

SOUNDWORK

Wherever I Am, Nevertheless You Are: A Sonic Autocartography

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“WHEREVER I AM, Nevertheless You Are” is a sonic autocartography. I reflect on my experiences becoming acquainted with the unceded and ancestral territory of the Skwxwú7mesh sníchim-speaking Peoples, the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səliwətaʔ (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations in so-called Vancouver for the first time. I have been privileged to live here from September 2023 to the present, as a Pilipinx-Canadian graduate student at the University of British Columbia (UBC).¹ I have been a migrant-settler on Indigenous lands since moving to Toronto from Manila when I was five years old. In reflecting upon my movements between these three sites (spaces of ongoing coloniality, transnational commune, and migration) I find myself mournful, energized, and reflexive. I chose to practise and manifest these reflections for public experience through a “soundwork” of various sonic phenomena I collected and created.²

This piece is a palimpsest of sounds, including a musical/lyrical composition, layered with personal sonic fragments that define and carve out my diasporic experience. The musical composition consists of

¹ I use the term *Pilipinx* to refer to myself as a migrant descending from the Philippines. I do this in line with Kay U. Barrett, Karen B. Hanna, and Anang Palomar’s “In Defense of the X,” acknowledging the colonial underpinnings of the term *Filipino* and the opportunities for recognition of queer diasporic peoples in maintaining the suffix *x* rather than *o* even in understanding the latter presupposes gender neutrality. Kay U. Barrett, Karen B. Hanna, and Anang Palomar, “In Defense of the X: Centering Queer, Trans, and Non-Binary Pilipina/x/os, Queer Vernacular and the Politics of Naming,” *Alon: Journal for Pilipinx American and Diasporic Studies* 2, no. 1 (2021): 125–47, <https://doi.org/10.5070/LN41253177>.

² Michele Hilmes, “Soundwork: Something to Work With,” *Resonance: The Journal of Sound and Culture* 1, no. 4 (2020): 340–43, <https://doi.org/10.1525/res.2020.1.4.340>.

sung performance, guitar instrumentals, and synthetic keyboards/pads. The collection of sounds throughout the composition ranges from environmental sensations (such as water rushing at Tower Beach, the creek behind my childhood home in Toronto, and flora and fauna in British Columbia) to familiar ephemera (such as my childhood voice, singing at a dinner party, and family discussions). I compile and collage these sounds through my production and mixing/mastering choices, including techniques such as echo, reverb, and fading. I wield the palimpsest as a framework capable of illuminating how our expressions of memories and present experience are always marked by traces of past sonicities. The musical/lyrical work I created is the foreground of this soundwork, but its foundations are nonetheless integral to the piece. While conventions around the popular musical/lyrical piece bar the listener from access to the auditory pasts that the artist describes, I include these directly in the narrative. I sing of multisited emplacement, characterized not by my personal geography at any one moment but rather my simultaneously manifesting relationships to, and across, people and spaces/places all the time. I offer the listener whispers into what these relationships sound like for/to me. For example, I attune to the indexical possibilities of sound by directly introducing the listener to my family in the form of a clip of conversation amongst us as I lead into verse lyrically reflecting on these very relationships. I highlight these relationships not only through time but also space by juxtaposing faraway conversations with the voices of environments (beaches, crosswalks, parks) I have found home in over the years. As such, I engage with the defining techniques of soundwork: “selection, sequencing, structure, pace, dynamics, mood, timbre, intensity – all through the combination of voice, actuality sound, and music.”³ Through these techniques I also build from the ecopoetics of Pilipinx avant-garde poetry, “where nature, the environment, and human actors produce collective-making and consciousness-building exercises.”⁴ Through lyricism that attunes to the rhythms of my fluvial environments, and complementary/divergent sounds of crashing/still water, I complicate and transmogrify conceptions of human relationships to the environment. I tap into the collective memory of diasporic experiences of bodies of water in Manila, Toronto, and Vancouver through my personal affects in relation to them. Our relationships to environments have multivalent roots that go beyond our material sensing of them.

³ Hilmes, “Soundwork,” 340–43.

⁴ M.T. Vallarta, “The Avant-Garde as Ecopoetics: Experimental Landscapes of Filipinx Diasporic Poetry,” *Amerasia* 49, no. 3 (2023): 189–201, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00447471.2024.2339872>.

I explore relationality to spatial environments born from relationality to people: what it means to be here, there, and elsewhere. Ultimately, this piece puts sound to work through both music and raw aurality. Narrowing its scope through definitional parameters defeats the purpose of the sonic collection altogether. Through simultaneous existence they offer an opportunity from myself, as the artist, to you, as the listener, to participate in a flurry of memory and revelation that constantly plays in my head, and that I hope offers Pilipinx people across the diaspora mirrors to their aural experiences.

This piece thus acts as a sonic autocartography inspired by and integrating Katharine Harmon's work on creative cartography, Giada Peterle's auto-cartography, and Iain Findlay-Walsh's sonic autoethnography by challenging the bounds of the map as a visual form through auditory representation of the seascapes and socialscapes I have come to know in Vancouver's Lower Mainland.⁵ Harmon champions the practice of imaginative mapping in which contours of land merge with the contours of one's identity through the presence of the cartographer's hand in the shape and form of the mapped work itself. This can manifest in the form of "the mapmaker's personal viewpoint, or sense of humor, or ingenuity, or all of the above." I also build from Peterle's offerings around "auto-cartography as a creative research practice that enables us to understand maps as processes through stories, and to explore how they impact our self." I am particularly inspired by Peterle's focus on allowing the map to narrate and speak for itself and attuning to what these accounts reveal to us about our selves: the cartographers who made them. Similarly, Findlay-Walsh outlines narratives of self that arise from composing soundscapes, through the recordist's subjective accounts of the sounds they experience embedded in the work (meta-narrative). Findlay-Walsh provides the example of Hildegard Westerkamp's *Kits Beach Soundwalk* in which Westerkamp narrates their surroundings and experiences of Vancouver's Kits Beach on top of an edited compilation of recordings of this very environment. The composer reflects on the recordings as they play in the background (edits they wish to make, the technical process of recording, and editing the footage). I engage in my own "meta-narrative" in this soundwork through the dialogue between the lyrics of my sung

⁵ Katharine Harmon, *You Are Here: Personal Geographies and Other Maps of the Imagination* (Princeton Architectural Press, 2003); Giada Peterle, *Auto-Cartography: (Fictional) Ethnographies of the Self, and the Map in the Field* (Routledge, 2024); Iain Findlay-Walsh, "Sonic Autoethnographies: Personal Listening as Compositional Context," *Organised Sound* 1, no. 23 (2017): 121–30, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1355771817000371>.

performance, and the sounds of voices, and mountains, and waters directly interspersed between and within.

In this accompanying paper, I reflect on my sonic autocartography to illustrate the self-revelatory capabilities of soundwork/mapping and meditate on Casey Mecija's proposal "that sound has an affective quality that capaciously allows Filipinx diasporic subjects to create forms of home, desire, and belonging."⁶ As a Pilipinx diasporic subject myself, does my sonic experiment prove this to be true? Has curating and composing and arranging this aural constellation allowed me to create some form of home in Vancouver, lands and seas away from Toronto and Manila? I am guided by Tom Western's practice of "listening with displacement."⁷ By examining the sonicity of borders and migranhood in Athens – in the form of music, oral storytelling, and urban noise – Western interrogates the sounds of citizenship. While acknowledging the political and moral implications of being "bordered," my soundwork also brings light to the practical fact of being transient across borders, which defines my citizenship, status, and diasporic subjecthood. These borders are simultaneously silent and loud with rage; they do not merely exist in vacuums of policy, they happen and are happening. I "listen with displacement" by sharing with you the sounds of the countries and cities through which I embody identity and home. Some voices and some sounds linger, and others do not. They might fade into the background if you choose to listen to the piece on a speaker and walk away for a moment. The discussions will dissolve into air, unless you choose to attune to this work in stereo through a pair of headphones. Legibility of my vulnerability is your choice, paralleling my experience as the artist of attuning to my (collective) memories. The song of longing always plays, but the reasons for its playing (my family, my love for water, my yearning for familiar sites) are not always apparent, unless I pay close attention.

In my experimentation, I am inspired by and build from the canons emerging from Pilipinx sound artists and musicians like Mecija and Dayang Yraola. In particular, I draw from Mecija's song and music video, "Sounds That Mark Our Words," and Yraola's listening essay

⁶ Casey Mecija, "The Sound of Queer Diaspora: Sonic Enactments of Filipinx Desire, Loss and Belonging" (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2020), ii, Tspace, 103430.

⁷ Tom Western, "Listening with Displacement: Sound, Citizenship, and Disruptive Representations of Migration," *Migration and Society* 3, no. 1 (2020): 294–309, <https://doi.org/10.3167/arms.2020.030128>.

“Jeepney Through the (Y)ears.”⁸ Mecija’s song embodies a diasporic lens to tell her queer story; of the song’s central thesis she says: “We think about queer as not only how I imagine my sexuality but queer as a force that nudges against what is considered normal – within this framework we can think of being diasporic in Canada as a queer thing.”⁹ The sung song and synthetic instrumentals are set to a series of video clips featuring Mecija with her family, with her partner, and as a child. From this vulnerable collage of memories I conjure my own in the form of sound (my voice as a child, family conversations over dinner) set to musical performance. In doing so, I construct an aural picture of the queerness of being within the diaspora and lay bare the auditory experience of queer embodiment as it has grown within me over time. For most, the “normal” conception of “home” is necessarily emplaced and static; for a space to be considered home it must embody a familiar point of return because it is this feeling of familiar situatedness that defines it. Through these sounds, I convey the “force that nudges against what is considered normal” by illuminating how my home is characterized by a sense of everywhere-ness.¹⁰ I associate Toronto most with “home,” for example, when I am away from it and learning Vancouver through community; this is made possible by diasporic connection. I attune to this homing frequency in relation to Toronto because of a connection I make in Vancouver with community members who conjure memories of friends I have made in the former. My knowing of home is informed by past experiences but embodied in the present. In this way, the queerness Mecija speaks to is realized through changes in time across space. For the bold blankness of naked sound made vulnerable by its own purity, I also appreciate Yraola’s “Jeepney Through the (Y)ears,” ruminating on the attempted jeepney phase-out in the Philippines in 2023. A marker of Philippine culture and (social) transport, Pilipinx people across the diaspora protested the move away from the jeepney. Yraola presents an ode to the jeepney in the form of an audio recording of a jeepney ride in Quezon City. She writes, “It is uncomposed and unedited, just stitched together, to give you one hour of the jeepney experience through your

⁸ Casey Mecija, and May Truong, dirs., “Sounds That Mark Our Words [Official Video],” posted 6 December 2016 by Casey Mecija, YouTube, 4 mins., 15 secs., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TyeN0gRqEac>; Dayang Yraola, “Jeepney Through the (Y)ears,” *Garland Magazine*, 1 June 2023, <https://garlandmag.com/article/jeepney/>.

⁹ Kelsey Adams, “Casey Mecija Pushes Against Normal in the Tender Video for ‘Sounds That Mark Our Words,’” *Fader*, 29 November 2016, <https://www.thefader.com/2016/11/29/casey-mecija-songs-that-mark-our-words-video>.

¹⁰ Adams, “Casey Mecija Pushes Against Normal.”

ears.”¹¹ In addition to embodying a queer identity, my status here has been plainly queer since the moment I landed from Manila and had to learn what it meant to be Canadian; what it meant to build home when you have just left it. I leave many of the fragments snipped from the score of my real life plain throughout this piece to allow the listener to confront the truth of this often contentious, but nonetheless real, crafted homeness. For these reasons, I allow the listener to embody the raw cut of the childhood voices I experienced growing up, as Yraola invites the listener into a jeepney.

Furthermore, I interrogate the notion of home in terms of its colonial underpinnings: What might it mean to feel connected to places I would not have the privilege of knowing had they not been stolen and exploited? My investment in the fluidity and metamorphosing qualities of homeness is complicated by my position as a settler on these lands. As such, I ponder the relationality of “settlerhood” and the consequences of my feelings toward home in British Columbia as my current place of residence. I have learned much in this space of the struggle for Indigenous sovereignty, and how achieving it is inherent to any form of migrant justice possible on these lands. Thus, in this work I meditate on the practice of creating homeness and how it must also actively challenge the settler colonial state Canada is, rather than allowing my migranhood to be complicit with an ongoing legacy of brutal theft and genocide. I learn particularly from the body of works by Pilipinx thinkers and creatives on what it means to be Canadian with a Pilipinx lens and visibility, including: Christine M. Añonuevo, John P. Catungal, Roland S. Coloma, Bonnie McElhinny, Ethel Tungohan, Lisa M. Davidson, May Farrales, Robert Diaz, Marissa Largo, Fritz Pino, and Ashley Morford.¹² I reflect on the devotion of Pilipinx community members to our relationships as migrant-settlers with Indigenous community members whose lands we touch for a chance at surviving and thriving. Through their praxis, I identify the latent, and often hidden, entanglements of empire pervading through cultures of home-building, which arise from migrants’ need to emplace

¹¹ Yraola, “Jeepney Through the (Y)ears.”

¹² I am grateful for the works of various Pilipinx scholars and artist practitioners who have invested time and energy into advocating for, and offering, tangible resources and practices for fostering solidarity with Indigenous Peoples together in struggle and joy on Indigenous lands. I am particularly inspired by, and routinely return to, the following: Coloma et al.’s *Filipinos in Canada: Disturbing Invisibility*, Catungal et al.’s “Setting the Scene: An Introduction to FilipiNEXT”; Farrales’ “Colonial, Settler Colonial Tactics and Filipino Canadian Heteronormativities at Play on the Basketball Court”; Morford’s “Settler Filipino Kinship Work: Being Better Relations Within Turtle Island”; and Añonuevo’s “Ang amin mga kwento ay siyang magpapagaling: Our Stories Are Our Healing.”

in a country offering opportunities the homelands have been stripped of by ongoing colonial powers. While implicated and oppressed by global networks of imperialism, Pilipinx migrant-settlers are nonetheless settlers on unceded, ancestral lands. Advocacy for collective meditation on the complex embodiments of shared Pilipinx identity drives my exploration of home. Hence, I outline how the physical, fluvial, and sociocultural geographies of British Columbia lend to the particularity of my experience of diasporic Pilipinxness, personally and collectively, by bringing the sonic connections my mind identifies between Vancouver and Manila in tension together. I juxtapose these sounds to highlight their indistinguishability within aural picture, but also their contentious relationship. These waters are not the same, and the shores of the former have been stolen, while the latter has been picked clean and polluted by industry powered by commercial colonialism.

The piece begins, endures, and ends with sounds and musical performance engineered together. The instrumental introduction consists of a classical guitar chord progression and organ, overlaid with my family's voices, and sounds of saltwater on the shore of the Burrard Inlet. From this geographic point, I begin my exploration by "imagining" this sonic map, challenging Western inclinations toward the rational, and instead prioritizing the affective bodily experience.¹³ I do so through lyrics describing an imagined dimension in which I directly perceive my childhood self, prior to immigrating to Canada, sailing from this shore. As outlined in the full text of the lyrical piece below, in the first verse I sing:

I used to watch as they'd smile
 At the birds like a child
 Wanting to fly with them
 Somewhere real far,
 But I always hoped that
 Wherever I am,
 Nevertheless you are.

Here, the sounds of saltwater crashing imply my envelopment in the spaces and physicalities Vancouver offers, while the sung content of the piece speaks to my desire for relationships familiar in Manila and Toronto. Thus, I feel transient between all three sites but reflect on the

¹³ Dara Culhane, "Imagining: An Introduction," in *A Different Kind of Ethnography: Imaginative Practices and Creative Methodologies*, ed. Denielle Elliott and Dara Culhane (University of Toronto Press, 2017), 1–22.

deepening meanings the seas of Vancouver are beginning to hold within me as I relate them to the seas of Manila, contrasting the freshwater Lake Ontario that Toronto borders.

The lead-up to the refrain includes sounds of my family bickering immediately followed by fauna chirping in the forests of Vancouver as I continue to assert that “wherever I am, nevertheless you are.” The objects and subjects that emplace me in various memories and possible futurities, positioned wherever I am, remain ambiguous and multivalent. They are my mother; my grandparents; my father; my friends; my childhood bedroom; the walk to my grandfather’s sister’s house in Manila. They are lost in the world of my sonic because in my waking life, they do intermingle constantly in my movements through spaces known as homes. I never feel tethered to one idea of who I envision being with when I think of home, or one place I exist in the space of. Instead, I am home in diasporic fluidity because I have grown to feel grounded wherever I might be moved/choose to go. I developed this habit after immigrating to Canada with my parents when I was five and have been fine-tuning the skill ever since. If my parents and I never did so, we would never build community outside each other and we would never gain from what we had lost.¹⁴ I survive by refusing to succumb to one source/feeling of familiarity. Rather, they fill me all at once. I intentionally use the word *nevertheless* to connote a sort of normative dismemberment. To “be apart” from my immediate family in Toronto, and extended family in Manila, I must not be where they are. Yet I find that despite this spatial distance, they are somehow always with me. Geographically, I am in between Toronto and Manila within Vancouver. Even so, I feel closer to my family in this space because my distance fosters longing for the relationships to people and sites I have formed in the former two. This dissonance is further mediated in Vancouver by the physical and social elements underscoring my simultaneous feelings of distance, but also closeness to Toronto and Manila. In Vancouver, I endeavoured to develop relationships with Pilipinx community independently because I was all on my own. In Toronto, my relationships seemed handed to me by time and the networks of my parents. It was through autonomous choice and generous welcoming into the spaces of migrant organizers and Pilipinx cooks that I felt enlivened by my diasporic identity anew. Furthermore, I chose to move to Vancouver because of its seawater and warmer weather, paralleling that of Manila, in ways I never knew in Toronto. In this sonic autocartography, I gesture to the ways our memories, and affective

¹⁴ Celine Song, dir., *Past Lives* (A24, 2023).

bonds to people and places home us. In actively conjuring ideas, and yearnings of the faraway people I know so well while I come to know and resonate with myself in a new space, I am effectively shipping them to my affective present within and through distant geographies. I expand on this phenomenon in the second verse of the piece:

Crept up like mountains,
And waters of blue;
Who would've thought
Salt wouldn't taste like you?

Here, I describe physical topographies – mountains and waters – while pondering my own disbelief that I could feel so newly formed in a physicality so unfamiliar from the freshwater of lakes. The coda similarly describes my recursive recollections that occur through the circulation of saltwater via the Pacific Oceanic connection between Vancouver and Manila. I sing of “breathing sea salt the second time” by recalling the first five years of my life in Manila – the scent of Manila Bay activating as I inhale Tower Beach on UBC campus for the first time. Juxtaposed with these representations of physical sensations are reflections of the deeply familial and lifelong connections that tie me to Toronto and Vancouver.

As I completed arranging and mixing the soundwork, I was left to wonder if Mecija's suggestion was true: Do sounds have an affective quality that allowed me, as a Pilipinx diasporic subject, to create a form of home? The outro of the piece culminates my reflections on this possibility. It begins with a softened clip of myself singing Natalie Cole's “I Wish You Love” at a potluck hosted by Dr. Leonora Angeles, accompanied by composer and UBC graduate student Dave Dagta on piano. As I sing “but most of all / when snowflakes fall / I wish you love,” sounds of rain I recorded in Vancouver begin to play, and finally, the sounds of my child self speaking to my mother in our first Toronto apartment begin to play, echoing until my mother says “wait, wait, wait.” For me, creating this piece sonically allowed me to attune better to the multisensory quality of memory. To record each of the bits of sonicity I needed for this piece, I had to recall memories – in the case of writing lyrics and singing them – and was reminded of them as I physically existed amongst the material environments of sounds I wanted to document and archive – such as in recording the seas rising and falling against the shores of Tower Beach. By doing so, I deepened my relationship to the ways my present place of residence – Vancouver

– strengthens my understanding of who made Manila and Toronto my homes once, and the physical spaces I experienced within them, though I no longer inhabit them. In this way, sonicity's homing quality for Pilipinx diasporic subjects lies in its ability to allow us to attune to multisensory presents in the geography we inhabit while realizing the stark distance of intimate relations separated from us by borders, nations, provinces, and waters alike.

WHEREVER I AM, NEVERTHELESS YOU ARE

Verse I

I used to watch as they'd smile
At the birds like a child
Wanting to fly with them
Somewhere real far,
But I always hoped that
Wherever I am,
Nevertheless you are.

Refrain

You are,
Wherever I am,
Nevertheless,
You are

Verse II

Crept up like mountains,
And waters of blue;
Who would've thought
Salt wouldn't taste like you?
Tethered to memories of the gaze in your face
But even in oceans, I'd never escape
The way that she loved still silence by lakes
The sky here is grey, but clearer than there anyway...

Refrain

Wherever you are, wherever I am
Nevertheless,
You were

Bridge

If I sailed away from home now
I'd sooner make it to the bay
Away, away, away from...

Coda

paper feet launch into the sky
breathing sea salt the second time
inhaling 'tween fibres that jumped from the lake
a graveyard of trout bloodied awake
once-fertile, they swam, left behind,
mouths a-tremor desperate she finds
gasps kiss her heels
soft bark shattered, palms wrapped 'round to heal
like glass softened to kelp
withering from rivers that lined her to help
tracing journeys through waters she steers
from there once to now here