

## Performance Matters

# "Revolutions in Sound": Keynote Duet

Christine Bacareza Balance and Alexandra T. Vazquez

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### “Revolutions in Sound”: Keynote Duet

Christine Bacareza Balance and Alexandra T. Vazquez

The authors were honoured by the invitation to present a dialogic duet keynote for the *Revolutions in Sound* conference beautifully imagined by Caitlin Marshall, Patricia Herrera, Marci McMahon, and Iván Ramos. Their collective generosity included not only food, travel, and an honorarium but also some much-needed intellectual sustenance: they provided us with several prompts to work with for our remarks. You will find their questions below in bold and our respective answers to follow. It was a moving experience of turn-taking in the live, of singing in round, rather than a masterful display of individualistic pontification. The authors would like to extend our infinite thanks for the organizers' thoughtful questions and for giving us such rich soil to plant future idea seedlings. For many of us, this was our last moment of being with others before the isolation of the pandemic took hold, and it is partly for this reason we have left our remarks mostly unedited. Here they are published very much as they were delivered in the live so as to record that moment of togetherness and to also remind of a polemical mode that is possible when in an actual room with others that you can see, hear, and feel. There is thus a palpable sense of safety-in-experimentation in our remarks.

#### **I. Why sound? What openings did/does sound provide your scholarship? What formations of thought or feeling were lacking in other tools/methods that were only possible through sound?**

Response by Alexandra T. Vazquez

What are we talking about when we evoke the word sound? Sound is often used to announce, over and over again, a disciplinary formation. When you say or hear “sound,” our reflexes have been trained to append “studies.” It seems now you can't say or hear one without the other. This willing or unwilling codification of an emergent discipline tries to rein in things that have been a little unruly for the writing about music. “Sound” as a critical molecule is made to take in and quickly attach to both “studies” and “unruliness,” which is a lot for a little word. Transformed into a frustrating contradiction that tugs between the impulse to tame and the more principled letting be, sound has become the paralyzing variety of scholarly operatives. It has been used to quickly name the stuff they didn't want to hear. For example, to English departments, sound said and says: “books make noise.” To musicology departments, sound said and says: “there is more to the score.” Let me be clear that these bountiful intrusions have been at work for many decades. And yet, “sound,” which had been performe a way to represent all that couldn't be named, has now become a way of naming what isn't given enough time or space to be said. In English, “sound” may have been heard, but not all the way, and somehow removes the bodies and ghosts from what we meant as noise. Similarly, in musicology, “sound” often replaced a focus on “the work” with a strong preoccupation with equipment rather than people. Related to all this, we find in sound an auto-shorthand for a website or c.v. that organizes vast interests into a marketable lure for professional opportunities, to attract

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students to our seminars, to perform public readiness that you bear some nontraditional approach to music, or listening, or more generally, to mark a capaciousness for objects of study.

What is made possible when we don't care to make any discipline feel better about the various silences they are so invested in continually suppressing? Or, for that matter, making sound work as various examples for all the Studies, rather than assuming that sound models, in advance, the pleasures and difficulties of survival and coalition? And so, why not play and thrive in sound involvement with all the implied stuff that refuses a name and doesn't need permission to matter by a Studies Reader. What is made possible when we don't force sound to the frontlines of the disciplinary interventions that junior, adjunct, and contract faculty are under tremendous pressure to make all the time? This "Revolutions in Sound" symposium offers a wondrous and wonderful occasion to work with other senses of sound in ways that keep in ear, all the time, what is really and actually important, which I might posit as people, plants, animals, water. Sound as wonder-word of approximation, as in "sounds like" or "they sound"; as sinew that might strum some thinking on the relationship between a song and to its seemingly incongruous bust-a-move part. And how to feel sound as that which gives a sense of precious significance to those things thought to have none: the weird aside a performer will make, or that feedback pierce that tells the guitarist about themselves.

I still want to think about how all this sound has and continues to take place in song. Song, as sign and thing, may have fallen out of fashion, but it has been unfairly abandoned in the larger drive to differentiate one's individualistic scholarly find from an undifferentiated mass. This drive makes roadkill of the musicians that give and gave us so much. The avant-garde or the experimental has never been good at making room for the popular or the song. "Song" is, of course, an incomplete category. I don't mean an enclosed sense of work but something that takes in all of its social worlds, dance work, and the rest. I mean it along the lines of Kofi Agawu's sense of music as "an escape from ordinary, lived time . . . to stage a departure from an ordinary marked realm into a marked one" (2016, 29). The popular—which is not necessarily the same as the contemporary—leaves so much room for engagement with sound artists (musicians without the gallery). None of them need theorists to argue for them, to argue for their mattering because to so many, they already do. How do they instead invite theorists to take part in something alongside them?

## **II. How has listening to/feeling with/and working with sound influenced your respective radical practices as scholars? What formations of thought or feeling were lacking in other tools/methods that were only possible through sound?**

### **Response by Christine Bacareza Balance**

Music and sound structure memories.

A man's slow exhale as a guitar strums the opening notes of "Superstar" by The Carpenters.

"This is my life as a freshman in college

from Sunday night until Friday evening

I play with freedom and adulthood

Weekends my first quarter of college

are spent back in my childhood room

The drive down the 405 on Sunday evenings with my parents may take an hour

but it feels longer

The minutes on the drive feel like a countdown to my mini-version of independence . . ."

Thurston Moore breathily sings: “long ago, and oh so far away . . .”

The snippet you just heard was written and performed by Elaine Dolalas and was part of “The Songs We Carry,” a 2014 project I worked on in collaboration with the L.A. Music Center and Search to Involve Pilipino Americans (SIPA), a community-based organization in L.A.’s Historic Filipinotown.<sup>1</sup> Sound designer/DJ Gary Gabisan and I identified four Filipinx American storytellers and community leaders. We asked them to choose a song and write a short piece in the style of “Critical Karaoke,” introduced by poet and critic Joshua Clover. “The conceit,” said Clover, “was this: you get to talk about a single song, for the length of the song, while the song is playing behind you.” Their pieces were recorded either in their own homes or at SIPA, a community space that, over the years, has hosted Sessions LA—DJ Phatrick’s (Patrick Huang) make-shift DJ academy—as well as the Balagtas Collective (BC) and Foundation Funkcollective—groups that gave rise to hip hop artists such as Native Guns’ Bambu de Pistola (Jonah Deocampo) and Kiwi Illafonte (Jack DeJesus) and the Black Eyed Peas. Through the alchemy of music and words, the project’s storytellers—Dolalas, Michael Nailat, Faith Santilla, and Joel Quizon—captured memories and feelings otherwise submerged, slightly reverberating under the surface.<sup>2</sup> Their stories mapped Filipinx America across Southern California—from Valley to Valley, San Gabriel to San Fernando; from county to county, Orange to Los Angeles to Ventura; on freeways, in cars, and at LAX (Los Angeles International) airport, the original arrival space for every Filipino immigrant. Their stories had everything to do with mobility across cities and suburbs, oceans, and time zones. Their stories were made available via a phone service where listeners could dial in and hear each person’s song and story.

In my public humanities/community work and my teaching, I centre sound and music as a way of bringing people together, a technique that many of us learned on the grade school playground, at family parties, and around high school lunch tables. “Who’s your favourite band?”—a shorthand and short-cut to intimacy and communion with others. At the beginning of each semester, I tap into these types of questions by starting every first day of class by asking my students to fill out a questionnaire that includes “What music are you listening to these days?” and “What songs have carried you through?” Popular culture is not only a battlefield. It is also a confessional booth. My students’ answers help me to gather a “feel” for where they are at and what sparks their joy. Their answers are a common language through which our relationships, our collaborations as teachers and students, can grow over sixteen weeks (and beyond).

I aim to instil in all my students the ethos of my own teachers. As my *kumare* Alex Vazquez so lovingly documents in her introduction to *Listening in Detail* (2013), I continually remind students that our writing about and of music is a response to the question “What does the music sound like?” How might we approach our musical objects of study—both live performances and recordings—in an “interanimated” manner so that we remain attuned to how sound is amplified and inspired by the literary, visual, and other sensorial modes (Moten 2003)? What do we gain—what is at stake—in bringing these modes together, especially when talking and writing about race, gender, sexuality, class, and ability? How might this synesthetic approach offer us alternative languages for writing about music, a way out of the restrictive and prescriptive modes of cultural norms? How might we not only recognize the limits of a singular mode of analysis but also apprehend and lovingly transmit the complexity of life and sound itself?

We might look to artists who have considered such questions in their work. Filmmakers who add emotional layers to a story through sound and image. The saturation of colour and sound in Barry

Jenkins' *Moonlight*. The eerie-ness indexed by the Luniz' "Five On It" in Jordan Peele's *Us*. The ways Wong Kar-Wai sets and edits a scene so that we never hear "California Dreaming" the same way again. Poets whose words begin and end and begin again as orality. Their poems are documents of sounds from the past and scripts for future soundings. And I reflect upon my own experience as a singer and performer. How much I want to bring you, the reader and listener, onstage and backstage with me. How much I want to let you in on the feeling of sitting with the band before and after a set. I can never abandon my embodied knowledge nor my radical empathy for performers. They are forms of imagining and theorizing those moments and feelings, both on- and off-stage, and, in doing so, wagering what it all means. I want you to learn, as much as I do, from my conversations and dialogues with bandmates, audience members, and friends, as well as from the songs I listen to, the books and articles I read in solace.

I often meditate upon the type of listening that reading enables. Like prayer, reading forces you to stay present with words, especially those that come from a time and place outside of yourself. The rhythm of people's words on the page can startle you, make you catch your breath, and sometimes even soothe you, especially when they are no longer physically present. These past two years, I have been thinking so much about friends who have passed on, about how clearly their voice comes through in their writing. Traces of their conference presentation tone, their cadence when teaching, our after-hours cackles and whispered side conversations. Reading has now become a different type of "being-with" (Sedgwick 2003). My own practice of writing, a continual attempt to ensure my friends and family, in the future, will always feel me nearby.

I teach my students to approach texts and music like this: to listen close so we hear and imagine pasts re-sounding. To listen long so we hear where another is coming from. To listen deeply, never forgetting the effort that goes into the writing and music-making. Listen not just one time but instead through perpetual re-visions and re-turns. What does it mean to stay long and close enough with a piece of reading, with a piece of music? In this era of memes and GIFs, around-the-clock news cycles and swift "cancels," an unending barrage of emails and texts and notifications, it is revolutionary to just linger in the words, the sounds, the music. Like sleep and rest, reading and writing are *not* luxuries but instead our means of survival (Lorde [1977] 2020).

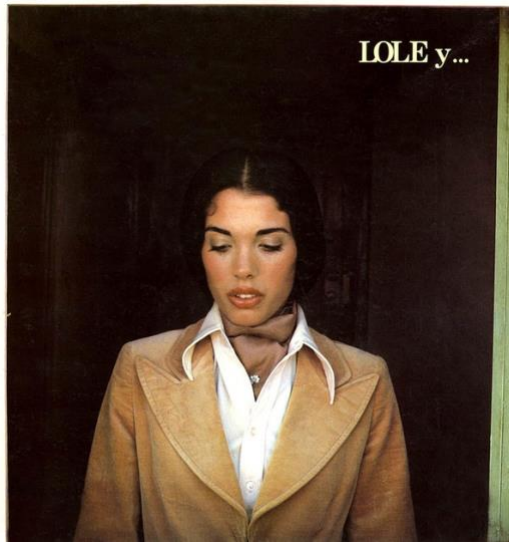
### **III. How might work on sound might change the field of performance studies? What new world views might this research help up imagine?**

#### **Response by Alexandra T. Vazquez**

Here is one rudimentary answer by way of two things, side by side. On the left is a Nasrid tile from fifteenth-century Al-Andalus, fired by an unknown artist when the Iberian Peninsula was in the midst of a dual-expulsion: the removal of its Jewish and Muslim populations, which is the same time, almost exactly, that Isabella sent exploratory boats, captained by thugs, to the new world. A counterpoint is the cover of the album *Nuevo día* by the great duo Lole y Manuel, which I mean to specifically evoke the song "Todo es de color." The song was recorded in 1975 around the official if not the actual end of the Franco dictatorship and the strange dizzying activity that dovetailed with his death.



Nasrid tile, fifteenth century, glazed and painted blue and manganese earthenware with lustre, Museo Arqueológico Nacional, Madrid, 1948–31 (Bordoy 1992, 102).



Lole y Manuel, *Nuevo día*, c. 1975, collection of Alexandra T. Vazquez.

In the tile, there is so much sensible movement turned into aesthetic shapes, lines, repetitions. We feel the strange strata of influence and how it works, where it enters ear and eye, how it trains the hands, alters the brushstroke. We learn of the many inheritance factors here: how to mix color, with what earth elements (given or imported), and how color requires foresight. For the artist has to understand the play and travails of tone before it is fired. The tile teaches us that color is in some ways reliant on past knowledge, but to work with it takes some confidence, or surrender, in taking a chance. The worlds that happen between color as it is set down and color as it is glazed all ask: how will it turn out? The tile, this singular tile of many, is noisy for all its palpable migrancies, evictions, goodbyes, last gasp collaborations, and brings to life an artist that hoped to bring all that and all them in a small space in a short time. In other words: *Todo es de color*.

And in the song, “*Todo es de color*,” we’re given the profound honour of beginning with an in-process announcement, a relentless refrain that we just know has been going on for many years before our hearing of it. It is sung by one voice and one guitar to accompany it but sounds overfull in peopling and placing. *Todo es de color*, everything is of color, everything is color, everything is made of color, everything in color. Lole y Manuel are heralded as pioneers of new deep song, Flamenco’s radical turn. Stylistically, they made words clearer; there is an openness to their dialecto andaluz. The sparseness of their work invited in so much countercultural adornment. But there is something here other than relief. Rather, there is a reminder that shifts are not always experienced outwards but are opportunities to keep sharing secrets, to maintain the vitality of whispering, over the long term, with a chosen another. Here we hear something of what is made possible by the duet, whether named outright or suggested for their audiences. In Lole’s voice, we hear her mother, Antonia La Negra, her Algerian birthplace, and all she brought with her from there to here. We hear the dynastic mode of Flamenco that happens in plain sound of everyone. We hear in Lole y Manuel’s song an aftermath where air might not be needed or sought out, but oxygen quietly and continually shared, given, and taken in turns.

To turn to, or better put, trust the tile as a guide to listen closer to Lole y Manuel, half a millennium after it was fired, is the activity performance studies. And perhaps the most fun thing we get to do in the field is to take up aesthetics as a way to think about other aesthetics. A blood and guts aesthetics that honours the histories that made them possible. The best kind of performance studies is one that takes aesthetics and all those things that happen and are important to them (the people, plants, animals, water), that takes all of that and makes a kind of third eye between objects even when they are five hundred years apart. An object such as this tile helps us to listen to what's happening in this song, which is not a cathartic recording after a dictatorial fall, but a kind of bleary eye-opening after a too-long bad dream that finds echoes in other bleary eye openings from the shared sand of southern Spain. The song is of its place and time, but it is also of the time of Al-Andalus. There is no comparative or equivalency being made here. What performance studies (that place I live and breathe and not necessarily my job) encourages me to do is to not only take in this tile and this song as things of their place and their time but as this place and this time of sound writing. The tile, you will note, is a musical composition, a form of sound notation; and the song is a surrender to color, the in-between of its setting down and firing. It takes up the chances given and taken away from the unknown artist of the tile. Doing away with what officially counts as composition, as musical score, as song might be an impulse given permission by sound or performance studies, but really, I love to think of it as antiquity and its formats demanding more of our present listenings.

**IV. Academic genealogies and official disciplinary histories can be restrictive to creative intellectual thought. At the same time, scholars of color—particularly queer, disabled, and/or women of color scholars—have historically been written out of such disciplinary genealogies. We therefore find it important to acknowledge those scholarly forebears whose thoughts on performance, critical race, and sound preceded and made possible our own work. To that end, what work(s), traditions of thought, and/or mentors made possible the creative imaginings and leaps of faith that led to your own scholarly work? What was already built when you began to dream, and what did you need to build for yourselves?**

#### Response by Christine Bacareza Balance

What does it mean to have learned how to think and write about Filipino/Filipino American performance, about Asian American critique, from scholars of black studies, Cuban/Latinx studies, queer studies? I think about this question often and am indebted to José Esteban Muñoz and Fred Moten, two teachers who helped me find a way into (and then out of) conversations on race, form, the archipelagic, blackness, queerness, and performance. Through José, I also felt the queer genealogy of Eve Sedgwick coursing through our writing and thinking. Her model of the reparative (as opposed to paranoid) stays with me as a means of approaching music, culture, and life itself. A reparative practice revels in reaching for the unknown rather than assuming a politics of “uncovering.” It returns to me to the work of Joshua Chambers-Letson and Robert Diaz, Alexandra Vazquez on “surprise,” and Martin Manalansan on queer living and “queer mess” (Chambers-Letson and Diaz 2006; Vazquez 2009; Manalansan 2014). Of Daphne Brooks, Gayle Wald, Josh Kun, who all pay close attention to the ways in which popular music *matters* (Brooks 2021; Wald 2008; Kun 2005). Of Fred Moten (2003) and Saidiya Hartman (1997), who show us how to read against the grain and remind us that, even within institutions and their constraints, there can be resistance and, yes, even joy. These scholars, and so many more, model for us different ways of writing—where the poetic and philosophical live side by side, where the teacher patiently explains critical theory and the

ways it travels from high to low culture, where we enter the archive together and come out the other side to tell a different story of life and music.

Performance studies offers us a language for describing the edges of our knowing—those feelings, emotions, and moments when the body, memory, and music come together. Not just a visual approach, not just a literary approach, not just a kinesthetic approach, but all those (and more) in concert. Performance studies moves us beyond what ethnomusicology, musicology, and even pop music studies offer. Performance studies allows us a different way of talking about race and gender and bodies through/in performance. It allows us a different way of envisioning time and sound—the event of a performance impressed on a recording; the recording as both object and the re-sounding of a performance; the event of playback; the recording as a condition of possibility for another performance, another sounding. Voices of the past and the great beyond, sound and music as those things we keep trying to reach for the words to describe. Sound and music and performance as the edge of our knowing, as the vehicles of the reparative itself.

But there are other traditions of thought: the ones not sanctioned by academic life and therefore the ones we work to bring into the room. Lea Salonga's audition for Miss Saigon (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sy-A-wyzj7c>) and how it taught me, in the words of Danielle Goldman, that "I want to be ready" (2010). How L-7 and Courtney Love taught me that making noise is a feminist act. How *In Livin' Color's* Fly Girls taught me sisterhood solidarity and crazy sexy confidence in movement. The way that my parents' records of Bisayan love song/medley and post-World War II crooners taught me about music and memories.

Strings swell and layer upon each other  
They crescendo, rolling out a field of feelings  
That land on that tonic of C  
A note of home where Frank Sinatra's voice enters

"When somebody loves you  
It's no good unless he loves you  
All the way  
Happy to be near you  
When you need someone to cheer you  
All the way  
Taller than the tallest tree is  
That's how it's got to be  
Deeper than the blue sea is  
That's how deep it goes, if it's real . . ."

Face pressed up against our record player's speakers, elementary school year-old me would listen while staring at the sunset settling behind our gauzy living room curtains. Heavenly shades of night are falling, it's twilight time. In the crook of Frank Sinatra's voice, another voice would settle. It was the voice of my dad singing along to this song, his otherwise mild-mannered demeanour now taking on a crooner's comportment. This song, its singing, filled my father with the confidence he lacked after immigrating to the US, a Philippine engineering degree in hand, one that did not pass muster in his new "home" country. In these moments of living room performance, my father let go of those injustices and instead transported himself to another place, another time filled with romance and possibility. To this day, I do not know where Sinatra or Nat King Cole or the Platters' voices end



and my dad's voice begins. I cannot hear those songs without also hearing him—strong and strident and unafraid—singing right along. My father passed away on May 15, 2013. But his voice still lingers.

### Response by Alexandra T. Vazquez

It happens on a daily basis, how far, how permeable our thinking and listening genealogies can get. There's nothing quite like the thrill of getting to know a forebear, when you find her, all unpublished and in plain sight of everything and everyone. In February of 2020, I was lucky enough to go to the New York Philharmonic to hear a new work by the brilliant composer Tania León. León had been commissioned to write a new work for the Philharmonic for "Project 19," a special series to commission nineteen new works by nineteen women composers to celebrate the centennial of the Nineteenth Amendment, which gave women the right to vote. León is no marginal figure. She is a prolific composer, conductor, programmer, and professor. Imagine a career that began in Havana's most prestigious music conservatory to then come to New York to do it all over at NYU. From 1969 to the early 80s, she was a founding member and musical director of Arthur Mitchell's Dance Theater of Harlem. Other luminous glimmers of her career include her opera *Scourge of the Hyacinths* set to Wole Soyinka's radio play. León is, for many, the gravity for New York's misfit composer community.

For more on this, buy, as soon as possible, Alejandro L. Madrid's *Tania León's Stride: A Polyrythmic Life* (2021), which will no doubt sit by many of our bedsides. León is a giant among us who is never given enough space and time, and this was her first work to be played by the philharmonic, the very organization for which she was the New Music advisor and conductor in the 90s. My expected night with Tania León, the one I bought the ticket for, was in actuality a program formally billed as Brahms, Strauss, and Tania León. Her piece was programmed between Brahms's "Violin Concerto in D Major" and Richard Strauss's "Der Rosenkavalier Suite." I went to the concert with another musical wonder, the composer and saxophone and master chekeré player Yosvany Terry. Before the show began, and because of my New Jersey residence, I told Terry that I would probably slip out after León's piece. And he replied with playful Cuban severity: "you cannot leave before Strauss." It was a way of saying both that the classical music authorities do not give you permission to leave during someone like Strauss, and the ridiculousness of Strauss is something that can't be missed. It is a laugh, in the presence of bombastic seriousness, that we needed to share. So began the Brahms featuring a Dutch violinist Janine Jansen who played the concerto as a demon possessed, fully body listening and talking back to the orchestral onslaught. It was the kind of playing that makes you feel like you can't breathe. And just when we needed it: an intermission.

During the break, the musicians were doubled for León's piece titled "Stride." León took the stage before the orchestra began to say a few words about the work. She told us all how she was inspired by the lives of Susan B. Anthony and her grandmother, women who, as she put it, "walked with firm steps."<sup>3</sup> Though called "Stride," the fifteen-minute piece had nothing of the ways our ears have been trained to comprehend linear progress. León's gentle pull on the metals, putting their off-centre sound subtly and powerfully in such a way that the philharmonic as an institution and public couldn't forget. It was another kind of relentless refrain that had been in progress many years before that and them. The flash of her composition was such that I can't recall its whole; in fact, it resists narrative recall. And this compositional agility of León's means that she tucked right into the live, into us. It was a different kind of recording mechanism and a set of after-effects that compel one to ask who was there and where were they going. The clave, she warned us, was to be present

throughout, but you (the untrained) would only hear it palpably at the end. And they did. Her work changed the light on the stage, and the air was different, only to be quickly cleared by the performance of Strauss's "Der Rosenkavalier Suite," which might have been the most hilarious nineteenth-century bomb I ever laid ears on. After the concert, there was a way that León's fans were struck by the planned aggression of the Strauss after her piece and the compensatory of Brahms just before it. And yes, it was a violent and terrible act of programming. But here's the thing: her work stood up to them and us. León showed us Brahms's and Strauss's undoing. She showed us the seams of what made their works feel crazy, by the haunt of some other presence, by modernity's shakeup. Whereas León's grandmother, the real Susan B. Anthony, walked with firm steps.

I relay this story because it was yet another lesson in what official disciplinary histories can't allow (even some of those counternarratives of disciplinary histories). There was the profound sense of company, that walking together when you discover (and you will discover) that someone has been through, thought through everything before. The beloved of our genealogies always welcomes more company. León and her grandmother are the teachers I find in music but in scholarship too, whether the foundational thinking houses of *This Bridge Called My Back*, Chicana and Black feminisms, queer Cuban intellectuals, or all the women who made doing theory while making a living, and more so, making it possible for others to make a living too. I relay this story too because, goddamn it, I loved going to the Philharmonic that night, with all its craziness, its violent strangeness not mine. What a gift to be schooled by León in the midst of it all in ways that were much more difficult and interesting than "finding myself" in or "feeling left out of" the classical lexicon. This is all another way of saying: we have to read and listen and go to everything to keep extending the prop roots of our mangrovia genealogies. And be sure to bring the friend that will tell you to hang on until the end.

#### **IV. In accordance with the question of radical practices, can you talk about how pursuing/writing/thinking about sound has been rooted in relationality and friendship?**

##### **Response by Christine Bacareza Balance**

My friendship in letters and music with Alex has everything to do with how we see, feel, and inhabit the world. Perhaps not so much the sonic but the musical allows for our shared language—lyrical, affective, and intertextual. There is relationality at the level of the physical body—sound waves resounding within me and then resonating with/from others. But there is also relationality at the level of shared soundtracks, life pathways carved out by sounds. We may have grown up on different coasts, in two distinct cities (both overburdened with cultural meaning)—Los Angeles & Miami—but freestyle, hip hop, Miami bass, and Latinx rap (among others) reverberated in each of these locales, at our high school dances and family parties, while getting ready in salons, garages, and your cousin's bathroom. These commonalities don't begin in the diaspora, of course, but instead signal the shared homeland politics of Cuba and the Philippines, two island nations built under Spain's imperial flag and then under the banner of what Allan Isaac has dubbed the "American tropics" (2006). These musical attachments and kinships are not simply ours to claim, of course, but instead are colonial counterpoints shared by many. Over the years, as we have each travelled around the globe, we see glimpses and hear echoes of these 1898-inspired motifs in the banter of Filipina domestic workers in a Roman piazza on a Sunday morning, in the Cuban Spanish-only conversations of a Hialeah, Florida grocery store, in the murmurs and clanking chopsticks of a

Vietnamese restaurant in Paris or New Orleans, and the roosters (oh, those roosters) that crow as the sun rises over Kaneohe, Hawaii; Talisay, Cebu; Puerto Rico, Long Island, and Santa Ana, Califas. “What’s important,” Olivia Gagnon and James McMaster remind us, is that we “think together about togetherness . . . Perhaps, to start, it is best just to say that [this] emerges from the collaboration *between* Stewart and Berlant, and it’s the between that we are after, after all” (2019, 212). The between as: that which is “at, in, or across the space separating two objects or regions,” “in the period separating (two points in time),” “in the interval separating (two points on a scale),” and most important for us here today, “indicating a relationship or connection involving two or more parties” (*Oxford Dictionary of English*). In that period known as graduate school, the “between” of a couple expanded into a cohort, a formation that takes on the makings of a crew, a band, an island of misfit kids. As a professor and mentor, having survived academia as part of constellations of friends and interlocutors, I cultivate among my own students ways of relating and being that work against the institutional mandates of individualism and protocols of exceptionalism.

So, what do music and sound have to tell us, to show us, about such a collectivity? That authorship as a singular act (or voice) is a falsehood. That music and its meanings are always made at these moments, these places of “the between”—between musicians, between musicians and instruments, between musicians, instruments, and a world of sound, between musicians, instruments, and audiences, between fans and the music, and so on.

However, the band, the crew, the cohort are not just a means of survival but also a means for evolution (and even revolution). As a musician, organizer, scholar, and listener, I have witnessed these facts and forms of intimacy since the late 1990s. As our dear José Muñoz writes in *Cruising Utopia*, “I am not just an archivist or a scholar. I am also part of a queer relational orbit, a force field of belonging” (2009, 119). What might it mean for us to think of our work—as scholars, teachers, and community—as the everyday practice of being-with and being alongside (of just being) others through “associations both common and unique”? What types of utopian possibilities can be captured through songs, music, and singing?

I think about that every time I look back at these two short videos I captured at a street party in Escolta, a historic neighbourhood in Manila, during a Philippine Independence Day block party (last June 2019). In the first video (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tPCYk7zALs4>), young Filipinos revel in the familiar rhythms of Manila Sound, a musical genre popular during the 1970s and 1980s, at the height of Ferdinand Marcos’ martial rule.<sup>4</sup> These youth, as DJ Arbie Won reminded me, grew up with the musical sounds on the radio and through their parents’ record collections. Familiar with the 4-4 beat of VST & Company, they pose and bounce with joy, take selfies and scream with pleasure—a radical publicity—as the song reminds them, “Awitin Mo, At Isasayaw Mo.” Sing it and dance it out.

The second video ([https://www.youtube.com/shorts/V9X7h1rly\\_Q](https://www.youtube.com/shorts/V9X7h1rly_Q)) was captured as we were about to leave the street party.<sup>5</sup> Like the young people in the earlier video, I was beckoned by my own 1980s-inflected nostalgia upon hearing the opening notes of Belinda Carlisle’s “Heaven Is a Place on Earth.” We could chalk up local Filipinos’ familiarity with this pop song to America’s imperial afterlife or the never-ending time machine that is the Internet. No matter the “why,” what the young folks of Escolta did that sweltering evening was remind us of the world-making magic of community and music. As always, we just need to get in there and listen.

## Notes

1. I invite readers to listen to the “The Songs We Carry” pieces, in full and performed by the writers, at <https://garygabisan.com/audio/>.
2. Elaine Dolalas is a Historic Filipinotown-based writer, podcaster, and independent curator. Michael Nailat (aka Waxstyles) was born and raised in Oxnard, educated at UC Irvine and USC, and helps guide Sessions LA, a DJ and music production program for youth. They are one-half of the hosts/crew that bring you “This Filipino American Life” podcast (<https://thisfilipinoamericanlife.com/about-us/>). Faith Santilla has been a labour and community organizer for the past twenty years and co-founded Pilipino Workers Center in Los Angeles. An award-winning poet, her work has been published widely and is featured in various Beatrock Music artists’ songs, including Ruby Ibarra’s “Us” (<https://rubyibarra.bandcamp.com/track/us-ft-rocky-rivera-klassy-and-faith-santilla>). Joel Quizon is a Los Angeles-based/Manila roots arts and culture curator and programmer, filmmaker, and DJ. He is the co-host with DJ Les Talusan of the weekly “OPM Sundays” show on Twitch, featuring original Pilipino music (OPM) from the Philippines and diaspora. For more, visit <https://www.joelquizon.com/>.
3. Program notes, *Project 19*, New York Philharmonic (February 15, 2020). The program made no mention of León’s grandmother.
4. Visit [https://www.instagram.com/p/ByLDGwXAqRe/?utm\\_source=ig\\_web\\_copy\\_link](https://www.instagram.com/p/ByLDGwXAqRe/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link).
5. Visit [https://www.instagram.com/p/ByLEBePgd-7/?utm\\_source=ig\\_web\\_copy\\_link](https://www.instagram.com/p/ByLEBePgd-7/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link).

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