

The Land of the Living in the Necro-Zone: Linking Border Stories with Prison Stories in Yadira De La Riva's *One Journey* and Liza Jessie Peterson's *The Peculiar Patriot* on the Cabaret Stage

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Introduction: Linking Border Stories with Prison Stories on the Cabaret Stage

In the following pages, I consider the significance of *Thinking Out Loud*, a night of performance in which Yadira De La Riva's *One Journey: Stitching Stories Across the Mexican "American" Border* and Liza Jessie Peterson's *The Peculiar Patriot* shared a stage, an evening, a space. I argue that the shared stage method of this night of performance synthesized a situated, topographical understanding of the political and economic connections between the militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border (De La Riva) and the cultures and policies of mass incarceration (Peterson) in the United States. I propose that cabaret staging—that is, the practice of the shared-stage “variety” show—is a curatorial, pedagogical and artistic practice uniquely conducive to experiencing connection across difference, and that the shared stage phenomenon expands the moment of reflexivity through the palimpsestic and entangled qualities of the cabaret stage. The shared stage bears the accumulated traces of all the performances in a cabaret, and, rather than remaining discrete, contained hermeneutic units, each performance within a cabaret relates to all the others: each is seen through, over, among, across, within the others. A cabaret, or variety, stage, then, like the one

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shared by De La Riva and Peterson, is a place of a distinctly engaged praxis; it is a space for political performance that multiplies the impact of individual performances by the layering and intermingling of affect and analysis as the performances work on each other and on their spectators. In the case of these performances on this night, the space of the cabaret stage became a site of shared borderland aesthetics, affect, analysis and teaching, superimposing the border between incarcerated and not-incarcerated in Peterson's prison story, through, over, among and across De La Riva's story of the Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, Mexico/El Paso, Texas, U.S. border. Here, I develop a theory of the aesthetics and pedagogies of the shared stage, and suggest that cabaret methods of collaboration, assemblage and distributed knowledge production can be expressions, experiments and practices of coalitional politics. I argue that in the particular case of the stage shared by De La Riva and Peterson, the shared stage method enabled a powerful pedagogical counter-discourse against dominant news and entertainment media in the United States, which typically depict these borderland spaces as necro-zones: as areas marked for criminalization and death. Rather, the accumulative impact of De La Riva's *One Journey* and Peterson's *The Peculiar Patriot* animate these spaces with vitality and allow spectators to shift their received assumptions about the borders between citizen and non-citizen, between incarcerated and not incarcerated that so determine a person's life chances in the United States today.



Fig. 1 *Thinking Out Loud* was a staged reading and discussion curated by Cecilia Rubino, which included excerpts of three plays by Liza Jessie Peterson (*The Peculiar Patriot*), Yadira De La Riva (*One Journey*), and Marc Wolf (*Another American: Asking & Telling*). *Thinking Out Loud* was one compo-

ment of “Days of Art and Ideas,” a weekend course and series of events, curated by Rubino along with Brian Lewis and Rasu Jilani and structured on the teachings of “citizen artist” Sekou Sundiata (Rosenthal 2013, 7). Produced by MAPP International Productions and Eugene Lang College. September 12, 2014.

Performance Interlude: *Thinking Out Loud*



Fig. 2 Yadira De La Riva performing an excerpt of *One Journey: Stitching Stories Across the Mexican “American” Border*. Tishman Auditorium, The New School, New York City. Photo by Stephanie Li. Courtesy of the artist.

On September 12, 2014, the stage at the Tishman Auditorium at The New School in New York City is set with a simple chair center stage. A roll of masking tape has been placed on the seat of the chair. Yadira De La Riva opens the night with her performance of an excerpt from *One Journey: Stitching Stories Across the Mexican “American” Border*. She enters from the wing and dances to center stage to the El Paso/Juárez-based band Fuga’s “Peligroso”:

I’m so happy I’m home! Ah man, I love my fronterizo flavor, but it confuses people.
Let me tell you, everywhere I go in the United States people will ask me.
Where are you from?
And I’ll say
Well...
I’m from a desert land
Vast and flat like the palm of my hand
Brown and rough like my skin when it’s dry
...

I'm from humble "si Dios quiere" wishes
And ey no me pushes
Chihuahua
Give that man, un baso de agua
Coz it's hot
And time is slow
And work is hard
Pero nos aguantamos
Because we're always striving to be better
No matter the circumstances
No matter what side of the border we're on
...
Well, I don't actually say all that but I do say I'm from El Paso, Texas and Ciudad
Juárez, Chihuahua. (De La Riva 2014a; 2014b)¹



Fig. 3 Liza Jessie Peterson performing an excerpt of *The Peculiar Patriot*. Tishman Auditorium, The New School, New York City. Photo by Stephanie Li. Courtesy of the artist.

De La Riva goes on to explain, extending a strip of the masking tape to create a line on the floor down the middle of the stage, with half of the chair on either side:

They'll be like, "What? Where is that?"

¹ Please contact Yadira De La Riva directly for permission to cite the excerpts of *One Journey* published in this article.

And I'll say, oh that's on the western tip of Texas, where the U.S. and Mexico and New Mexico meet.

Then they'll say, "No, where were you born? Are you American?" (De La Riva 2014a; 2014b)

Later in the evening, that same center stage space is set with a music stand and a stool behind it. The music stand is draped in a colorful quilt. Liza Jessie Peterson, as "Betsy LaQuanda Ross," enters, sits on the stool, and begins:

I'm dating this guy named Pablo. Remember when we watched that John Singleton movie, *Baby Boy*, together? OK, well you remember that scene when Vingh Rhames was scrambling eggs naked in the kitchen drinking Kool-Aid. Arms like "baboww." And pretty teeth...got all of 'em too. He aint no snaggle-tooth. And his hair, silky and nappy. [...] And genteeel, oohh girl! Talking 'bout he knows a deer that'll eat right from his hand, and you know them deers be scared. Well, not with him. He told me you ain't lived till you had a fawn ... a fawn, f-a-w-n... it's a baby deer like bambi, nibble apple pieces out the palm of your hand and listen to the quiet of the forest, or watch a cow give birth. He's a animal lovah, he-who-talks-with-squirrels type of brotha—nature boy. He got his ass locked up selling drugs. [...] Talking bout he was a gun totin' urban pharmacist, with a crew of soldiers on the payroll. I said now ain't that a dichotomy—from bullets to bambi. (Peterson 2014a; 2014b)²

As the performance continues, it becomes clear that Peterson is performing both to and through the fourth wall: her audience is her friend, Joann, who is incarcerated, and Betsy has come to visit, to entertain, to update. Facing out past the border created by the music stand and the fourth wall, Peterson positions the audience as her incarcerated friend. The audience is on the inside; Betsy brings word from the outside.

Sharing Stages, Staging Borders: Shared Borders

1,950 mile-long open wound
 dividing a *pueblo*, a culture
 running down the length of my body,
 staking fence rods in my flesh,
 splits me splits me
 me raja me raja

—Gloria Anzuldúa 1987 "*El otro México*"

Nine hundred miles of prisons.

—Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007, 4)

² Please contact Liza Jessie Peterson directly for permission to cite the excerpts of *The Peculiar Patriot* published in this article.

We continue to find that the prison itself is a border.

—Angela Davis and Gina Dent (2001, 1236)

The shared stage space that De La Riva and Peterson occupied that night was vividly shaped by what Chela Sandoval, Arturo J. Aldama and Peter J. García call “de-colonial performatics/antics” (2012, 6), which “work as de-colonizing, interventionary deployments that become stylistically linked and raised to the level of method through practioners’ shared understanding of performance as an effective means of individual and collective liberation” (Sandoval, Aldama and García 2012, 2-3). The cabaret stage itself is uniquely conducive to the political-aesthetic project of de-colonial performatics/antics and we can see how De La Riva and Peterson deploy performance as border analysis and as a way of expressing counter-hegemonic narratives of ‘liberation.’ Furthermore, the shared stage method is uniquely conducive of the transfer of what Sandoval has so compelling described as “differential consciousness.” Sandoval explains that

[d]ifferential consciousness is linked to whatever is not expressible through words. It is accessed through poetic modes of expression: gestures, music, images, sounds, words that plummet or rise through signification to find some void—some no-place—to claim their due. (2000, 140)

Rather than making the connections explicit across performances, a shared-stage method relies on the spectators to draw their own connections and to access these knowledges as they materialize in the overlapping and in between affective and analytical entanglements of the show. Throughout this essay, I engage with De La Riva’s and Peterson’s shared-stage performances to suggest that the cabaret stage *can be* a space/no-place where the ineffable aesthetics of the differential mode, together with its practical comrade, affinity politics,³ are potentially at home. Sandoval’s differential mode of consciousness is a mode that enables tactical connections across difference and alliance formations in response to oppositional readings of dominant relations of power. Cabaret stages, like the stage of *Thinking Out Loud*, facilitate exactly this aesthetic-political analysis across different, but linked, experiences of oppressive power.

³ Coalition politics and affinity politics are modes of political organizing that are structured by a non-universalizing impulse to recognize difference, rather than sameness, as the most ethical mode of acting for social change. The coalitional mode requires participants to account for the intersection of multiple simultaneous experiences and markers of oppression and privilege. See, for example, The Combahee River Collective Statement on coalition politics; Audre Lorde’s “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” on difference; and Donna Haraway’s “A Manifesto for Cyborgs” on affinity politics. Sandoval also takes up affinity politics in her discussion of Haraway and Anzuldúa’s *la conciecia de la mestizo* (2000, 170).

Putting Sandoval's work into conversation with Katherine McKittrick's framing of Sylvia Wynter's theories of the human, and conditions and constructions of (in)habitability, I argue that this shared-stage space operates as "demonic ground" (McKittrick 2006)⁴: a liminal space beyond the current configurations of "the human," from which De La Riva and Peterson articulate the living that happens and the knowledges that are produced in the necro-zones of the Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, Mexico / El Paso, Texas, U.S. border and the U.S. prison system on the border between the incarcerated and the unincarcerated. Here, I discuss the ways that these necro-zones—sustained by necrocultural practices through which misery, exclusion and death are manufactured, administered, normalized and, ultimately, aestheticized—are nonetheless densely populated zones of exuberant *living*, knowing and resistance. From their shared stage, De La Riva's and Peterson's performances animate this living, communicate these knowledges, and demonstrate these tactics of resistance across border zones.

I argue that by staging these performances together, curators Cecilia Rubino, Rasu Jilani, and Brian Lewis ask spectators to expand the moment of perception and reflection, to proliferate and constellate the dialectical relationship between these borderlands—to understand where they converge and how they are importantly different. The shared staging of these performances requires the spectator/audience to hold steady on the border—at the threshold—and, thereby, to attend to the histories of the border knowledges and border living that they produce. Furthermore, while women-of-color feminism, Black feminist thought, Latina and Chicana consciousness and U.S. Third World feminism have, for many generations of thinkers, activists and artists, been linked in famous anthologies and other distributive/collaborative/coalitional genres, the synchronous, live experience of the shared-stage performance is a powerful political-aesthetic tactical space for being together, an epistemological-pedagogical space that insists on the what Maria Lugones has called "complex unity, or, ... solidarity in multiplicity" (The Women of Color Association 1991, 28). Shared-stage cabaret methodology is a praxis of multiple perspectives, and a portable, resilient site/practice of potentiality for experiments in translocal coalitional feminist aesthetics. While variety cabaret has conventionally been understood as a performance form especially oriented toward satire—which might be aimed in any political direction in service of any agenda—this essay extends my ongoing study of grassroots cabaret as a form that expands analysis and serves radical pedagogical functions especially within the socialities that characterize feminist, queer, decolonizing, anti-racist, anti-imperialist political and cultural scenes in

⁴ See also McKittrick 2015a; 2015b; Wynter 1990; Wynter & McKittrick 2015.

the U.S. and well beyond.⁵ Certainly, the shared stage is a method that feminist and other social-change artists and organizers have been using for generations; for exactly this reason, it is a critical and aesthetic genealogy that requires serious critical attention.

The dialectical, assemblage aesthetics of the cabaret that bring De La Riva and Peterson together on this staged space, work to draw attention to the constructedness of borderlands as build environments and ideological platforms upon which national, state and personal political agendas are performed (Ramón Rivera-Sereva and Harvey Young 2011). I attempt to model these dialectical, assemblage aesthetics in the form of this essay, putting in close proximity significant passages of writing by scholars whose work has informed and, indeed, constructed, my analysis. This dialectical writing, while mediated by my assemblage technique, is meant to defer authorial voice to a multiple, rather than solo analysis.

“I’m a product of what was already in place”: Staging The Land of The Living

In the opening scenes of their twenty-minute performances, which I quote at length above, De La Riva and Peterson each establish the border of/in their stories. As De La Riva divides center stage down the middle with a strip of masking tape, she performs her story on both sides of the border and, frequently, on the border itself (See Fig 1). Ultimately, she pulls up the border during a final spoken word poem:

I am a borderlander
 an open wound
 two flags torn and re-sewn, torn and re-sewn
 I am a fear of the unknown
 a third country marginalized
 I’m neither from Mexico nor from the U.S. in their eyes
 but I-dentity is mine to design. (De La Riva 2014a; 2014b)

The performance thematizes the partialness of U.S. citizenship for borderlanders, and stages the border zone as a consequential landscape/a landscape with consequences. De La Riva is assumed to be a non-citizen – “Everywhere I go in the United States people ask me, ‘Where are you from? ... No, where were you born? Are you American?’” – and, finding out she was born in the U.S., people assume that she is “one of those anchor babies” (De La Riva 2014a; 2014b). On

⁵ See also my previous work on cabaret consciousness and cabaret methodologies: Cowan 2016; 2014; 2012a; 2012b; 2011; 2010.

the Juárez side of this masking tape border, she performs her parents' visions for their future looking from Juárez to El Paso:

I love you Luz. Mira look over there. El Paso... we could just swim across and be en los Estados Unidos right now, until la migra sees us "mojados go back!" Pos que crees? I got my papeles! I did! With my mother's citizenship.

...

Mira ven. Our children, if we get married, they could go to school in those buildings over there, imagine. (De La Riva 2014a; 2014b)

And as she continues *One Journey*, De La Riva stages—back and forth across the masking tape—her "bi-national hustle": of living in two worlds, always a "new challenge on the border" (De La Riva 2014a; 2014b).

Later in the evening, the center-stage placement of Peterson's quilt-covered music stand, which marks the space between Betsy and her audience, creates the border of this staging of *The Peculiar Patriot*: the tenuous threshold—that inside/outside space—between incarceration and proximity to incarceration of the prison visiting room (see Fig.2). Peterson-as-Betsy immediately begins entertaining her doubled audience: an internal audience of one, Joann, and the theatre audience of many. Betsy weaves stories about her new boyfriend, Pablo, with a collectively-generated analysis about experiences of being targeted by a police/state culture of racially-profiled mass incarceration. She hails her audience, with "Remember when we watched that John Singleton movie, *Baby Boy*, together?" *Remember* functions as a common ground; listening and watching from the other side (positioned as inside), we try to remember.

Peterson has performed *The Peculiar Patriot* primarily in prison spaces, and so, unlike the performance at The New School that night, the distinction between Joann and her theatre audience is often *not* a distinction between the incarcerated and not-incarcerated. Rather, Peterson performs to an incarcerated audience. The border created by her quilt-covered music stand—in the same place as De La Riva's earlier masking tape border—palimpsestically draws this threshold, the simultaneously single and many, visible and invisible, thin and thick, porous and solid line between the criminal and potentially-criminal. Throughout the performance, Peterson holds the fourth wall: she speaks only to Joann, never acknowledging a break between audiences, until the very end, when an off-stage voice announces "visiting hours are over" (Peterson 2014a; 2014b) and Betsy stands to wave goodbye to Joann, watching her walk away as the theatre audience remains in their seats, heads turning to watch Joann/ourselves disappear. It is perhaps most significant in this moment when the audience on this night—mostly college students and faculty—realizes that until this moment of distinction, when Peterson's/Betsy's gaze shifts to separate the theater audience from the invisible Joann, whose visiting time is up. In this moment the theater audience sees Betsy's heretofore happy face, sink into sadness,

and the performance doubles: the audience sees the impact of incarceration on the unincarcerated and the border—held for the rest of the performance as the fourth wall—is simultaneously removed and reinforced.

The convergence of borders on this New York City stage materialize the linked politics, economies, affects and socialities of the increased levels of militarization and criminalization of the U.S./Mexico border and the streets of the United States. Both De La Riva and Peterson produce their performances as historical/political pedagogical texts, communicating the racialized/racist histories and techniques that demand, manufacture and (re)enforce these border spaces. The cabaret methodology of the shared stage maps these borderlands as imagined spaces with material consequences; the coalitional aesthetics of the shared stage help to articulate what Angela Davis and Gina Dent identify as “the intersections of punishment, gender, and race, within and beyond the borders of the United States” (Davis & Dent 2001, 1236) and “the links between the corporate economy and the punishment industry under globalization” (Davis & Dent 2001, 1235-6). This shared stage is the space of shared analysis.

By way of explaining her U.S. citizenship, De La Riva performs her own birth: as her mother in labor, she smiles and waves with pleasant nonchalance to the US border official as she and her husband cross from Juárez to El Paso (see Fig. 1): “I made it! We made it to El Paso a short distance from Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, a 30 minute drive and I was north of the border, stamped with U.S. citizenship” (De La Riva 2014a; 2014b). The condition of being “American” while being treated like what Lázaro Lima calls an “extra-national” (2007, 169) citizen is one theme of *One Journey*, but its central concern is articulating how De La Riva is “a product of what already was in place” (De La Riva 2014a; 2014b). She contextualizes her contemporary life through a history of La Frontera, from

Manifest Destiny
U.S. greed laced with hate
Called it the Treaty of Guadalupe
And signed it in 1848 (De La Riva 2014a; 2014b)

to the Mexican Revolution, The Great Depression, Mexican Repatriation, World War II, Operation Wetback of the 1950s and

The Border Industrialization Program (BIP) of the 1960s that established many maquiladoras or factories along the border, using the cheap labor of Mexicanos to relieve Mexico’s debt to the U.S. (De La Riva 2014a; 2014b)

Back and forth across the masking tape, De La Riva demonstrates the push-and-pull, economically-driven border policies that shifted exclusions/inclusions/expulsions based on the labor and military needs of U.S., while simultaneously narrating stories of *living* in the border zone.

De La Riva's El Paso/Juárez border stories characterize the landscape not only as a site of labor exploitation, immiseration, forced disappearance and murder, but also as a land of parties, of love, of ecstatic childhood freedom:

My grandma's neighborhood in San Lorenzo was filled with kids, and we ran those streets. Grown ups asked us for the 411 because we knew everybody in that neighborhood by name: parents, kids, cousins, grandparents... And every time a car passed by, we looked in to find out who visited and how long they stayed. (De La Riva 2014a; 2014b)

While navigating her U.S. citizenship, De La Riva performs Juárez not as no-man's land, but as a place for childhood "days of freedom" (De La Riva 2014a; 2014b).

Peterson similarly renders the border where Betsy resides as a site of complex, very much *alive*, detail. As Betsy plies Joann with stories about her fawn-loving new boyfriend Pablo, for whom she has broken her own rule against "PPP—no more post penitentiary pussy" (Peterson 2014a; 2014b), she also provides her audience (Joann, the theater audience) with an analysis of the political and cultural economies of mass incarceration, the U.S. Prison Industrial Complex, and the War on Drugs:

He said they locked him up for committing a crime against poverty. I said crime against poverty? [...]
But he said on the real though, Ma, if the government was really serious about ending the war on drugs they wouldn't keep coming after the petty street foot soldiers, or the low ranking commandos. [. . .] You gotta cut off the head of operations, go for the big dawgs, hit the suppliers and shit. (Peterson 2014a; 2014b)

Combining material that would be well-placed in Michelle Alexander's game-changing *The New Jim Crow*, news from the science pages of the *New York Times*, and her own border stories from inside/outside of the carceral system, Betsy's narrative—performed with the urgency and wit of stoop gossip—cuts like a hot knife through War-on-Drugs rhetoric:

I was reading something the other day in the New York Times, 'cause you know I read the New York Times. Well on Tuesday's they have the science section and they're working on a camera that looks like a bumblebee, a fuckin' bumblebee, Ma! So you think it's a fly or bumblebee flying around and your ass is under surveillance. They got shit like that! So you mean to tell me they don't know who's supplying what to who, who's shipping what in? Think about it mommi, the only reason why drugs is still rocking and flowing is cause Old Glory is in on the cut. The financial benefit from the drug economy is too great to REALLY shut it down. (Peterson 2014a; 2014b)

The shared stage form of the *Thinking Out Loud* programme allows for an extension of what McKittrick identifies as “black women’s geographies [that] demonstrate ... that racial-sexual domination is an ongoing spatial project” (McKittrick 2006, 121). By bringing McKittrick’s analysis to my reading of the stage as a site of border(s) analysis I hope to articulate these borderscapes—and their staging—not as marginal to the U.S. imaginary, but as exclusion/inclusion mechanisms that enforce, and thus are entirely central to, translocally connected in, and unequivocally part of the ongoing project of differential valuations of the human within the U.S. citizenship structure. Thinking about the stage as a layering and entangling of borderland spaces can help us to think topographically about how these spaces—of the prison and the US/Mexico border—are geographies of domination and subordination, but also how staging them together can bring a clearer understanding of how these spaces are connected in the organization of the human and in the distribution of life chances. The shared stage pedagogy offers a coalitional model that recognizes these geographies as simultaneously linked and distinct. We might think about how feminist and anti-racist analyses emerge from multiple centers, multiple histories, disciplines and movements: we attend to these analyses across rhizomatic genealogies.⁶ The shared staging of these borderlands encourages us to think and act according to rhizomatic geographies as well.

Devising what Emma Pérez calls the “decolonial imaginary,” that imaginary space which recognizes all the living, all the knowledges that the colonial imaginary hides—these performances write *in* what a colonial imaginary evacuates from the picture. The shared stage offers a differential, engaged aesthetic space that has the capacity to recognize, in a formal way, the conditional citizenship status of the Latinx “extra-national,” and allows for the sharing-across-

⁶ My framing of a rhizomatic genealogy draws from Michel Foucault’s “effective history,” which “opposes itself to a search for origins” (140). While conventional historical analysis aims to search backwards in time for one true beginning, genealogy is history as “numberless beginnings” (Foucault 145). Instead of searching for a definite line of “uninterrupted continuity” (Foucault 148) as in linearly-constructed historical analysis, genealogical mappings, according to Foucault via Nietzsche’s *The Genealogy of Morals*, make discontinuities visible and insist on their productivity. Furthermore, instead of looking at history as a series of causal links, chained together in a straightforward, uncomplicated, linear trajectory, a genealogical approach understands events to be “entangled” (139). This kind of historical research recognizes and affirms knowledge as a product of perspective, and history itself as the result of a particular set of knowledges and experiences. Deleuze and Guattari use the image of the rhizome to explain the possibilities of a language system without absolute positives and of intellectual histories that run simultaneously in many directions: “a rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles (7). A rhizomatic genealogy is a coalitional, affinity-driven methodology.

difference of the experience of unmaterring through criminalization:

the racializations of Latinos and the presumptive grounds by which they have been constructed almost exclusively as extra-nationals in the public sphere—from the Mexican-American War to the present—have sustained and implicitly sanctioned a “tiered democracy of bodies” where certain national bodies matter more than others. (Lima 2007, 169)

De La Riva and Peterson stage this “tiered democracy of bodies” and insist upon the materring of borderland bodies, through performances of “borderlands consciousness” (Sandoval, Aldama and García 2012, 20): knowledges and methods developed in the border between materring and not, between nationals and extra-nationals, between citizen and alien, free and incarcerated and the lived blurring of these mutually constituting positions.

Certainly within the neoliberal fantasies of colorblind culture and DREAM Act promises, these performances might be understood as *counterpatriotic* (Lima 2007, 171), since they resist the terms upon which a U.S. democracy, sustained by patriotic support of its constitutive exclusions, is based:

A Latino counterpatriotic subject emerges when it is no longer possible to believe, much less rely on, the national constructions of citizenship perpetuated in the public sphere that purportedly protect all nationals. ... The counterpatriotic subject seeks to account for and reenact the scene of the cultural crime, the national *corpus delicti*. (Lima 2007, 171)

The invisibility-through-naturalization of necro-culture is necessary in order to hide “the inherent contradiction, the incommensurability between the democratic imperative of equality and the *lived experience* of a national hierarchy of bodies marked by race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and language” (Lima 2007, 169 emphasis mine).

Peterson and De La Riva structure their performances on the knowledges that come from the lived experience of hierarchical materring: they populate these borders as living spaces. While the lives of the living in these border spaces are targeted for criminalization and neglect, *One Journey* and *The Peculiar Patriot* resist the representational mechanisms of control that impose conceptual limitations on these border spaces.

Miguel Díaz-Barriga and Margaret Dorsey have shown in their studies of photographic representations of the Rio Grande borderlands that “border wall imagery circulating in the popular press ... [t]ypically hails from the nameless ‘illegal,’ desolate border town, brave Border Patrol genre, or a combination of the three” (Dorsey and Díaz-Barriga 2010, 129). Working against the necrocultural aestheticization of death and abandonment in “the photographs published in major U.S. news magazines [that] tend to fetishize the U.S.–Mexico border

as an uninviting locale” (Ibid.), De La Riva and Peterson both defy this symbolic annihilation by adding their own stories of living to the borderlands representational repertoire. Using a method akin to what Sekou Sundiata called “research-to-performance” (Sundiata 2009, 6), they explain the structural/hierarchical genealogies and logics that produce these “uninviting” (Dorsey and Díaz-Barriga 2010, 129) uninhabitable borderlands as part of the U.S. nation-building project. These performances mark an important opportunity for audiences to come to a fuller understanding of how inhabitants of these borderlands imagine their lives in these spaces.

Like the perceived marginality of U.S./Mexico borderland spaces, there is a “common view that prisons sit on the edge—at the margins of social spaces, economic regions, political territories, and fights for rights” (Gilmore 2007, 11). In contrast, these shared-stage performances animate the situation as Ruth Wilson Gilmore sees it:

even while borders highlight the distinction between places, they also connect places into relationships with each other and with noncontiguous places. So too with prisons: the government-organized and -funded dispersal of marginalized people from urban to rural locations suggests both that problems stretch across space in a connected way and that arenas for activism are less segregated than they seem. (Ibid.)

Riffing on bell hooks, I propose here that cabaret-style, shared-stage, curation might be productively thought of as *curating to transgress*:⁷ a curatorial practice informed by critical pedagogical principles. This is a method that strives to dismantle rituals of control and mechanisms of domination, including those modes of domination that limit representations of borderland spaces to geographies evacuated of livable life. In particular, shared-stage curation lends itself to decolonizing performatives/antics and the decolonial imaginary, in which borders are staged as sites of shared struggle.

As I write this, I experience a paranoid fantasy, hear a chorus (read the comments) of (phantom? fictional?) naysayers, arguing against the aesthetic tyranny of pedagogical, message-driven performance. But! I respond! Cabaret curation, devised through a dialectical aesthetic and structured as a bridging epistemology⁸—which maps the intersecting and constellated contradictions of contemporary citizenship, power, and conceptions of beauty—has room for many modes of expression, and indeed values a palimpsestic aesthetic that layers these contradictions. A transformational, radical pedagogical curatorial practice might be the performance equivalent of Sandoval’s “differential consciousness,” which emerges through “a crossing network of consciousness, a trans-

⁷ See hooks’ *Teaching to Transgress: Education as a Practice of Freedom* (1994).

⁸ See Moraga 1983; Anzuldúa 1987; Lao-Montez 2007.

consciousness that occurs in a register permitting the networks themselves ... to be appropriated as ideological weaponry” (Sandoval 2000, 181). These pedagogical performances might also be understood to be practicing critical pedagogy as M. Jacqui Alexander puts it: “Pedagogies [...] as in breaking through, transgressing, disrupting, displacing, inverting inherited concepts and practices, those psychic, analytic, and organizational methodologies [that] make different conversations and solidarities possible”(Alexander 2005, 7; Walsh 2014). Thus, an aesthetic orientation toward transformation, toward “education as a practice of freedom” (hooks 1994), are the criteria that count on these stages.

The shared space of a cabaret staging is a manifestation of what Sandoval, following Gloria Anzaldúa, calls “weaving ‘between and among’ oppositional ideologies as conceived in this new topographical space” (2000, 58). Thinking of the shared stage as palimpsest, as a multiply performative topographical space, helps us to see how it enables a translocal analysis to emerge. The masking tape border of De La Riva’s *One Journey* remains palpable in the space of Peterson’s quilted border: adding a new border story to the same space “can realign all the others, creating different kinds of patterns, and permitting entry at different points” (Sandoval 2000, 181). By staging their borders as shared space, as interwoven, stitched-together, quilted narratives, De La Riva and Peterson embrace and become imbricated within each other’s knowledges.

An Aesthetics of Necro-Citizenship: Staging Differential Consciousness on Demonic Ground

The figure of *homo oeconomicus* “unveils... the *symbolic death* of the denizens of the ‘planet of slums’ just as it uncovers the teleological underpinnings of the story-lie of ostensibly human development.”

—Wynter & McKittrick 2015, 19

There are no people in the image.

—Margaret E. Dorsey and Miquel Díaz-Barriga (2010, 131)

La maquila, la maquila

Running our lives

—Yadira De La Riva 2014a; 2014b

They caking off this shit.

—Liza Jesse Peterson 2012a; 2012b

The border as stage, and staging borders, especially the U.S./Mexico border in El Paso, Texas/Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, and the outside/inside border of the U.S. carceral system, is the stage/staging of what Anzaldúa has famously called *una lucha de fronteras, la conciencia de la mestiza* (1987). Furthermore, the knowl-

edges that are transferred in these performances attend to a “changed quality of consciousness’ impelled by ‘the imperative of a perspective of struggle’” (Wynter 1989, 640). These performances develop a shared consciousness—connecting the social, cultural, and economic analyses presented in each performance—emerging from linked border struggles, and produce aesthetic resistance to the racist/white supremacist cultures, imperializing impulses, settler colonial logics of genocide and neoliberal capitalist economics that these border spaces reproduce. De La Riva and Peterson thematize, but ultimately defy, the genocidal logics (Smith 2010, 53) through which necro-political “vulnerability to premature death” (Gilmore 2007, 247), and “civic death” (Michelle Alexander 2012, 142) operate. Borderland necro-zones are normalized and necessitated by the production of their opposite: *the land of the living*—those physical and conceptual spaces occupied by an anointed citizenry marked for *a livable life*. De La Riva and Peterson confound this exclusionary matrix, by *staging living* in these borderland necro-zones, these apparently uninhabited/uninhabitable spaces, these spaces marked for death. These engaged aesthetics, marked by a decolonial imaginary, are characterized by how they linger, dwell and reflect on the living that happens in the borderland necro-zones, living that happens in spite of being marked for an *unlivable life*. Reminiscent of Victor Shklovsky’s exhortation that the technique of art must be to “increase the difficulty and length of perception” (1965: 12), the technique of the shared stage defamiliarizes and extends each border story by entangling it with the other; no longer discrete formations of power, these staged borders shift each other, and prolong the gaze of the spectator towards the vitality of these borderlands.

De La Riva and Peterson stage the performative function of these necro-borders as a conjoined set of racialized economic priorities.⁹ Performing necro-citizenship as a “theory of the flesh” (Moraga 1983, 23), they populate the uninhabitable zones and bring an analysis of how necro-borders are enacted and sustained by capitalist logics, policies and structures erected to pursue profit over any other indicator of life. De La Riva describes her mother’s job at the Levi’s factory in El Paso:

She said she was a good worker
 Sewing more than the quota a day
 20 bulks, 60 pants in each
 While I went to school and learned how to multiply
 20 times 60 equals 1,200 pants
 going through her hands every day

⁹ In their Introduction to *Geographies of Justice and Social Transformation: Beyond Walls and Cages: Prisons, Borders, and Global Crisis*, Jenna M. Loyd, Matt Mitchelson, and Andrew Burridge make a similar connection (2012).

La maquila, la maquila
 Running our lives
 An assembly line with no stopping time
 Getting up every day
 Until 1998 (De La Riva 2014a; 2014b)

De La Riva plays out the life of *la maquila*, of working in the place of U.S. economic precarity, living with the rhythms and logics of factory subsistence until the factory is closed in search of cheaper, even less regulated labor “overseas” (De La Riva 2014a; 2014b). Wynter’s formulation of *homo oeconomicus* — that figure who arrives with “the emergence of a global free-market-driven and consumer-oriented mimetic desire that is anchored to a single genre-specific Western European bourgeois model of being” (Wynter & McKittrick 2014, 19) — is figured in *One Journey* as the interactions that Luz De La Riva (Yadira De La Riva’s mother) has with the bosses at the Levi’s factory who hire, and then fire her.

Peterson’s economic analysis of carceral politics in the US similarly implicates the criminalization, imprisonment and subsequent de-citizenizing of black bodies as an economic practice camouflaged as security policy:

Prisons jumping off the damn hook like Jiffy providing the main source of economy for these upstate trailer park, windmill, dairy, rural white communities . . . As soon as a prison is built it provides steady year round employment, not to mention the diners and rest stops that’s making more money cause you got more people coming upstate to visit their loved ones. . . . When I first came up here to see you there wasn’t hardly no stores and that was two years ago. Well now they got a lil’ strip mall right up the road.

...

That’s why they come looking for us, stopping and frisking us. We straight cash money crops. [...] Girl they got this shit hooked up, it’s a damn racket ... and a cash cow. They caking off this shit[.] (Peterson 2014a; 2014b)

Wynter’s *homo oeconomicus* is, importantly, not only the boss, the judge, the prison guard, but the figure of free-market relationality that is modeled for, “projected onto, and incorporates, all those who belong to the now globally economically Westernized middle classes; *their working classes; and their criminalized and jobless underclasses*” (Wynter & McKittrick 2014, 19 emphasis added). These are the necro-citizens, who, through the human sciences (economics, citizenship) of differentiation and exclusion, live in, live on, and live through the “*symbolic death* of the denizens of the ‘planet of the slums’” (Ibid.), and who, by living in these uninhabitable zones, are marked as already, or mostly, dead. This necro-marking produces lives of no Political consequence except for the cheap, precarious labor and refracted livability these bodies offer through the naturalized otherness they inhabit in white supremacist schematics of the human. Both De La

Riva and Peterson feature significant economic analyses in their work; rather than avoid the ugliness of global capitalism, they take it as cultural material and stylize their analysis for the stage.

Peterson and De La Riva co-produce an analysis of these border spaces as necessitated and (re)produced through/justified by racialized economic policy. And in the translocal shared stage space of the cabaret, the two borderlands—U.S./Mexico border and the incarcerated/unincarcerated border—overlap through the logics of capitalist, colonial modernity. Maylei Blackwell highlights the urgency of linking border stories to global capitalism. A shared stage method has the capacity to (per)form and sustain “imagined communities of resistance” (Blackwell 2014, 300) while acknowledging the “deep cleavages of inequality” (Ibid.). Thus the shared stage methodology of cabaret, must, for example, draw powerful consequence from a framing of prison spaces as borderlands, while not instrumentalizing this framing to disguise the significant material distinctions of these related carceral politics.

The cabaret format of discrete but connected performances allows for articulations of the complex ways in which these translocal borderlands are both materially and experientially distinct and politically linked. Agustín Lao-Montez and Mirangela Buggs have argued that, “the politics of translocation *link* geographies of power at various scales (local, regional, national, global) with the subject positions (gender/sexual, ethnoracial, class, etc.) that constitute the self” (Lao-Montez & Buggs 2015, 391). Sandoval explains that her methodology of differential knowledge happens as “[e]ach mode of oppositional consciousness, *linked* to the others in dialectical relationship, creates an alchemy back and forth between them” (Sandoval 2000, 145). This linking is a fundamentally important component to the shared stage method of cabaret. So, too, however, is the politics/practice of *delinking*. As I put Peterson and De La Riva into conversation with those writing/thinking/acting towards a “version of humanness imagined outside liberal monohumanism” I am reminded that McKittrick perceives that Wynter’s “overall project can be identified as that of a *counterhumanism*” (Wynter & McKittrick 2015,11). Following McKittrick, Mignolo observes that Wynter is,

not proposing to contribute to and comfortably participate in a system of knowledge that left her out of humanity (as a black/Caribbean woman), but rather *delink* herself from this very system of knowledge in order to engage in epistemic disobedience. (Mignolo 2015, 106 emphasis added)

Thus, while making connections and producing/sharing knowledge across necro-zones, these performances also undo conventional knowledges, common sense about who is and who is not living/human. By enacting “the decolonial option, a practice of rethinking and unraveling dominant worldviews” (Mignolo 2015, 107), Peterson and De La Riva do “not simply protest the contents of im-

perial coloniality; [they] demand ... a delinking of oneself from the knowledge systems we take for granted (and can profit from) and practice[e]... epistemic disobedience" (Ibid.). Like Wynter's counterhumanism that delinks us from exploitative knowledge systems upon which 'the human' is formed and persists, Lima has observed that it is necessary also to delink from the version of patriotism upon which "the American human' is formed and sustained," (Lima 2007, 171) through acts of counterpatriotism.

The counterpatriotic subject-citizen, then, is a subject who *acts*, seeking, like De La Riva and Peterson, "to account for and *reenact* the scene of the cultural crime, the national *corpus delicti*" (Lima 2007, 171). These acts mark the "difference between powerlessness and invisibility/impotence" (Sassen 2011, 2), and stage a living analysis of power from below that is not exactly the same as empowerment. Staging these reenactments, Peterson and De La Riva show how aesthetic presentation can communicate politically-nuanced and theoretically-rigorous analyses in the dialectical space of the shared stage, and while their performances might not directly affect policy change, they are consequential, because they have an impact of their spectators' understanding.¹⁰ By insisting on borderland, carceral *living*—that is, by refusing to *play dead*—De La Riva and Peterson perform a de-colonizing performativity/antics that enact the epistemological disobediences of counterhumanism and counterpatriotism.

The carceral borderlands that De La Riva and Peterson play out are those geographies that are designed to choke the living out of those who inhabit them, even those, like De La Riva, who has U.S. citizenship, and Peterson's alter-ego, Betsy LaQuanda Ross, who is not incarcerated. These performances enact "[t]he realization of the living" (McKittrick 2015, 7), one aspect of "a relational act and practice that identifies the contemporary underclass as colonized-nonwhite-black-poor-incarcerated-jobless peoples who are not simply marked by social categories but are instead identifiably condemned due their dysselected *human* status" (Ibid.). In her study of mass incarceration in the U.S., Michelle Alexander explains that "[m]yriad laws, rules, and regulations operate to discriminate against ex-offenders and effectively prevent their reintegration into the mainstream society and economy" (2012, 142). Like the exclusions forcibly performed at the U.S./Mexico border, "[t]hese restrictions ... send the unequivocal message that 'they' are [not/]no longer part of 'us'" (Ibid.). These performances stage the consequences of these restrictions, and decline dysselection.

By bringing together these borders through the signifier of 'necro-zones' I hope to have shown that Peterson and De La Riva perform the consequences of what Jasbir Puar—re-tooling Foucault's "bio-power" and Mbembe's "necro-

¹⁰ Here I am following Sassen's important point that even when protestors (or, in this case, artists) have not gained power, they might still be "making a history and a politics" (2011, 2) which is, indeed, consequential.

power”—calls “bio-necro collaboration”: a framing that “acknowledges biopower’s direct activity to death, while remaining bound to the optimization of life, and the nonchalance that necropolitics maintains towards [civic, biological and/or] death even as it pursues killing as a primary aim” (Puar 2009: 164). Rather than performing an American-dream version of “optimization of life” in the *land of the living*, Peterson and De La Riva *refuse to play dead in the necro-zone*; in so doing, they opt out of a typical do-or-die fantasy and stage a more transformative aspirational terrain. Furthermore, these performances play out the drama of these theories of power and necro-politics that in typical classroom experiences are merely read and interpreted by faculty and students. The staging of these works in the context of a learning environment emphasizes the potential of performance as lived theory.

In the necro-zone of the uninhabitable borderlands, Peterson and De La Riva perform differential consciousness as differential living, in a cultural topography that is, “palpitating with life” (McKittrick 2006, 133). To speak from that place that Wynter calls ‘demonic ground’ is to speak those “perspectives that reside in the liminal precincts of the current governing configurations of the human as Man in order to abolish this figuration and create other forms of life” (Weheliye 2014, 21). We can imagine, then, the El Paso/Juárez border and the carceral borderlands that occupy so much space in the U.S. as what McKittrick calls “biocentric spaces of unevenness that are life-filled and poetic” (Ibid.). I want to suggest that these shared-stage performances offer revolutionary cultural topographies that can produce a “geographic disruption—one which, in noting the alterability of our present geographic organization, takes seriously the possibility of more humanly workable geographies” (McKittrick 2006, 133). De La Riva’s pulling up of the border at the end of her performance is an enactment of these geographies. Rather than performing the often-repeated tropes of these border spaces as wastelands and/or graveyards, Peterson and De La Riva perform against the grain of the “genre-specific storytelling codes of *symbolic life/death!*” (Wynter & McKittrick 2015, 29). These performances show how “those who occupy the spaces of Otherness are always already encountering space and therefore articulate how genres or modes of humanness are intimately connected to where we/they are ontologically as well as geographically” (McKittrick 2006, 133). Peterson and De La Riva stage McKittrick’s “realization of the living ... which envisions the human as verb, as alterable, as relational, and necessarily dislodges the naturalization of dysselection” (McKittrick 2015, 7-8). Thus the dialectical shared stage, cabaret aesthetics of *Thinking Out Loud* articulates these connections and draws our attention to these borders as historically constituted, shifting and *alterable* spaces, which are not dead, and not forgotten. These are, Peterson and De La Riva, insist, places of living.

Post-Script

There was another play excerpt staged at “Thinking Out Loud,” which I have not brought into this discussion. Marc Wolf’s *Another American: Asking & Telling* was the third performance that night. I wanted to focus my attention on the very potent, generative, and I think *reparative* connections between De La Riva’s and Peterson’s performances that night, so I opted to skip over Wolf’s performance, which (appropriately enough) came between them. *Another American Asking and Telling* is the culmination of Wolf’s research-to-performance in which he interviewed U.S. veterans from WWII to the Don’t Ask Don’t Tell era, turning the interview transcripts into an Obie-winning, multi-character one-man show. *Another American* stages versions of “queer necro-politics” that Jin Haritaworn, Adi Kuntsman and Silvia Posocco theorize in their book of the same title, as “queer vitalities [that] become cannibalistic on the disposing and abandonment of others” (2014, 2), and thus marked a distinct break from De La Riva and Peterson’s borderland stories. Wolf’s performance of gay and lesbian life in the military before and during the U.S.’s DADT, adds new dialectic proliferations to this shared stage methodology that I chose not to take up in this article. However, I want to signal that curators Cecilia Rubino, Rasu Jilani and Brian Lewis offered the audience a chance to think very carefully about the meaning of “critical citizenship” and what kinds of complicities can also be performed under this sign.



Acknowledgements: Many thanks to Yadira De La Riva and Liza Jessie Peterson for their performances that night, and for providing me with scripts of their work. Thanks also to Cecilia Rubino, Rasu Jilani, Brian Lewis and Will Powers for their curation of the “Days of Art and Ideas,” especially the *Thinking Out Loud* performances, and to Jennifer Riegle for helping me access the archival materials. Finally, I am grateful for the support of a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) Standard Research Grant, and two years as Hemispheric Fellow at the Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics in the Americas at New York University, both of which infinitely helped this project along.

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