“In My Life”: Loving Queerly and Singing Across Generations

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Abstract

DOI: https://doi.org/10.59350/xbkqp-f5b45 December 1975. The cold winds staked their claim over Toronto, where my parents had recently arrived from the Philippines. They were underdressed and making their way down Parliament Street. Despite being warned of a shift in temperature, they were not expecting the brutal intensities of Canadian winter.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Archival, Article, Asian And Asian American Studies, Canadian Studies, Cultural Studies



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Photo of Francisco and Emma Mecija in their apartment near Parliament Street. December 1975. Courtesy of Francisco and Emma Mecija.

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December 1975.

The cold winds staked their claim over Toronto, where my parents had recently arrived from the Philippines. They were underdressed and making their way down Parliament Street. Despite being warned of a shift in temperature, they were not expecting the brutal intensities of Canadian winter. I'm not sure how anyone anticipates the sharp sting of negative temperatures when they are arrivants used to tropical climates. Undeterred, my mother and father headed to a small Filipino grocer, hoping to encounter a semblance of domestic familiarity. Pressed against the biting winds, my mother abruptly stopped, looked at my father and said, "Tumutolo ang sipon" – you have a runny nose. To which my father replied, "Ikaw din" – you do too! They both started laughing and laughed again when they retold me this story 48 years later. When faced with the challenges of migrating to a new and very cold country, they managed to mine humour from a deep well of difficult circumstances. We had been listening to the song "In My Life" by the Beatles (Lennon & McCartney 1965). Something in its expression, melody, and feeling caused my parents to be transported to this small but important moment.



https://youtu.be/YBcdt6DsLQA

In her conversation with Christine Bacareza Balance, "'Revolutions in Sound': Keynote Duet" (2022) Alexandra T. Vazquez writes: "The popular...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?" (12). I was never a big fan of the Beatles, but regardless of my opinions, they were popular. As a relentlessly oppositional teenager, I was put off by their mass popularity. As Vazquez suggests, despite one's musical taste, songs are invitations, not scholarly conquests. The memory re-opened by my parents' connection to "In My Life" was an invitation for me to take stock of the song's affective and, for them, diasporic trajectories. As Balance (2022) suggests songs request us to "listen long so we hear where another is coming

from" (15). For her, "long" describes temporality and commitment. To "listen long" implies that duration and attention are the pretext for empathic relations.

"In My Life" was released in 1965. My mother was fifteen years old when she first heard the song on the radio in a boarding house in Marbel, Philippines. One year later, on July 16, 1966 the *Philippine Free Press* would announce, "The Beatles Are Coming" (de Manila as cited by Robert Nery in "The Hero Takes a Walk" 2018). At that time, Ferdinand Marcos was the newly elected president of the Philippines, and Imelda Marcos was his First Lady. The Marcoses would later unleash an era of violent dictatorial power and impose Martial Law in 1972, escalating political suppression (Burns 2013). My mother recalls that the band's first and only appearance in the Philippines was remembered by many less for their two scheduled concerts and more for their "snub" of Imelda. The Beatles were noticeably absent at a lunch reception they were expected to attend with the First Lady at the Presidential Palace. Their absence, attributed to a communication error between the concert promoter and the band's manager, incited public disapproval and resulted in the sudden disappearance of their security escort and hotel and porter service. Unlike in other cities, the band was refused room service and was forced to carry their own luggage (Nery 2018).

What is striking about this moment is that it breaks from preoccupations with Filipinx desires for assimilation and mimicry of Western imperial projects. In *Video Night in Kathmandu and Other Reports from the Not-So-Far East*, British travel writer Pico Iyer (1988) famously stated that Filipinx people are the "[m]aster of every American gesture, conversant with every western song…the Filipino plays minstrel to the entire continent (153)" Turning against imperial scripts and the band's documented disdain of "Mosquito City" and even worse, John Lennon's comment that a return to the Philippines would require "an H-bomb," the soured residues of their visit marks a queer rupture in Beatlemania. The public decried that Filipinx people deserved better from the band, capturing what Balance describes in *Tropical Renditions: Making Musical Scenes in Filipino America* (2016), as "disobedience" in that "disavows a belief in the promises of assimilation" (5). For me, Filipinx non-compliance textures the sonic substance of "In My Life." While the shadow of the Marcoses cronyism and corruption is an inescapable footnote, it is the defiant voices of hotel employees, dismayed fans, and airport workers that insisted on the "ordinariness" (Wofner & Smeaton, 2003) of the Beatles that holds the song's queer decibels.



Photo of Hannah Dyer and Casey Mecija at their baby shower. December 2017. Image by Sarah Creskey.

> *There are places I'll remember all my life, though some have changed. Some forever, not for better. Some have gone, and some remain.*
>
> *"In My Life" (Lennon & McCartney 1965).*

January 2018.

I am sitting on my couch watching a Toronto Raptors game. The television emits light that flickers through a large window that frames a bright winter moon. I am 41 weeks pregnant at this point (feeling similarly shaped and sized as the moon outside). My stubborn queer resistance to the Beatles somehow dissipated during my pregnancy, and the song "In My Life" made its way to me. I would quietly sing the song to my pregnant belly. Then, that January night, I felt a snap inside my body and a rush of water down my legs. I won't go into much gratuitous detail other than to say that at 12:49 pm the next day, Asa Cy Dyer-Mecija was born at home.

> *And these memories lose their meaning when I think of love as something new.*
>
> *"In My Life" (Lennon & McCartney 1965)*

Sometimes, I needed to couch the queerness of pregnancy in words that were not mine. The distance between these words and the ones I had yet to find would help to structure my unfolding love for Asa. Here, queerness presented a modality of encounter with uncensored desires. Queerness is often theorized as a utopian impulse; the queerness of my pregnancy jostled both the hopes and fears brought up by the unknown terrain of parenting amidst heteronormativity. For me, "In My Life" is riven by sentimentality and nostalgia, but it also gave melody to a tender relationship with myself and my new role in the world. This was the sonic throughline to my parents, a queer inheritance of tension made from the hopes for kinder contexts amidst the limitations of harsh realities.



Photo of Asa Cy Dyer-Mecija and Casey Mecija at home. January 2018. Image by Casey Mecija.

December 2022.

I was invited to perform as part of the Queer Songbook Orchestra's holiday fundraiser. The Queer Songbook Orchestra is a chamber pop ensemble that hosts an annual concert focused on songs and stories about "chosen family and queer joy" (Queer Songbook n.d.). At that time, Asa was four years old. He is a child of the pandemic. He's a kid with two moms, a present and kind donor, and is dearly loved by his Lolo and Lola, his grandparents, aunts, titas, uncles, cousins, kuya, ate, and his beautiful chosen family. My partner, Hannah, and I sometimes worry about how his world will be affected by reactions to the makeup of our family, but mostly, we know he'll be sure he's loved by many.

To me, the song "In My Life" offers a useful sonic response to homophobia. As a baby, after Asa's baths, I would often wrap him in a towel, and while rocking him back and forth, I would sing these lyrics from the song: *"Though I know I'll never lose affection for people and things that went*

before, I know I'll often stop and think about them. In my life, I love you more" (Lennon & McCartney 1965). To me, this statement is a queer ethos. We know that 2SLGBTQ+ people have necessarily and creatively reworked and reimagined the organization and expression of kinship. When family is so often bounded by what Julianne Pidduck calls "constraints of relationality" in "Queer Kinship and Ambivalence"(2008: 441), the lyrics *"In my life, I love you more"* are a call to action. *More* is a word used comparatively to insist that there is something greater, something more exists, something more is possible. I embrace the challenge to love *more*. My queerness urges me to love more, and parenting Asa does, too. On the evening of the performance, indexed by my parents' struggles and our shared disdain for the chill of winter, Asa and I performed "In My Life" together. The video of our performance will remain a treasured sonic archive that I will return to often, and as Asa gets older, I hope it reminds him of how beautiful he's always been.

https://vimeo.com/812162458

Video credit: *Directed by Colin Medley*

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Casey Mecija i*s an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication & Media Studies at York University. Her current research examines sound as a mode of affective, psychic, and social representation, specifically in relation to diasporic experience. Drawing on sound studies, queer diaspora studies and Filipinx Studies, her research considers how sensorial encounters are enmeshed and disciplined by social and psychic conditions. In this work, she theorizes sounds made in and beyond Filipinx diaspora to make an argument about a "queer sound" that permeates diasporic sensibilities. She is also a musician and filmmaker whose work has received several accolades and has been presented internationally.*

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