Kun; Koestenbaum; Dolan; Rivera-Servera).

A brief consideration of three authors situates my critique of utopia as a hermeneutic. Josh Kun’s work in imperialism, globalization, race, and class (*Audiotopia*; “Playing the Fence”) is devoid of gender or sexuality as categories of analysis, thus missing key modes through which power operates in the border spaces he analyzes. I am especially indebted to José Esteban Muñoz’s commitment to theorizing performance and/as queer of color survival serves as a model for my research. One of the few considerations of transgender subjects in Muñoz’s work appears in his discussion of the film *The Transformation* as an example of failed disidentification. An HIV+ New York City street-based trans feminine person reluctantly accepts the invitation of a Texan Christian rights group, who arrange a heterosexual marriage for them (*Disidentifications* 162–63). But might not this subject’s conflicted feelings mark a more successful, not failed, disidentification, *because* they made sacrifices in order to live? How might systemic inequities with regard to HIV+ treatment for transgender persons, as well as class status, have undergirded this choice? In other words, who has the privilege to disidentify? And what does it mean when theorists who do not share the everyday lives of trans people, especially HIV+ trans persons, name their tactics as failures?

I analyze Ramón H. Rivera-Servera’s work more extensively because of this essay’s investment in queer latinidad. Supplementing Jill Dolan by closely accounting for “frictions,” his discussion of Reggaetón most closely examines “the tensions and frictions that emerge within social spaces that are structured around difference and inequality” (*Performing Queer Latinidad* 37). Theorizing transnational sonic-somatic encounters of race, ethnicity, and class when Puerto Rican music resounds in a club populated mostly by Mexicans in Phoenix, AZ, he foregrounds “the tensions that arise out of the social encounters within and around [clubs]” (171). But these tensions are never about gender or cissexism. What is more remarkable than the fact that women (in the remainder of this essay when I write “women” I refer both to

transgender and nontransgender women) occupy a small space in almost all the ethnographic sites he outlines for us is that their *absences* are unremarkable. Because Rivera-Servera does not mark the predominance of male and cisgender persons in almost all the spaces he analyzes, it is almost as if sexism and cissexism do not exist. If "performance and its attendant aesthetic communication strategies serve as critical sites and tactics for creating and sustaining queer latinidad" (*Performing Queer Latinidad* 6) but a male and cisgender analytic is at the center, then we might well ask, *whose* "queer latinidad"? Who remains marginalized and underrepresented in these spaces? It is not despite but *via* its hinging on the utopic that any figure, even queer latinidad, can risk eliding people who are the most marginalized in the spaces we analyze.

While I am inspired by theorizing performance through how it makes us *feel*, utopic affects may be productive of and produced through other abject(ed) feelings and subjects. These absences themselves risk being omitted in a theoretical move that uplifts performance: it may be exactly in the moment of "feeling the potential of elsewhere" (Dolan 6) that we take our eyes and ears away from what we can *do* right now, to create more just spaces. Taking the risk of generalizing distinct and complex monographs is necessary in order to raise the critical question of whether the utopic—both as an ontological, observed phenomenon (the performances themselves) and as a hermeneutic (how they are written about)—performs its own forms of discursive violence. It is *because* queer of color performance theorizing is so astute on race, class, nation, and imperialism that the workings of sexism, cissexism, transmisogyny, and disability demand closer attention. Sylvia Rivera tells us that drag queen (her term) Lee Brewster raised most of the money for the first Gay Liberation march in 1970 and changed homophobic drinking laws in New York City so that the inaugural Pride could be celebrated in bars (Rivera 83). More than thirty years later, Rivera tells us: "I have nothing to be proud of except that I've helped liberate gays around the world" (81). Within a history in which "the queens and the real butch dykes were the freaks" (78), what does it mean when we smooth over the episodes of exclusion that exist between trans people of color, especially women, and cis gay men? This is how, at times, performance literature on utopia (and I am harder on the queer men theorists because they have clear investments in gender and sexual liberation) has inadvertently reduplicated sexism and cissexism.

In working against the cleaving of queerness from feminism, I draw from Gayatri Gopinath, Juana María Rodríguez, and others. Framing sexuality in the affective realm, Rodríguez asks, "What implications does [an] economy of perversity have for queer studies, where the alleged sexual and gestural excesses of gay men are deemed to be what is ... queer?" (15) In my experience of gay male academic and social spaces, bodies read as female (which might include trans and nontrans women and nonpassing trans men) are often positively valenced when they perform a particular kind of femininity. When we "fail" to perform the femininity lauded by a gay male politic and aesthetic, something akin to sexism emerges, to the extent that it involves judgments about what female bodies are supposed to be and look like. This is

cissexist because it is rooted in the idea that one knows what gender someone “really” is (going for). Crusty punks like Yva las Vegass, whose sexual and gender preferences do not fall into neat cissexual categories (and cannot be assumed to be “lesbian” or “gay”), are thus marginalized in some of the only public spaces where they might expect to thrive. While performance certainly can and does occasion joy and resistance, sonic borderlands is a mouthpiece for beautiful *and* ugly sounds, for disidentifying with beauty, and for showing that some bodies become ugly by virtue of being in gay male spaces. Disidentification is a mode of resistance by which minoritarian subjects dance within a dominant order but with a difference: queering it toward purposes for which it was not intended. Borderlands allows us to think disidentification in a sonic mode. Shifting the focus from anti/identification, borderlands fleshes out embodied effects of disidentification in the spatiotemporal field of music performance (Muñoz *Disidentifications*). While we must interrogate each of the following binaries, queer *and* feminist performance theorizing demands accounting for the workings of power as it accrues differentially to cis/trans, male/female, and masculine/feminine bodies, gestures, and identifications, not (only) centering female subjects, and much less including (only) a few trans men or women. It is precisely the power relations between and among each of these terms, represented by the slash, that a borderlands analytic is suited to explore.

Sonic borderlands is a listening praxis that allows us to hear in multiple directions at once. In contrast to utopia, a borderland framework insists on the simultaneity of liberatory and oppressive effects in performance. I present three case studies with a focus each on performance, lyrics, and timbre. The first picks up my critique of utopia and explores voice’s capacity to “move” singers and listeners, suggesting it is the borderlands of the body that are at stake in trans and female queer of color performance. Exploring what a sonic borderland analytic does differently, the second case study foregrounds language and lyrics in the song “Mariposa”—as vocalizations of the felt-sensed realities of living within various liminal zones—while the third looks at timbre in the song “Crack Whore” and its negotiation of respectability politics, race, and racism. Throughout, I take advantage of the slippages that sonic borderlands offers ethnomusicology, moving between spoken and musical texts.

Vocal borderlands is a methodology for practicing *intersectional listening*, one attuned to the everyday realities of producing knowledge from the interstices. When thought through performance, sonic borderlands is a heuristic for *doing* intersectionality theory; music announces positionalities in and as performative enactments. When we hear a sung phrase, we hear lyrical content, vocal timbres, linguistic and geographical markers, and more. It makes little sense to “hear” race and gender distinctly when they emerge imbricated in and as bodily sound. Because sound is both replete with and exceeds categories, all identifications are partial and processual. Thus, sonic borderlands highlights how music articulates and traverses geographical and psychological zones wherein affect and sensualities circulate (Rivera-Servera, “Crossing Hispaniola” 165).

I center a subject who is queer and trans, Latin@, in their fifties, transnational, and disabled, but this intervention is not about what is termed either “identity politics” or

(more pejoratively) "oppression olympics." Rather, it is about the terms of cultural intelligibility that structure our lives, and mostly it is about physical and psychical survival (Butler; Muñoz, *Disidentifications* 161). Voice reveals normalized practices of listening, bouncing off the walls onto which it is exhaled and, like sonar, showing the contours of the categories that determine who and what we hear. Queer of color theorizing is always already imbricated in feminist, transgender, and dis/ability political movements and quotidian realities, regardless of who we center as our research subjects. The impulse to deride categories as "identity politics" only underscores the stakes for thinking of ourselves as objective nonspatialized listeners.

Borderlands moves us away from visual logics that tell us we can only see in one direction at a time. Vocal borderlands allows us to "look" in both directions at once; that is, to understand performance as always simultaneously oppressive and liberatory. Our ears offer a different common sense. Sounds enter from any number of directions simultaneously, sometimes masking each other and their sources. Aural epistemologies amplify the cacophony of in/accessibility that permeates queer sociality. Sonic borderlands opens where social landscapes meet and resonate with/in bodies, highlighting what trans/feminism and disability offer performance studies as analytics, not (simply) for the subjects they presume to include.

### **Borderland Methods: Music, Performance Ethnography, and/as Self-theorizing**

Norma Alarcón observes that cultural texts can include representations of marginalized subjects but that they "exist in ... [and] are produced from the interstices" (44). I investigate performance, musical, and interview data to foreground Vegass's quotidian experiences of performance and/as violence and to illuminate the ideological pathways that constitute the US American field in which Vegass sings. That is, air is not empty because one is not yet singing. Vegass's voice announces ideologies of race, gender, and so on that circulate in and outside the body. My claims are informed by ethnographic research conducted between 2011 and 2015. Data include four semi-structured interviews and many more informal conversations with the artist, performances in New York City, rural Tennessee, and Chicago, IL; one documentary film; and a record. While I have never performed with them, my practice as a Do-It-Yourself (DIY) musician informs this research, as do my past and present careers in operatic and popular music, respectively. Coperformative witnessing (see Conquer-good) accounts for ethnographers' responsibilities for what they see and hear. While nothing is predictable in the field, I believe the fact that I am trans and Latin@ made Vegass feel comfortable talking to me. While sonic borderlands may be a productive analytic for a record as a whole, I read two of Vegass's songs closely and consider these alongside interviews and live performances. My methods enact a borderland praxis that pays attention to the spoken and musical modes in which my subject communicates. I imbricate Vegass's music and self-theorizing in order to attend to the ways they navigate violence of various kinds, a negotiation that has much to offer queer and trans of color performance theorizing.

Vegass identifies as trans in the sense of transcending gender. In our first interview, they tell me, “White trans men are so racist. That’s why I don’t call myself transgender” (2011). After reading a draft of this essay, Vegass says:

I have come to the realization that, even though a pronoun is not the most important piece, I prefer the gender neutral “they” or “them.” It gets complicated because I’ve lived and struggled under the woman header. I like to acknowledge my bio/birth assigned gender as well as my present gender identity. (2015)

Vegass identifies not only as *neither* male nor female, but also as *both* neither *and* female.<sup>3</sup> While white transgender discourses make claims to the liberatory power of gender-neutral pronouns, Vegass points to the linguistic and cultural variables that affect how we relate to any English pronoun and the importance of remembering and marking those differences (Shlasko). Bordering on trans, Vegass is a marginal subject within an already liminal zone.<sup>4</sup> Sonic borderlands is not only a theory for complex intersections of power, but it also challenges the structures of language we feel to be normal and correct. “They” as a singular pronoun presents readers with an opportunity to traverse new borderland topographies where Shakespearian quirks meet transgender politics (see Pullum). A performance analytic reveals processes by which language becomes non/normative, with opportunities to challenge these paradigms. I invite readers for whom “they” is unfamiliar to consider whether they become accustomed to it through the discussion.

### Violating Performance, Performing “All that I Am”

In this first case study, I foreground the intersections of violence and live performance in Vegass’s musical career. Vegass sings a genre that crosses US-based folk, British and US American punk, Mexican bolero ballads, and Venezuelan popular songs. They sing in a vocal style I have never heard before—their core voice is strong and powerful, and they have an ethereal falsetto extension that soars above the rest of the voice. When I ask them how they came to sing this way, Vegass says, “I just always sung this way.” As Sara Cohen observes of the production of place through music, performance highlights the ways in which new styles of singing and new genres are also significant “political and contested” processes (288). Music allows artists to sing spaces into being that externalize their experiences, sometimes with violent consequences.

While performance comprises a life-long practice that connects Vegass with artists in Venezuela and the United States, it also occasions some of the greatest dangers to their physical person. One night, I ask Vegass about their four nylon-stringed instrument—a Venezuelan Cuatro, which derives from the Portuguese *Cavaquinho* (which becomes the ukulele in Hawaii)—and we end up speaking about violence:

YL: When I played in Seattle, I played in the street and I had a lot of [Cuatros] broken by people. I would be playing and some dude would come over and grab it and break it... ’Cause they were homophobic or whatever they were, you know? They would take my money. I suffered a lot of abuse that way. I’ve had my head cracked open, I’ve had my instrument broken many, many times. I’ve suffered a lot

of bullshit because I’m not a—I don’t look the way that—people are confused, you know?

EK: In what way?

YL: It’s like if people perceive me as a woman, then I’m not the right-looking woman. If they perceive me as a man then they beat me up, cause they figure that I could fight them back.

EK: Do they think you’re a gay man?

YL: Yeah, a gay man.

EK: So there’s a homophobic component?

YL: Yeah, definitely. I’ve been punched before, people called me faggot. (2011)

In a national racial order that privileges white femininity, a mode of femininity that is defined as subdued and passive, Vegass’s voice becomes a metonym for a body always already marked as an outlier, dissenter, troublemaker. Vegass also characterizes themselves as outspoken and “fearless”; their unapologetic manner refuses to take up the small amount of space Brown women are afforded. Neither is Vegass aspirationally middle class (see Rivera-Servera *Performing Queer Latinidad*). Vegass owns one pair of pants and has two T-shirts: “It’s not really that I’m punk, I just hate doing laundry. Last year I didn’t do laundry for one whole year” (2011). Their presentation marks them as an outsider in Latin@ immigrant communities and in national rhetoric about Latinos. Regardless of whether Vegass understands themselves as outspoken, their body is read into anti-Latino and homo/transphobic discourses. As much as something their body *does*, Vegass’s outspokenness is a reading practice through which they are heard as excessively noisy.

As Vegass describes it, the violence they face is often explicitly homophobic and implicitly transphobic. They are attacked for being a wrong-looking woman or wrong-desiring man. A transgender lens highlights the added threat of and labor demanded by the expectation that they have been socialized to fight back. Read as a man, they are interpellated into the lascivious and violent tendencies assigned Brown masculinities. Trying to ascertain what onlookers may be expecting of them based on their body is a high stakes transgendered labor that exceeds the temporal limits of an attack. It is a quotidian, mundane, and cumulative form of violence (see Hartman). By reminding us that gender and sexual border crossings are linked with violence and death of bodies of color, Anzaldúa and Andrea Smith help think about why transgender bodies of color experience such heightened violence in our contemporary moment: they embody the intersections of gender nonconformity and nonwhiteness that justified centuries of colonial genocide.

The kinds of violence Vegass experiences include not only aggressive attacks, but also neglect, for example, by emergency medical officers. At a show in New York City in 2009, Vegass suffered a stroke while playing. They finished the set, but immediately afterwards asked their bandmate to take them to the emergency room. He disbelieved Vegass was ill. Vegass sat on the ground and their field of vision

rotated ninety degrees so they were seeing sideways. When their roommate found them, she called the paramedics. Arriving on the scene, the paramedics laughed at Vegass, saying “She’s drunk, there’s nothing wrong with her.” After telling Vegass repeatedly to get up, and finding them unable, a paramedic kicked Vegass several times, yelling, “Get up!” Finally convinced, the paramedics took Vegass to a hospital. The hospital did not test Vegass for a stroke but sent them home, where they promptly suffered another stroke. Vegass lives off government-issued disability due to severe carpal tunnel syndrome in both arms and rarely has extra income. It was a full week before they could find someone who could take them to a different hospital. While we often think of performers having a kind of privilege or sheen of celebrity (the act of performance itself constituting them as someone worth listening to), this example demonstrates that performance can augur imminent threats for queer female and trans people of color.

The cumulative effects of these two strokes left Vegass partially disabled on one side of their body and manifests in a visible limp. Vegass’s limp is also the result of hurting their right hip in a BMX bike accident, and from “years of dancing like a motherfucker” (2015). Vegass’s limp not (only) constitutes them as a victim of assault and neglect, but (also) as a willful and joyful subject. Indeed, we must go further and observe that disability is not something we can or should simply situate *in* Vegass’s body. Patty Berne writes, “the disability rights movement understand[s] that the ‘problem’ resides in sociopolitical and economic structures which exclude an array of people and abilities, and the solution is social and institutional change” (205). I outline a border zone between the ableist and racist gaze upon the pain of a disabled Other and highlight the ways systemic and interpersonal violence engender pain. Vegass wears the legacies of anti-immigrant racism, transphobia, sexism, and classism, as well as their resistance, on their body.

Vegass has experienced sexual violence as well. Much literature by Black and Third World feminists has documented that women and gender nonconforming persons of color are afforded differential bodily integrity (the separateness or borderedness of some bodies over others) than white women (Collins; Diedre E. Davis; Rushing; Salaam). With historical roots in the use of rape as a systemic tactic of control, some bodily borders are taken to be more permeable, thus justifying nonconsensual touching of various kinds (Angela Y. Davis; Smith). Vegass’s racialized femininity is further abjected by a trans masculinity that, via transphobic discourses of beauty, makes them an ugly or failed woman. This potentially renders Vegass more susceptible to discourses that subtend sexual violence against women of color.

When Vegass was twenty-three, they were in the passenger seat of a car driving home from a rehearsal with three male Latino bandmates. A policeman signaled for them to pull over, but the driver panicked because he had an outstanding warrant (I was not told nor did I ask what for) and he drove off. After trapping their car in a cul-de-sac, three policemen pulled everyone out at gunpoint. The man who took Vegass out had a syringe and shoved it in their arm. He said he would throw the syringe away if Vegass was nice, and unzipped his pants. He then pointed his gun at Vegass’s head and forced them to perform oral sex. After one of the other policemen

told him to stop, they took all four bandmates to the station. At the station, the officer who had assaulted Vegass ordered a female officer to give them a cavity search with a pencil in full view of everyone, saying it was Vegass’s payment for being able to leave with their “guitar.” While the other bandmates were able to go to court to appeal their arrests, the police erased all documentation of Vegass’s arrest so that they could not press charges.

When we meet in 2011, I had been conducting a touring ethnography for over six months. My travel-induced exhaustion prompted the following question:

EK: Do you ever just get physically tired of touring?

YL: Dude, I’ve had two strokes and a a—I was gonna say two strokes and a microphone. I’ve had two strokes and a heart attack. I do get tired. I don’t like to leave my house anymore. I’m not a traveling hipster. You know all those kids hopping the trains they think they’re so cool. It takes a lot of *privilege* to do that. Being born with privilege, and believing that you deserve all that. I could never do that. People immediately look at me like I’m stealing. It’s [a] very different [experience]. I’m not about to jump in a train. I know that if the police catches us I’m the one that’s gonna get beat up. I’ve had police beat me up, sexually assault me. I *know* what could happen. (2011 original emphases)

It may seem that a life of touring would be copasetic with borderland subjectivity, but Vegass demonstrates that what it means for a queer Brown female to travel—especially to perform traveling “outlaw”—differs from white traveling hipster realities. Further, “knowing” what could happen manifests in internalized safeguarding (policing?) that constrains what queer and trans people of color permit themselves to do, even outside the presence of law enforcement. As Lisa Calvente observes, the idea of “freedom” of the open road in the United States has always been constructed in opposition to bodies of color whose mobility is restricted. Although Vegass’s music and life construct them as a borderland subject, this does not mean that they travel freely, borderlessly. In fact, quite the opposite: when their all-male bandmates are pulled over on tour, Vegass is the one who is sexually assaulted and left with no legal recourse.

Performance reveals how dirtiness and ugliness are differently valenced on white versus Brown bodies, with particular effects for gender nonconforming and/or female subjects. White disheveled buskers might be seen as temporarily rebelling from their parents, going through an “alternative” or even “quaint” hippy phase. When Brown people perform that same aesthetic, they become “undocumented,” “bums,” and so on. Race and sex are thoroughly imbricated in such encounters. As Patricia Hill Collins observes, it is a racialized sexism that produces women of color as imminently violable. Vegass named their DIY label Ass Records because, “I went from ass that was too young, to experienced ass, to old ass, but I’ll always be seen as a piece of ass in this world” (2014). The extra “s” on the end of their last name onomatopoeically performs the catcall that constitutes female bodies, especially those of color, as borderless.

Vegass also experiences racism in self-identified “radical” and “utopic” white queer spaces. In June 2013, I meet Vegass at Idapalooza, a yearly music festival hosted at a

predominantly white commune in rural Tennessee. One afternoon, we sit in a cold creek, surrounded by about forty white people and three other people of color. This ratio is roughly consistent with the demographics of the festival: out of 500 attendees, a generous estimate would number the people of color at forty. Vegass tells me that that morning they ran into a person who attacked them the previous year after a show in New Orleans, LA. “What happened?” I ask. Vegass responds:

We were outside a bar. She didn’t like my take on gentrifiers in NoLa. She started by telling me to go smoke crack, that all I had to do was whistle and they (Black people) would come like dogs. She made fun of my English. [I went] in the bar [and] I lost her. On my way out she was outside waiting for me with two other women. They had fat chains and were swinging them. I’m tough but that scared the shit out of me. She told me I was a fat bitch with body issues and to go back to Honduras. She kept blaming me for the crack problem in NoLa and to get the fuck out of her city (she’s not from NoLa). People were watching and finally someone got me a cab and I left. She’s here [at Ida]. I told the organizers and asked them to tell her to leave or something. And they are not doing anything. Because she’s friends with one of the organizers. And the person who mediated said I couldn’t drink. They’re not telling her anything but they’re telling me I can’t drink. (2013)

Maritza Cardenas’s research demonstrates how Central and South Americans are interpellated into anti-Mexican discourses in the United States. Vegass’s attacker’s invocation to “go back to Honduras” demonstrates both how racism renders national difference irrelevant under a hegemonic monolith of *latinidad* and how, paradoxically, different nations are differently valenced as places where “the third world” takes hold—“Go back to Venezuela!” or, less still, “Go back to Argentina!” do not carry the same pejorative weight.

The inattentiveness of the organizers to Vegass’s request reflects how even “radical” white queer and trans spaces both relegate racial justice to the periphery and enact their own racisms by implying that Vegass’s deviant drinking body is the problem. Ironically, Ida began instituting “anti-oppression” workshops that same year in response to other people of color’s complaints about racism at Ida. The lack of agency the organizers offered Vegass performs the kind of violence that “radical” spaces can augur: while offering “anti-oppression” workshops, Ida organizers privileged a racist person and their relationships with commune residents over a person of color’s well-being and safety.

Throughout the festival, I hear two main threads of conversation amongst white attendees: how magical Ida is, and how they do not “get” why there is a “POC (people of color) only” camp. Their reactions to the approximately fifty-foot area within thousands of feet of land range from indignant to hostile, as four hundred queers experience, perhaps for the first time, their whiteness disallowing them something. Ida is an example of the hegemonic force utopianism can open; its constitution as a performance space bolsters its claims on utopia. As white queers gather in front of tents, instruments in hand, oppression of any kind is deemed unlikely if not impossible, the exact mechanism that allows it to permeate the space.

Vegass theorizes how violence has coincided with their singing, mostly during the years they busked in the street.<sup>5</sup>

When I play, I become somebody else. Not that I become somebody else, I am all that I am. And my expression really bothers people. Some people can’t believe that I sing like this. I’ve experienced a lot of crazy hatred. I would be playing—I always sing with my eyes closed, I don’t know if you’ve noticed—and someone would punch me in the face. It always blows me away that instead of being happy, it bothers them. I just don’t fall into any category. So a lot of the violence I have experienced is because I don’t fit in anywhere and because I am good at what I do. People like it if you’re good and they can brag about you. But if you’re not part of their thing and you’re good, they don’t like it. (2011)

Vegass theorizes that an inability to fit in anywhere in conjunction with their performance prowess is a catalyst for violence. To the extent that music invades listening bodies and moves us from within (Grossberg 152–53; Kheshti), Vegass becomes a person through whom some people will not allow themselves to be moved.

Suzanne G. Cusick tells us that all voices, but especially singing voices, perform the internal–external borders of the body by passing through the throat. When Vegass closes their eyes, channeling the reverie that leaves their body through their voice, their body is literally and figurally open(ed) to auditors. While Cusick privileges the throat, I extend the throat-border to the body’s epidermal surfaces. Vegass’s entire body, even their Cuatro, which Donna Haraway would insist is an extension of their body, becomes open to violence when they sing. Although Vegass’s scrappy presentation has remained constant in the time I have known them, their voice proffers a wide range of sounds, from rough growls to ethereal falsettos. There is something about voice’s border-crossing capacity to transcend the body that not only allows Vegass to perform their own bodily borders, but also inspires others to transgress upon Vegass’s person. Vegass’s voice is a performative object that *does* something in the world: it moves them and their audience. The transcendent quality of their falsetto should be theorized with their nonbinary gender and racialized body: Liminality meets violence when and where gender nonconforming, female, Brown latinidad is vocalized.

A concept of vocal borderlands highlights the risks for queer and trans of color bodies in performance to become “all” that they are. The double meaning of “all” is instructive here. It can denote either a delimiting function, as in, *all* they are is queer, Brown, disabled, or it can be the ultimate manifestation of their being. This duality is constitutive of performance for many Brown female persons. A borderland analytic evinces that performance spaces can never be presumed to be free from the threat of bodily harm, even or especially in moments of beautiful transcendence. When Vegass sings their latinidad, their voice announces the borderlands between expanding possibilities for queer Brown female performance while subjecting them to all that being queer, and Brown, and female can elicit. I now turn to examining the lyrics and language in the song “Mariposa” via/as sonic borderlands.

### “Mariposa”: Mapping a Geography of Sonic Borderlands

“Mariposa” maps out a geography of sonic borderlands. The song is preceded by a spoken introduction of the singer by the singer:

Yva las Vegass,

A Venezuelan-born Seattle-native,

A motherfucker—<sup>6</sup>

The prosody is marked by stops and starts, and seems to end mid-thought. After this introduction in English, Vegass transitions to singing in Spanish, announced by the Cuatro strumming. In contrast to the halting and slightly stuttered speech, the rhythm of the Cuatro is fluid, taking up space as silence and sound. The vocal timbres of the sung voice continue this fluidity. I contend that the timbral distinction between the spoken and sung openings is significant in part because English is Vegass's second language. During my training as a professional singer of various genres, my most effective voice coach told me that the voice is most relaxed when singing in the language(s) learned first in life. For each subsequent language learned, the voice tightens slightly, the larynx heightening and closing. I knew this to be true, in an embodied way. I felt most comfortable singing in German (my first language), slightly less so in Spanish (my second), and quite unrelaxed in English (my third). This vocal "theory in the flesh" (Moraga and Anzaldúa) helps one understand affective distinctions in Vegass's spoken and singing voices. The scratchy and smooth qualities of the spoken and sung texts, respectively, delineate disparate histories of linguistic embodiedness and migration. A borderland rubric reveals the labor that geographic (dis)placement can require as embodied and potentially coerced performatives. Introduced in English and sung in Spanish, "Mariposa" articulates linguistic borderlands by demonstrating the code-switching between white American and Latino/a spheres that many Brown Latin@ immigrants perform in the United States.

After the introduction, a brisk and syncopated strumming begins. A Cuatro issues two rapid-fire phrases. This army-of-one opening ends as abruptly as it began and, after a pause, is followed by a slower, more ambulatory one. The architecture of "Mariposa" offers distinct fast and slow territories separated by silence. These recurring zones also contain border zones *within* them. For example, the faster sections contain hemiolas, or rhythmic effects that combine duple and triple meters for a syncopated effect. At 0:12–0:15 and 1:08–1:11, duples puncture an established triple pulse, squeezing four beats into a space where there were three. Causing us to hear the original meter as more expansive, the hemiolas introduce a duple rhythm while maintaining a triplet rhythm as their sonic residue. "Mariposa" thus foregrounds composite zones both within and without the binary (fast and slow) sections that comprise the song.

The fast and slow zones of "Mariposa" are separated by silences that neither singer nor instrument crosses. Lasting between one and two seconds, the silences highlight the richness of the textures that precede them, build anticipation for what will follow, and constitute a structural element of the song. I suggest these silences emblemize a paradoxical aspect of inclusion/exclusion for borderland subjects. While the gaps offer nothing by way of sound, they do not exist outside the aural imaginary of the

song. In fact, by framing the fast and slow sections, the silences perform a kind of structural scaffolding for the song. Eluding capture by the ear, the silences constitute border zones in which the singer is both unlocatable and trapped.

In the first slow section of the song, Vegass hurls plaintive phrases across sparse instrumental accompaniment:

Me dejaste en la orilla

Sin canoa sin remo

Para ahogar me

En mi desolaciòn.

You left me on the shore/edge (*orilla* also connotes the pejorative “sidelines”)

Without canoe or oar

To drown

In my loneliness/despair.

Unlike its stilted homonym, *desolaciòn* is an everyday word. It is seldom used, however, because of its meaning of profound loneliness, despair, and the feeling of drowning in one’s pain. The protagonist is paradoxically both abandoned on land and “drowning” in pain. The singer occupies a border space between floating and drowning, movement and stasis—an affective quicksand that metaphorizes the inability either to occupy or escape the bifurcated zones of the song.

In “Mariposa,” Vegass sings not only of, but also to, a butterfly—a symbolic figure of queerness in Latino/a cultural production (Xavier). After sonicizing the lilting aerial path of the large-winged insect, the vocal line falls, coming to grips with their own winglessness, bringing the singer back down to earth and back to their pain. The butterfly is both a sought-for escape and a source of pain. A borderland figure, butterflies can maneuver across variegated terrains, but they are also paradigmatic figures of transition. Change, Audre Lorde reminds us, is often painful. The relationship between singer and butterfly is complicated: the line “Me matas de amor” conveys both “you love me to death” and the less anodyne “you are killing me with your love.” The last line, “Mariposa, como me abres la herida,” “Butterfly, how you open my wound,” is reminiscent of Anzaldúa’s insistence that borders are places where established zones of power grate upon each other and bleed. Before the wound has time to heal, it hemorrhages again.

The song pronounces various border spaces: the bipolar shores of love (the often elusive transition where everything goes from being fine to not fine), geographic migration, and bodily transformation of many kinds. More than depicting what a borderland is, “Mariposa” sounds out what inhabiting a borderland *feels* like. Akin to growing pains, but not lauded like those of white adolescents in sitcoms, a borderland existence is an excessive and perverted phase. One’s existence marks the boundaries of powerful phenomena that flex and sway of their own accord. I turn now from

borderlands in Vegass's music to those Vegass inhabits vis-à-vis mainstream and subcultural music communities.

Born in and still a citizen of Venezuela, Vegass speaks back to US imperialism in their music. The back of their LP reads, "There's not much catering to the English-speaker on this album, the bulk of which is sung in Spanish, just as there's not much excuse for a 21st century American not to speak at least conversational Spanish" (*I Was Born*). This critique positions the entire United States as a borderland space and turns the tables on the linguistic labor that Spanish-speaking Latin@ subjects might reciprocally demand of the United States. The album links immigration and US policy, giving the border subject of "Mariposa" a history and a context for their suffering. Within the United States, Vegass's accent, brown skin, and critiques of whiteness and US imperialism mark them as an outsider. But in Venezuela, their many years of US residency do the same. Like many on the left, they initially supported and grew increasingly suspicious of Hugo Chávez over time. When I ask them if they are invited to play in Venezuela, Vegass offers:

There are people that want me but really don't like me because I'm not a Chávez person anymore. They're fanatics about it. They don't want to invite me because they think I'm an imperialist, because I live in the "evil empire." (2012)

Vegass occupies borderland subjectivities not only between, but also within each nation.

Born in 1963, Vegass moved with their family from a coastal town in Venezuela to Caracas and from a working-class to middle-class milieu. Their father worked his way up to middle management in a construction company. At fourteen, Vegass's parents sent them to a boarding school in Tennessee because they had been "acting out" (doing drugs, dating girls, etc.). Vegass's teenage behavior exceeded the bounds of acceptability, and this, as well as their class privilege, bought them a ticket across national borders. But Vegass insists that the boarding school was a scam, providing poor education and extorting absentee families. After one or two months, the school expelled Vegass (it was mutual, Vegass offers). The school emptied Vegass's bank account and bought them a plane ticket to Los Angeles, where Vegass moved in with their brother.

When they finished high school in 1982, Vegass moved to Seattle, WA, living there until 2006. "From the day I got to Seattle, I played music in the streets. On the first day after an hour my friend and I had enough to buy a whopper. I'll never forget that feeling" (2012). Vegass busked for years, and joined forces with Krist Novoccek, bassist and co-founder of Nirvana, after performing at his birthday party (Kurt Cobain had recently passed). Novoccek and Vegass formed Sweet 75 and toured the United States and Europe for five years. During this success, Vegass maintained a marginal position in the mainstream music industry. Vegass tells me about one manager of Sweet 75:

I had this guy who hated women singers. He didn't like women singing. And he was our A&R [Artists and Repertoire, responsible for artistic development] guy. I remember touring with him, he's like, "I just don't get it. I don't get Sweet 75."

Because I was a lead singer. Like, wow, dude. That’s ’cause you wanted to be a musician and you’re not and now you’re in this office getting fat and hating life. (2011)

A documentary made about Vegass reperforms their marginalization by not allowing Vegass to speak for themselves at any point in the movie, which is otherwise replete with white cis hetero male voices (*Life and Times*). In 2006, Sweet 75 disbanded due to managerial blunders regarding publicity. Vegass left Seattle and moved to New York City with \$400. They played four to six shows a week, most often on the street, as their primary form of income.

For five years of their thirty-five-year career, Vegass made a living off their music, playing in a band that got its start as an offshoot of Nirvana. Since then, Vegass’s biggest successes were being invited by *Alt Latino* (a segment of National Public Radio dedicated to alternative Latino/a musics) to perform on the station’s “Tiny Desk Concerts,” and their album being chosen by “Latino USA” as one of the top twenty-five albums of the year. While these might seem like accomplishments that challenge their status as a marginal artist, I contend that the fact that Vegass has *not* been picked up by a major label, despite all this success, is indicative of the industry’s (dis)interest in female of color artists. Vegass is invited on shows that are racialized as Latino/a, but not on mainstream (white) programs.

Vegass has also maintained an insider/outsider status within punk and folk circles:

In the ’80’s I was kinda punk, but I was never accepted either in those circles. I wasn’t white. They always had a token person, but I was never one of them. I didn’t have big tits, I was just so amorphous looking, that it wasn’t visually what they wanted to have around. That you can absorb all those cultures without being part of it is a miracle. I can feel like I belong anywhere without actually having to get a backstage pass to anything. Still, to me life is like one after another walk through exclusivity. It’s like every time I have a good time it’s because I’m in an exclusive circle of people and they’re *letting* me be part of it. (2012 original emphasis)

Vegass’s status as included *and* excluded echoes Anzaldúa’s observation that borderland subjects carry their homes around on their backs like turtles; it is not a comfortable existence, but a tactic of survival (43). Further, Vegass’s awareness that they can be ousted at any moment is inseparable from others whose right to belong is *not* questioned.

Vegass’s performance schedule has thinned over the years. Whereas they used to play on the street, Vegass now picks local venues because of their health. “I don’t leave my house anymore,” they offer (2011). One of the only “away” shows they have played in the last five years was the Third Annual Black and Brown Punk show in Chicago, where I first met them. Vegass stood at the top of a semicircle of about eighty queers, mostly people of color. Vegass had arranged three toy figurines around them, flanking the semicircle left vacant by expectant listeners. The dolls are GI Joe lookalikes, whose army paraphernalia contrasts with Vegass’s Miley Cyrus T-shirt. The contrast between their punk aesthetic and the white-and-pink T-shirt makes me laugh. Vegass stages connections between US militarism and cultural imperialism

through their GI Joe dolls and teen idol swag. After a couple of songs, Vegass says, “Hi, I’m Yva. I’m in my ‘twenty-five and under’ drag today.” In this Black and Brown queer punk space—one of the few spaces we might imagine them to feel at home—Vegass outs themselves as an outsider by virtue of their age. This demonstrates that despite race, gender, and sexual commonalities, Vegass’s status as an over-fifty-year-old keeps them peripheral to the crowd of twenty- to thirty-year-olds. I turn now to a final song study, foregrounding vocal timbre and its ability to navigate high stakes racialized terrains.

### **Timbre: Or, What Happens When You “Fly High, Girl!”**

“Crack Whore” demonstrates that timbre can simultaneously describe, embody, and critique race, respectability politics, and racist encounters. Vegass’s voice enters over a sparsely plucked opening:

I bought some crack  
 For a couple of white friends  
 And guess what?  
 Who’s the crack whore at the end?  
 Ooo

The song tells a true story of a time Vegass’s white friends asked them to buy drugs for them because, as it is initially couched, they are “afraid of the people who sell it.” Sharon Patricia Holland writes, “we often only have eyes for the spectacularity of racist practices, not its everyday machinations” (27). Highlighting the intersections of anti-Black racism, white guilt, and Latin@ immigrant respectability politics, “Crack Whore” explicates racism in/as quotidian encounters, or what Holland calls the “erotics of racism.” The events described in “Crack Whore” are neither spectacular nor unmarked by intimacy. Asking a friend to buy drugs requires asking for help, and potentially “outs” you as a user. In this encounter, we find an example of how “racism orders some of the most intimate practices of everyday life” (Holland 20). In the line “Who’s the crack whore at the end?” the voice becomes quieter, self-reflective, implying that the question is rhetorical.

I inadvertently re-perform this discursive violence in my first conversation with Vegass in 2011. While we sit in a large family-style restaurant in Queens, NY, I ask Vegass if the song is literal. “No,” they say wryly, shooting me a look across our carnitas and beer. After a pause, “It’s not about me becoming a crack whore.” I realize in that moment that the rhetorics through which I read their body as vulnerable to drugs and sex work are exactly the ones the song critiques. In fact, I encounter my own respectability politics while walking with Vegass through New York City. Especially the first few times we meet, I am aware of the possibility of being attacked or harassed more than usual. Unused to spending time with anyone, especially a queer of color, who rejects middle-class respectability, Vegass’s rough

appearance makes me feel vulnerable (see Johnson, *Sweet Tea* 15–16). Still coming into awareness as both a trans person of color and someone with a great deal of white skin privilege, I was not used to thinking of how class privilege in particular structured the ways my female, nonpassing, trans body was read. I pass as middle class, as a nonimmigrant (though I am one), and sometimes as white, whereas Vegass chooses not to pass as middle class and cannot pass as nonimmigrant or white. Vegass's artistry and life pushed me to the borders of my awareness of race (privilege) and class (privilege), borders that manifested in and on my body as uncomfortability (I also feared being interpolated into their sphere because I am decidedly untough).

The first significant timbral shift in "Crack Whore" comments on just such respectability trajectories, which are always imbricated with reading Brown bodies as criminal. The descriptive lyrics transform to a beautiful falsetto on an "Ooo" vowel. The "Ooo" answers, albeit queerly, the "buy me some crack" imperative. This response mirrors the bizarre mechanism by which, even in a context in which one is *asked* to buy crack, one becomes (known as) the crack whore. This white-on-Brown interaction is saturated in anti-immigrant discourses that cast Latin@ bodies as drug mules, a construction that depends upon Vegass's race privilege vis-à-vis Blackness. Non-Blackness is the condition of possibility for being entrusted with this errand as the go-between between whiteness and Blackness. The "Ooo" remarks on this encounter with whiteness by performing aural model minority drag in a light, nonthreatening sound for the majoritarian ear. But the "Ooo" might also be heard as an aural eye-roll. It contrasts starkly against what precedes it, literally interrupting the banal quotidian racisms narrated in the exegetical lyrics.

Although Roland Barthes finds the inevitability of attaching adjectives to music over-played (pun intended), this assessment is intriguing for queer and trans of color critique. From the perspective of those whose subjectivity is precisely *not* given, or given in a circumscribed way, music could constitute subjectivities that include and vastly exceed "loud," "rude," "foreign," and any number of sedimented affects around queer Brown latinidad (Ahmed). Like the everyday (re)actions queers of color might have to power, the "Ooo" is both resistant and capitulatory, acquiescent and furious. Vegass performs these intersections via timbre. The contrast between the falsetto and the sung lyrics potentially opens a space for the anti-racist ear to listen *into*. This anti-racist ear is related to but not synonymous with the intersectional listening noted earlier: it is its political imperative. A politicized ear listens for ideas and affects that move against dominant discourses. In offering an un(der)heard narrative, the song has the potential to politicize those who hear it. Vegass's "Ooo" cuts across the grain of deep historical grooves. Derived from the Latin *nuntius*, a messenger is one who announces (see "Nuncio"). Recasting their role from drug mule to a different sort of messenger, the "Ooo" constitutes Vegass as a subject who literally and figurally calls out anti-Black racism.

Vegass deploys timbre as a vehicle for both anti-racist and self-critique about a third of the way through the song:

And sometimes I don't even have a reason to keep on going,  
 Leaving a moment of mourning,  
 My mind exploding  
 And the wind blowing  
 Like the tall skinny palm trees of my childhood so pure.  
 Anhah.

The nasal timbre of the “Anhah” interrupts the sweet affect preceding it, a rupture that registers in the listening body. Before the “Anhah” pokes fun, our bodies are imbued with three mellifluous phrases of a “childhood so pure.” When Vegass mobilizes the trope of childhood purity (see di Leonardo), they lift up Venezuela as an Edenic site (perhaps a transgressive act in itself, in a US American context), feeling back thirty years for the life they had there. Then the “Anhah” *disidentifies*, per Muñoz, with childhood innocence (*Disidentifications*).

Both “Ooo” and “Anhah” create a rupture in meaning (Moten). Quoting Ferdinand de Saussure—“It is impossible that sound, as a material element, should in itself be part of the language. Sound is merely something ancillary, a material the language uses” (13)—Fred Moten demonstrates that Black bodies in the institution of chattel slavery disrupt this signifying chain by becoming objects (literal property) who speak. This framing of Black radical aesthetics is instructive for thinking about how meaning and sound are valenced within academic disciplines. After a presentation of an early version of this essay, David Samuels offered that ethno/musicology tends to fall on the other side of the Saussurian divide, privileging nonlexical sounds (Krell). I am intrigued by the anti-racist work ethno/musicology might be poised to enact because of its privileging of sounds that fall outside the sphere of Enlightenment semiotics and metaphysics. The nonlinguistic elements in “Crack Whore” contain some of the most multivalent and performative (in the sense that they *do* something) meanings in the song. They resist the ideology that we say what we mean and mean what we say. Vegass sings the borderlands between non/sensical signifying, demonstrating that what “counts” as sense is highly mediated (Keeling).

As the song progresses, Vegass critiques anti-Black racism more acerbically via timbre and reenactment:

Come on girl, go downtown, come on buy me some crack.  
 Because you're not terrified of people who sell it!  
 But I am. And you're not. Annha. Buy me some crack.  
*Cuz I'm terrified of Black people.* And you're not.

The shout-screamed (italicized) line sings and mocks white fear, casting a humorous sheen over it. At the same time, its intensity makes it impossible to take lightly. Timbre maneuvers the borders between embodying, critiquing, and parodying anti-

Black racisms, and offers multiple hermeneutic possibilities. Vegass addresses anti-Latino/a racism specifically in the last verse:

And you know, they tell me things like, fly high!

*Fly high, girl!* Reach for the stars.

Go away, to where the others are.

The other wetbacks, who share your scars, your broken heart.

Corazón de sangrado son corazón (Heart bleeding son/sound).

This stanza sings the external (epithets) and internal (Spanish) violence that racism can augur. In the last line, Vegass plays on the double meaning of "son" as both a musical genre and the word for "sound," while the meaning of "bleeding" spills forward and backward into the heart (heart-bleeding sound-heart). The song suggests that resistance can be enacted in the border zones between timbral and rhetorical modes but manifests the physical and psychical trauma of resistance in/as sonic blood.

## Conclusion

I have offered three case studies that outline performance's imbricated utopic and violent effects through sonic borderlands, a rubric that foregrounds trans feminism and disability. I am not (only) saying that performance is potentially and contingently utopic within a distopic world—Muñoz's theory of disidentification says as much (*Disidentifications*). I am arguing that performance *in and of itself* makes some performers vulnerable because of the inherent rapability of Brown female bodies (Smith) in ways that queer performance theory has yet to seriously account for. Thinking Cusick and Anzaldúa together, two writers interested in borders who have not yet been put into conversation, I have foregrounded voice as an episteme for the intersections of performance, violence, and identity/power. Sonic borderlands is a mouthpiece for and takes some of the pressure off of already marginalized groups asserting their needs to a gay male sphere that is gazing off into the utopic horizon and away from them.<sup>7</sup> Voice is the aural extension of a body (politic) into space. It is both nice enough to reveal complex workings of power and robust enough to announce powerful modes of resistance.

My three case studies highlight the materiality of inhabiting borderlands, aspects of Anzaldúa's writing that are often sidelined according to at least one scholar (see Hernández 237).<sup>8</sup> Like "borderlands," "transgender" often gets launched as a selling point in academic discourse rather than as an embodied reality. Alok Vaid-Menon writes, "today ... I recognized how so many of the people who speak our names to seem down and intersectional don't give a fuck about our livelihood and our survival. To them we are just entertainers, flamboyant, 'failed' men." Vaid-Menon's hinging of performance with transgender femininity here is instructive. What does it mean to laud femininity in/as performance when some people, mostly trans women of color,

cannot walk to the grocery store without being attacked *because* they are understood to be “performing” (in its pejorative sense)? Thought together with performance, borderlands points to divergences and convergences in the stakes for trans masculine and feminine people of color’s “presentation of self in everyday life” (Goffman). While Vegass has the privilege of *sometimes* egging on dissenters (other times we have seen that Vegass does nothing to incite violence), trans women are killed for simply walking down the street.

Vegass is attacked in part because their Brown Latin@ trans body threatens multiple intersecting majoritarian zones. When Rivera-Servera writes, “utopian performatives bank on the heightened emotional states that performance makes possible” (*Performing Queer Latinidad* 35), a sonic borderland analytic compels us to think about the violent effects these emotional states augur when those doing the heightening are trans and/or female of color bodies. As an extension of my critique and as a theory of sonic borderlands, I offer two embodied practices gay men might take up. First, pressure bar owners to make spaces accessible and remember that sexy moves are not confined to those with normatively able bodies. Second, start or continue doing the work to stop assuming that people’s sexed bodies, or what we presume of them, have anything to do with their gender or sexuality. With respect to gay male sociality specifically, performance offers an opportunity to challenge the cissexism that determines who has the privilege of being “fabulous,” and who has the privilege of *only* being fabulous because that is the only rubric through which a gay male optic can see you. When Vaid-Menon defines transmisogyny as “the policing of femininity on bodies it is not supposed to belong to” (Vaid-Menon and Balasubramanian), they insist this includes trans women and all people of color. When cissexism in gay spaces marks Vegass’s femininity as failed because it falls outside the politics of fabulousity, this is a form of transmisogyny. Gender nonconforming men and women are hardly seen in gay male spaces because they are hardly “seen” there.

This essay stages an intervention in the hegemony of fabulousity and other markers of performance presumed to fall under the category of “utopic.” Sonic borderlands compels us to hear not only the persons and affects present *within* a performance space, but also those who are absent. As Vegass’s “Mariposa” demonstrates, silence is not empty. It is a structural element of an affective and social body. The absence of comfortability (if not the presence) of (trans)women and some trans men is constitutive of much gay male sociality and theorizing. Jasbir K. Puar cautions that it is precisely when the possibility of causing harm is denounced that the opportunity for genuine violence is occasioned (24). It is when my cis gay male colleagues express a faith in the social or “queer” performance as utopic that I feel the most invisible, undesirable, and hopeless about the future. If I take on the role here of feminist killjoy (Ahmed), it is in part because a utopic analytic conscribes naysayers in that form—this, perhaps more than anything else, should give pause as to utopia as an intellectual performative.

In *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa articulates a *mestiza* consciousness that moves toward a “massive uprooting of dualistic thinking in the individual and collective

consciousness ... a long struggle, but one that could, in our best hopes, bring us to the end of rape, of violence, of war" (102). In this essay, I have tried to move away from a utopic/distopic frame in order to think borderlands as trans feminist of color *son*. Vegass articulates a *mestiza* consciousness in tattered jeans and with a middle finger ready for those who roll their eyes (or worse). Their music bleeds in order to throw the hypocrisy of white privilege in people's faces. Vegass barely makes a living off their music, but if success can be measured by the ability to continue to engage people whose identifications and politics diverge from their own, then Vegass is one of the most successful musicians of our time.

## Notes

- [1] The "identity/power" construction is mine but draws from E. Patrick Johnson's suggestion that identity is a rich object of analysis when thought in conjunction with power (*Appropriating Blackness*).
- [2] The "@" symbol is used within Latina/o gender nonconforming communities in the United States as a gender neutral designator of persons of Latin American descent.
- [3] I mention that Vegass is female-assigned because they identify as female *and* trans and also because I want to be clear that Vegass is not a trans woman. After decades of silence, violence against trans women of color is entering the media sphere, thanks to activists like Laverne Cox, Janet Mock, and others. While fighting violence against trans women of color must remain at the center of trans activism, there is virtually no discussion about the forms of violence that trans masculine persons of color face. I find this remarkable, given recent worldwide protests around the shootings of young Black men (#blacklivesmatter). Many transgender masculine-spectrum persons face violence for passing as gay men of color, as women of color, or, like Vegass, for not passing as either. In fact, the tendency to ascribe whiteness, able-bodiedness, and male-passing privilege to trans masculinity has obviated a rich theoretical and experiential intersection of violence against trans women and men of color (Daisy Hernandez). This essay offers only a starting point for this conversation. I reject the zero-sum game binaohan constructs (*decolonizing; i just want freedom*), wherein attention to the violence that trans "men" (who are never racialized in her writing) face excludes trans women of color. It is just such a convergence that theories of intersectionality prepare and extol us to explore.
- [4] To queer a panel title by Kareem Khubchandani at ATHE 2014.
- [5] It is not insignificant to my argument that Vegass often performed on the street. Public spaces are generally considered more violent than other spaces. However, critiques of this idea have been made, for example by Incite!, who argue that the domestic is the realm of the highest violence against women of color. Further, my ethnographic research reveals that white queer bands who perform on the street in the same cities as Vegass do not experience anything like the violence Vegass describes.
- [6] Lyrics reprinted by permission of artist.
- [7] In fact, borderlands is a heuristic for a spatiotemporal tension that characterizes utopic performance theorizing: Dolan's utopian performative tacks back and forth between the present and the future. Juana María Rodríguez names this paradox when she says that in utopia we see "the *tension* between ... the affective registers of loss and the quest [for something else]" a "*double* gesture of unflinching critique and fearless imagination" (75–76 emphases added). Borderlands allows us to zoom in on this paradox. Rather than *looking* toward the present and/or future, sonic borderlands calls us to hear; it does not presume the

agency of the looker/listener (because we often hear sounds we do not choose to hear), but opens rich affective fields of power. *Borderlands* incites us not to negate the present while casting a “projection forward,” for that negation itself can elide complex workings of power (Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* 125). *Borderlands* may be a less attractive analytic, but then utopia’s draw is also its drawback: readers pick up these texts in part for the effects and affects utopia promises. I have tried to suggest that along with this privilege comes an attendant risk of further obviating power.

[8] Ramón H. Rivera-Servera’s “Crossing Hispaniola” is an important exception to this.

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