“The desert’s no home for a rose”: Filipinx childhood and music as aesthetic experience

Casey Mecija
York University, Canada

Abstract
This article examines Diane Paragas’ film Yellow Rose (2019) for its capacity to offer important insights into the reparative utility of music for a child separated from a parent due to deportation. While the film depicts the brutality of contemporary U.S. migration policies, Yellow Rose is also a story about the role of aesthetic expression in childhood’s diasporic imaginaries. The film teaches us about the agentic potential of music as a mode of dealing with the trauma of forced separation. In particular, the genre of American country music is affectively instrumentalized by the film’s young, Filipinx protagonist. In deepening my argument, I work with the film to explain that the kinship between Rose and a genre of music that is hegemonically associated with whiteness produces a “queer sonic” that serves as conduit for the emergence of contingent networks of care and methods of survival. I propose that queer sonic expression, or the unassimilable qualities of sound and genre, is a site where we can broaden racialized imaginings of Filipinx childhood, as it offers an opportunity for reparation.

Keywords
childhood, Filipinx diaspora, performance, sound

“Square peg, round hole
Like a tumbleweed with nowhere to go
Square peg, round hole
A runaway with nowhere to go.” (Yellow Rose)
“‘They can take the roof from over my head, but they can’t take my freedom away. No, I won’t go quietly into the night, and I’ll sing ‘til the light of day.’” (Yellow Rose)

Director Diane Paragas’ film Yellow Rose (2019) opens with 17-year-old protagonist, Rose Garcia, riding her bicycle while listening to music on headphones. The red streamers attached to
her handlebars rustle in the wind as the sun in a Texas sky begins to slowly set. The music has her full attention, more so than where her bike is moving toward, as she intently listens and appears caught in a fantasy. The dreamlike musical intimacy of her commute is disrupted when she reaches the long driveway that leads to her apartment, which is located within a small motel. Upon entering, Rose passes by the reception desk and enters a door into her home. There she is greeted by her mother, Priscilla, who is frying meat and onions for dinner. The wafting steam from a rice cooker, the plastic covered furniture, and the candles that glow at a small religious altar are mundane and familiar characters of Filipinx domestic life. After prayer and dinner, Rose retreats to her bedroom and thumbs through a collection of vinyl. She thoughtfully selects a song, and the record player begins to spin. In a familiar contralto, country music icon Loretta Lynn croons the words, “crazy, crazy for feeling so lonely.” Rose has changed into a t-shirt that reads TEXAS in bold letters and is wearing a cowboy hat.

This film’s opening sequence offers an introduction to the ways in which American country music, the aesthetics of the South, and Filipinx immigrant subjectivity find a queer kinship in *Yellow Rose*. The relationship between child and music takes on particular importance when Priscilla is later abruptly detained by Immigrant and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Narrowly escaping detention herself, Rose is left to navigate Austin on her own as an undocumented immigrant. This article examines *Yellow Rose* for its capacity to offer important insights into the reparative utility of music for a child separated from a parent due to deportation. Here, I understand music as a form of art that children can play with and symbolically express emotions through. Reparation, broadly defined as the psychic drive to mend or repair relations to self and others (Klein, 1987; Sedgwick, 2003), will be theorized in relation to the film and described as an outcome of the child protagonist’s sonic expression.

While the film depicts the brutality of contemporary U.S. migration policies, *Yellow Rose* is also a story about the role of aesthetic expression in childhood’s diasporic imaginaries. I will argue that music is used by the child in this film to create new relational possibilities to trauma, pain, and hope connected to diasporic life. In particular, the genre of American country music is affectively instrumentalized by the film’s young, Filipinx protagonist. In deepening my argument, I work with the film to explain that the kinship between Rose and a genre of music that is hegemonically associated with American whiteness produces a “queer sonic” that serves as conduit for the emergence of contingent networks of care and methods of survival. I propose that queer sonic expression, or the unassimilable qualities of sound and genre, is a site where we can broaden racialized imaginings of Filipinx childhood, as it offers an opportunity for “reparation and resignification” (Georgis, 2013: 89). From reparation and its psychic processes, as Sedgwick and Adam (2003) illuminates, one can build hope.

The article is organized into three parts. The first and second sections introduce the key concepts that drive the analysis: queer sonics and the reparative process. The third presents analysis of the closing scene from *Yellow Rose*, conceptualizing queer sound as a framework for understanding abjected traces of racism, forced separation, and empire that determine the contours of the child’s subjectivity. The film is a reminder that music, as a form of art, sonically opens us toward consideration of how a child’s creativity engenders hope in a time of crisis in ways that surpass social constructions of childhood that have denied racialized children the ascribed protection of “innocence” (Dyer, 2020). Moreover, it bears emphasis that the figure of the child can be tied to how Filipinx adults have been historically infantilized in order to propagate imperialist expansion. Acknowledging childhood’s raced dynamics poses opportunity to examine how sound offers resistance to these epistemological enclosures. My theorizing of queer sonics pays attention to the possible subjectivities, politics, affects, aesthetics, and communities gathered at the intersection of queer sound and Filipinx diasporic subjectivity. The article concludes with a proposal that while
American country music has historically perpetuated gendered and racialized stereotypes of the submissive Filipinx, the performative potential of sound allows Filipinx diasporic subjects, in this case, a Filipinx child, to create forms of home, desire, and belonging that defy racialized ascriptions.4

Ultimately, this article aims to engage in a reparative reading of Yellow Rose and the ethical challenges of theorizing the affective, aesthetic, and political processes of a child faced with the colonial inheritances of racism and the American imperial project. Within a reparative approach, attention is rerouted from exposing the harmful and antagonizing effects of cultural objects in favor of “paying attention to the inevitable overtures and breakdowns present in any social world” to find hopeful possibilities (Gabriel and Johnson: 105). Thus, I locate the “traces, glimmers [and] residues” (Muñoz, 1996) of hope embedded in the film’s narrative and point to reparative strategies deployed by its characters. I do not want to undermine the racialized “asymmetry of childhood innocence” (Dyer, 2020) that informs Rose’s separation from her mother, but instead I hope to foreground the creativity involved in cultivating “different genealogies of desire” and sustainability (Diaz, 2018: 115).

Queer sonic narrations of “yellow” childhood

In the film’s opening sequence, Kimmie Rhodes’ song, Windblown, acts as the musical score. The following lyrics are sung while images of Rose flash on the screen: “Do you think it’s unkind to suppose that the desert’s no home for a rose?” (Rhodes, 2004). Rose first expressed her love of country music when she played a song at a talent show at her school. After that performance, kids started to tease her with the name “yellow rose” activating a variety of gendered and racialized associations. In particular, the children made reference to a category of imperial racist taxonomy. As a xenophobic designation, the word yellow summons a history of anti-Asian settlement in the United States in the late 19th century, when Asian immigration was first described as an impending catastrophe or yellow wave threatening white American jobs and white American families.5 Thus, the political designation “yellow” and discourses of “yellow plague” and “yellow peril” were propagated to restrict and redirect Asian migration and exclude the migrant subject from legislative recognition.

The juxtaposition of the racialized term “yellow” alongside the delicate image of a rose insists on the gendered dimensions of yellow racism. In 1986, the rose was adopted as the national floral emblem of the United States. Hailed as a national symbol of American patriotism and citizenship, President Ronald Regan proclaimed:

More often than any other flower, we hold the rose dear as the symbol

of life and love and devotion, of beauty and eternity. For the love of

man and woman, for the love of mankind and God, for the love of country,

Americans who would speak the language of the heart do so with a rose.6

The metaphoric uses of a rose as a national emblem reflects the project of American patriotism as a neoliberal, heteronormative, and patriarchal machination. In this way, the image of a “yellow rose” is an ode to an orientalist hybrid femininity that is both beautiful and obedient.

“The Yellow Rose of Texas” is a well-known American folk song that tells the story of the forced separation of a presumably Black soldier, referred to as “darker” with his “yellow rose” during the war for Texan independence (Harris, 2009). The original lyrics of the song pronounce:
“There’s a yellow rose in Texas, that I am a going to see. No other darky knows her. No one only me.” More recent recordings of this song have been critiqued for universalizing its narrative. For example, in Elvis Presley’s rendition recorded in 1968, he sings, “Oh the yellow rose of Texas is the only girl I love! Her eyes are even bluer than Texas skies above” (Wise and Starr). Relevant to the focus of this article, this version of the song not only locates the yellow rose within the geography and history of Texas, but it does so by erasing racialized subjectivities in order to uphold white superiority. The figure of the white woman as the object of fidelity and desire serves to erase Black women’s subjectivity and serves as historical proof of the resonant and racialized histories of the “yellow rose” in Texas.

American country music has also archived its own postwar vernacular of the “yellow rose,” but in specific relation to Filipinx subjectivity. The country song titled “Filipino Baby,” written by Cox and Van Ness (1938), captures a transnational reflection on race and the American imperial occupation of the Philippines and of Filipinx women:

When the warship left Manila
sailin’ proudly o’er the sea, deep blue sea,
all the sailor’s hearts were filled with fond regret.
Looking backward to this island
where they’d spent those happy hours, happy hours,
making love to every pretty girl they met.
When up stepped a little sailor
with his bright eyes all aglow, all aglow,
sayin’, “take a look at my gal’s photograph.”
Then the sailors gathered round him
just to look upon her face, smilin’ face
and he said, “I love my dark-faced Filipino.”

“Filipino Baby” recounts the romance between a sailor and his “dark-faced Filipino.” Reflecting fondly on his deployment to Manila he reveals that it was customary for sailors to “mak[e] love to every pretty girl they met.” In incantations of possession, the sailor remarks “she’s my treasure, she’s my pet.” Here, the scripts of Filipinx femininity, infantilization, and racialization converge on the body of the Filipinx woman. In particular, conceptual metaphors of childhood like “baby” and “girl” are used to describe Filipinx women as dependent objects of desire and affection. The term “Filipino baby” is deployed as a trope that revels in the infantilizing relationship between the United States and the Philippines. When American imperialists occupied the Philippines at the beginning of the 20th century, the application of child-like qualities onto Filipinx people was mobilized to bolster colonial civilizing missions. The signification of this racial taxonomy was further impressed into popular opinion by the remarks of U.S. Governor General William Taft, who famously conceived of Filipinos as America’s “little brown brothers.” Gideon Lasco writes, “[t]he ‘brother’ at the end of the phrase signified familial affinity, but one already preceded by asymmetry: More than a description of color, ‘brown’ was a classificatory gesture that located Filipinos in a racial hierarchy that placed ‘whites’ on top” (381).
“Filipino Baby” offers a narrative of imperial encounter and its objectifying erotic attachments, while it also asserts the oppressive infantilizing of Filipinx women. Racist stereotypes associated with “yellow peril” were scripted onto Filipinx people and used as justification for their treatment during the American occupation of the Philippines. In “Filipino Baby,” the Filipinx woman is presumed infantile and therefore uncivilized and in need of paternal guidance and care. My engagement with the film *Yellow Rose* is interested in the intimacies between conceptions of childhood and Filipinx colonial encounters that are drawn out through song. Indeed, country songs like “Filipino Baby” convey limited understandings of Filipinx subjecthood, but I would also argue that the deployment of the child stands in for the Filipinx adult. The historical infantilization of the Filipinx adult has left little room to consider the subjecthood and agency of the Filipinx child. Refracted through tropes of Filipinx submissiveness and domesticity, the Filipinx child is mechanized as an imperial strategy of subjugation. While the imperial desires to domesticate Filipinx subjectivity are historically thick, I suggest that *Yellow Rose* offers us a sonic departure from these symptomatic trappings and affiliations. As a non-normative mode of relating and belonging, Rose’s intimacy with country music possesses a queer valence and thus, produces a powerful queer sound. Through her writing, singing, and performing of country music she turns her artistic practice into a mode that not only re-writes gendered and racialized scripts imprinted in the designation “yellow rose,” but also repairs the psychic pressures of having to be legible to the state, to her mother, and to herself.

**Framing queer sound**

Queer theory draws inspiration from the experience of being marginalized for non-normative sexuality and gender in order to create methodology with which to analyze and critique normativity. As an aspirational framework that is oriented toward imagining new relationalities and ways of being, queerness can be used as a method that contests our perceptual apprehension of sound as a knowable and containable referent. In *Yellow Rose*, sound offers Rose a structure of feeling (Williams, 2019 [1954]) for a reparative artistic practice. Here, country music and its Filipinx singer-songwriter find a queer kinship. Through both an aural and sensorial engagement with a genre that historically centers whiteness (Mann, 2008; Manuel, 2008), the sounds she makes are compelling and vibrational, shaking perceptions of how and what country music should sound and look like and what kind of art young people can craft.

According to Moten (2003), sound can be felt in all of our perceptual experiences of the surrounding environment. For him, sound reverberates in excess of aural dimensions. Crawley (2014) proposes that “Queer sound is about the opening of oneself to pleasure however it may come, the openness to movement and vibration, and allowing such vibration and movement to work on you, on your relation to others, on your relation to the world” (np). Drawing on Crawley’s invocation that queer sound forces a different confrontation or relation to others, and ourselves, queer sound is, then, both a material and affective register that carries the capacity for feeling something in excess of expectation and predictability. Not only can we be queered by sound, but we also have the capacity to queer its significance. Sound holds the potential to prompt the listener to disidentify with its encoded meaning thereby disrupting normative modes of perception and imbuing sonic encounters with transformative possibilities.

*Yellow Rose* presents an example of queer sound that may not immediately align with traditional classifications of “queer” or “sound,” but that detail queer significations which shift our sonologic perspectives of Filipinx diasporic imaginaries. Keeling (2019) reflects on the temporal and spatial logics of queerness:
‘Queer’ is not an ontological category – it is not what one is; rather, it is an epistemological category – one that involves life and death questions of apprehension and value production. ‘Queer’ involves how one signifies and how groups of living beings are made to signify within a given set of significations. It may include what one does, how one does it, and where those actions place one in relationship to the maintenance of the present organization of things, including the groupings and affiliations of living beings constitutive of social, political, and economic relations. (17)

Keeling recognizes the contradictory impulses of queer as an “imposition but . . . [also] a becoming” (18). Queerness is perceptible through structures of gender, race, and sexuality, but it is also in excess of sociality and manageability. It is a concept that is often domesticated to the demands of capital and state-governed institutions like gay marriage and the family, but it remains useful beyond their measures. Manalansan (2005) offers “queer” as a rubric with which to theorize “cultural dissonance” that Filipinx immigrants may “experience with identity categories and cultural practices” (146). Relatedly, sound is understood as vibrations that shape corporeal sensations (Campt, 2017; Eidsheim, 2015; Kheshti, 2011) and elicit new formations of self and community.

In Metroimperial Intimacies (2015), Victor Mendoza demonstrates how ascriptions of queerness share a legacy with “imperialism’s racializing discourse” in the context of the U.S. occupation of the Philippines (29). Mendoza suggests that Filipinx subjects were always already regarded as “queer” to the U.S. imperial project, and that to summon the term in relation to Philippine subjectivity runs the risk of reproducing its imperial significations. That is, the Philippines was constituted as queer in order to assert the normalcy of the U.S. He believes that making notice of this relation to imperial relation requires a deprivileging of gender and sexual variance as a primary identifier, making room for the recognition of processes of racialization (Mendoza, 2015: 28).

Diaz (2018) further expands on the importance of locating historical specificity when imagining Filipinx subjectivity in relation to queerness. He argues for the examination of new archives of Filipinx queer experience that are constantly reproduced by shifting local and global contexts. While Diaz agrees that histories of imperialism undoubtedly leave an impression on contemporary Filipinx subjectivities, he finds hope and method by combing through the archives of the present in order to imagine something new that can explain their uniqueness. Diaz suggests that “[q]ueerness is a tactic for animating aesthetic practices and performances of world-making that insist our ‘now’ is not necessarily ‘future’” (345). His queer inquiry into Filipinx experience questions how the debris from the past can be aesthetically reactivated to create a more humane and just world. Inspired by Diaz, I use queerness as a method that makes room for Rose’s new iterations of racial difference and conceptualize her use of sound as a future-making project.

For Crawley (2014), queer sound “disrupts the everyday ordinariness and quotidian qualities of life, compelling imagination into otherwise possibilities for relation” (np). Crawley (2014) conceptualizes queer sound in response to an open letter published by jazz pianist Fred Hersch, where he repudiates the use of the term queer in an event called OutBeat: America’s First Queer Jazz Festival. Scheduled to appear as a headliner, Hersch was concerned about the conflation of his sexual identity and music practice, insisting that he did not perform “gay jazz.” In response, Crawley (2014) suggests that sound destabilizes what we think we might know about social constructions of identity. Sound has the potential to force confrontation with affects that might undo or queer us. Crawley (2014) argues that the substance of queer sound is “found in its *capacity* to queer us, to make us live in manifold capacities, into the exorbitant possibilities that are ever before us”; queer sound illuminates the excesses of identity.

Thinking alongside Crawley (2014) and drawing on queer theory’s challenge of dominant understandings of identity formation, I suggest that Rose uses country music to erode presumptive interpretations of Filipinx diaspora. For example, upon her first encounter with her (white) music
mentor, Dale Watson, Rose shares her extensive knowledge of the biographical details of country legend, Willie Nelson. Surprised by her candor, Dale replies, “That’s impressive from someone like you.” In another encounter, Dale innocently reveals, “You know I didn’t even realize you played.” These mundane and casual slippages of speech gesture to a deep history of the racializing of sound and the assumptions that gather around the sound of race. Burns (2013) and Balance (2016) provide important critiques of how the Filipinx performing body has been discursively read within tropes of mimicry and imitation. Relatedly, I argue that the racialization of Filipinx people has relied on the erasure of the powerful ways sound invokes alternative interpretations of diasporic subjectivity. Queer sound offers a methodological intervention that resists oversimplified tropes of Filipinx performance as a by-product of Western imperialism. In this article, my theory of “queer sound” expands on how the sonic might be used as a conceptual resource for making sense of the affective and psychic life of a Filipinx child, but also prioritizes the agentic capacities of sound to tell another story about Filipinx people. In the next section, I turn to Melanie Klein’s theory of reparation to deepen my inquiry into the film’s reparative potentials.

“Work it out”: Reparation in song

Reparation refers to the psychic work required to mend and repair relations with others. Klein (1987) suggests that reparation is a process that begins in infancy where the child learns to creatively integrating destructive and loving impulses. Klein was a child psychoanalyst who wrote theories about the emotional and social development of children between 1921 and 1960. For Klein, the reparative process is prompted by the depressive position, whereby the ego integrates and synthesizes the good and bad fragments of an object. In Kleinian theory, as infants become more able to integrate their polarized impressions of their primary object, the mother, as both good and bad, they are better able to cope with their split feelings and impulses. After the infant relates to the mother as one person whom they have both intensely loved and hated, guilt emerges alongside the drive to repair (Klein, 1987: 139). In this way, reparation requires creativity wherein the infant needs to incorporate what it wants to nurture and what it wants to destroy in order to tolerate its world.

According to Klein (1987), our adult lives are deeply connected to our earliest emotions about our caregivers. A caregiver is both able to satisfy the demands of the infant by providing love, comfort, and nourishment and also create feelings of frustration and hatred through not heeding to these demands on time. In Klein’s theory, the infant projects feelings of love and hatred onto the breast, splitting the object into good and bad. In the early stages of infancy, the breast is either good or bad, but never both simultaneously. Klein called this the paranoid-schizoid position. In phantasy, the infant projects destructive impulses toward the bad breast through biting and grabbing. These “attacks” on the breast are counteracted with feelings of gratification. As the infant grows, the hope is that she will better cope with the good and bad feelings. Klein called this process the depressive position, which correlates with the infant’s drive toward reparation (Klein, 1987: 130–131). Reparation involves moving out of the depressive position in order to make “good the injuries which we did in phantasy, and for which we feel very guilty” (Klein, 1937: 68).

The reparative turn in feminist, affect, and queer studies engaged in a methodological practice of reading that challenged the “heuristic habits” and binary constructions dominating the humanities and social sciences (Sedgwick and Adam, 2003: 496). In “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, Or You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You” (2003), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick suggests that dominant thinking is hailed into “paranoid reading”: a reading practice that perpetuates an internecine dynamic of suspicion, shaming, and anxiety between the
critic and her object. Interested in finding a new place to begin, Sedgwick developed an approach to reading via Melanie Klein’s psychoanalytic theory of the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions. Sedgwick proposed a method of “reparative reading” that would forego the aggressive tendencies of former methods, in favor of strategies that privileged love, “intimacy with...objects of study,” and repair (Wiegman, 2014: 10). Sedgwick (2003) offers this elaboration on her “reparative” methodology:

To read from a reparative position is to surrender the knowing, anxious paranoid determination that no horror, however apparently unthinkable, shall ever come to the reader as new; to a reparatively positioned reader, it can seem realistic and necessary to experience surprise. . .Because the reader has room to realize that the future might be different from the present, it is also possible for her to entertain such profoundly painful, profoundly relieving, ethically crucial possibilities as that the past, in turn, could have happened differently from the way it actually did. (146)

Sedgwick does not rid the possibility of “paranoid” reading practices, but rather suggests that reparative reading can offer an engagement with a multiplicity of possibilities that might engender a new relation to the past and present. In my reading of Yellow Rose I employ a reparative practice as a method of turning attention to childhood acts of agency that may otherwise be overlooked or easily categorized as cultural assimilation.

In the film, while Rose is secretly visiting a country music venue for the first time, her mother, Priscilla, is arrested by ICE. Much of the first half of the film is spent detailing Rose’s difficult and precarious situation. After her mother’s arrest, Rose leaves the motel that she was living in with only a backpack, a handful of money left by her mother and a letter instructing her to live with her Tita who resides in an affluent neighborhood in the same city. In an attempt to avoid entering the foster care system, Rose takes refuge in her Tita’s home. The new setting has her feeling out of place and unwelcomed. After a short and frustrating stint at her Tita’s house, Rose decides to leave and instead stay and work at The Broken Spoke, the “honky tonk” bar she snuck off to the night her mother was detained.

Her return to The Broken Spoken Spoke might be read as a queer refusal of heteronormative scripts that romanticize structures of the nuclear family. In the absence of her blood family, Rose turns to “chosen family” to produce a sense of place and protection. Commenting on the volatility of blood relations for gays and lesbians, Weston (1991) suggests that the “choice” of family engenders a “more subtle process of symbolic expansion...whereby meanings associated with kinship...are transferred” beyond biological connections (Lewin: 977). Rose’s departure from her Tita’s home dispels the widely held belief that enduring kinship is relegated to filial attachment. Relatively, Diaz (2018) cautions that the privileging of the blood family as the teleological promise of happiness runs the risk of eliding other forms of intimacy and recognition. Rose’s queer presence in the U.S. is not only emphasized by her racialized and undocumented status but also by her choice to forgo a clearer path to state recognition. Her blood relation to her Tita might render her more legible to the state but instead Rose chooses a queerer route that favors recognition in the form of community support and collective creativity.10
Without Rose’s knowledge, Priscilla kept her child’s status a secret. Rose was under the impression that after the death of her father, his citizenship status would apply to her. While this article addresses the reparative work of sound in Rose’s life, the absence of sound, in the form of secrecy and silence also haunts the narrative. Neither mother nor child is recognized as a U.S. citizen, and thus they belong to a large community of Filipinx subjects who silently labor in the diaspora. Because she is undocumented, Rose is also faced with the pressures brought on by this specific form of silence and secrecy. In *Yellow Rose*, the cultural silence that surrounds undocumented subjectivities is powerfully countered by sonic modes of expression.

After a slew of challenging encounters, like narrowly escaping an ICE raid at *The Broken Spoke*, Rose turns to songwriting and the performance of music as a site of reprieve, catharsis, and fantasy. In a scene in the film, Rose quietly strums a guitar and mumbles sounds and unfinished lyrics for her song called “Square Peg” (2020). She sings:

I never fit in and I never could win. Though I try and try this feeling don’t end.

I feel out of place, song out of tune, like a velvet chair in a dusty saloon.

Square peg, round hole. (Paragas and Watson, 2020)

Rose gently sways as the sanguine tone and smooth vibrato of her voice fills the privacy of her bedroom. When she finishes singing and writing this lyric, she raises her hand in the air in address of her imaginary audience and says, “thank you Austin, I’ll be here all week.” Her song is melancholic and the lyrics gesture to the incommensurability of Filipinx and American country music imaginaries. Rose is a “square peg” attempting to fit herself within a “round hole.” She is aware of this dissonant entanglement which does little to temper her fantasies of addressing an audience that might 1 day celebrate her queer presence on country music stages. She projects these feelings into a melody that sounds akin to the Filipinx song her mother would sing and comfort her with called, “Dahil Sayo” (Velarde, 1938). Perhaps this shared melody is of no coincidence. Here, through song, we are witness to Rose expressing psychic conflicts in both cognitive and unconscious ways.

Both “Dahil Sayo” and “Square Peg” smoothly move from the notes: E flat, F, G, and B flat. Hailing the sonic debris of “Dahil Sayo,” “Square Peg” emerges as a sonic reminder of the ways that children craft their own sites of comfort and pleasure amidst difficult emotional encounters. The palimpsestic appearance of this shared melody signals an opportunity for Rose to revise her difficult relations to her mother and their shared experiences of migration. It is possible that Rose has crafted a song that allows her psychic intimacy with the memory of her mother’s voice. Motivated by repair, Rose pursues aesthetic expression as a mode of not only touching the past, but also creating something that is new and entirely her own. For Eve Sedgwick, the process of reparation is amenable to the “amelioration” of pain in exchange for the fulfillment of pleasure (Sedgwick, 2003: 144). According to Sedgwick, by complicating notions of what pleasure is, an individual defers expectations about the potential success of an action. Instead, she explains, the process of “doing” comes into focus, which, in an Austinian framework, refers to the *performative* quality of the action (4). Bringing Sedgwick to bear on the film, rather than reading Rose’s life as simply stuck in multiple systems of oppression and trapped by the hold of American assimilation, a reparative reading suggests that through “doing,” a more complicated and generative relation to abjection is enacted.11

Reparation, to follow Klein (1987) “paves the way for more satisfactory object relations and sublimations” (p. 189). In the depressive position, objects are not easily split between bad and
good, but are synthesized as whole. For Rose, the reparative utility of music allows for her to resist idealizing or harshly attacking her mother, or the painful conditions of diasporic subjectivity, through projective identification. Rather, music instantiates the depressive position, where through the creation of music and sound, Rose is able to tolerate that which is abject in her life. As I have been suggesting, music allows Rose to not only experience her mother and her situation as a whole object, but she too becomes whole in the process. When Rose forgoes defensive projective identification, her ego grows stronger and more integrated. She can then reorganize her relations to her difficult feelings and better tolerate uncertainty. Her writing and singing are guided by this imperative to repair.

In her essay on *The Orestia*, Klein (1975) writes, “The creative artist makes full use of symbols; and the more they serve to express the conflicts between love and hate, between destructiveness and reparation, between life and death instincts, the more they approach universal form” (p. 299). Music offers Rose a platform to consciously and unconsciously come into contact with emotional states, that she may find uncomfortable or shameful. Klein explains that reparation involves the attachment of phantasies and emotions to an object. She writes, “[t]he child puts his love and hate, his conflicts, his satisfactions and his longing into the creation of these symbols, internal and external, which become part of his world” (299). The symbols and aesthetic characters found in country music are an important part of Rose’s world. They help Rose to situate herself in relation to the abjected fragments of history, in order to better prepare her for dealing with the external world. For Klein’s model of reparation is, before dealing with the external world, an internal process.

Rose’s relationship to country music involves the often-unconscious work required to land on the right music notes, words, and feelings. After a difficult visit with her mother at an immigrant detention facility, which involves an ICE officer cutting their meeting short and forbidding her access to her mother’s physical affection and consolation, Rose is distressed. She turns to the support of her music mentor, country singer, Dale Watson, and in a determined tone she announces to him, “You and I are going to write some songs, I got some shit to express. Take your damn guitar. . .just play some chords.” In this scene, the country song acts as an object of transference making it possible for Rose to encounter difficult feelings and thereby making them more tolerable. Put another way, Rose redirects her conscious and unconscious feelings into songwriting. Indeed, it is her mentor, who reminds her to “Let it roll. Let it come out. All of this stuff with your mom, let it come out. . .work it out a bit in a song.” Country music offers Rose a heightened awareness of self and others, enabling her with the ambivalence needed to cope with the instability of her environment. The film in many ways is also an object of transference for director, Diane Paragas, who loosely based the plot on her own experiences of being racialized in a small town called Lubbock, Texas (https://variety.com/2020/artisans/news/diane-paragas-yellow-rose-film-mira-nair-1234799335/).

**I ain’t going down: Queer sound as repair**

On the night of Rose’s first musical showcase, she begins her set slowly playing her acoustic guitar and singing the following words: “You won’t get the best of me. You ain’t seen the rest of me. I may go, but I’ll come back around.” The song positions Rose at center-stage leading a backing band comprised of mostly white men. She is drawn to *The Broken Spoke*, a venue that on a busy night brims with white patrons. White country performers fill the stage while their white audiences sway and swing on the dance floor. This venue, like many others, relies on the racialized and undocumented labor that is separated and concealed into rooms and corridors away from the bar and stage. Rose recognizes the potential for community in both spaces. However, despite the homogeneity of the scene beyond the bar, Rose is seemingly unphased by her dissonant presence. She finishes
singing the above phrase with a bright, country vocal twang which then segues into full band accompaniment. Rose proclaims, “I ain’t going down, I’ll keep standing tall.” The sound of her voice and the affects that surface throughout her performance reflect the reparative work of music, but also a politics of presence that contests and reimagines her racialized subjectivity. On this stage, Rose is the creative force that controls her cast of white back up players subverting the American teleology of racial order. She anoints herself as determined to survive while also reveling in the affective charge of her performance. Smiling she sings, “You can give me your best shot. Give it everything you’ve got. I’m here to tell you, I ain’t goin’ down.” Her performance loosens the demands for American assimilation and draws our attention to the haptic nature of sound as an agentic force that moves people in their own sovereign way. The twang in her voice delivers a queer sonic that opens Rose to “pleasure however it may come” (Crawley, 2014). I have used the term queer sonic in an attempt to capture the unassimilable qualities of sound, so that we might broaden the scopes of possibility for a young, undocumented Filipinx girl performing country music within the backdrop of a nation that would otherwise consider her abject.

On this evening, Rose sings with a recognizable country drawl and is dressed in an embroidered western button up shirt, cowboy hat, and cowboy boots. Contesting the “hegemony of vision” (Crary, 1990; Moten, 2003) that shapes discourses of race and racism, Rose’s Filipinxness is surplus to the genre’s loyal affiliation to American whiteness. Even her lyrics defy country’s most dominant trope, nostalgia. According to Geoff Mann, “the temporal politics that constitutes so much of the narrative of country music must pivot discursively on a past (however fictional or revisionist), but it is fundamentally about past-ness itself (89).” Sentimental attachments to the past or the “good old days” of American history are less likely to resonate with non-white American listeners. The sound and lyrics of country music are not typically future-oriented, but Rose condemns the past in favor of a temporal orientation that is inescapably present and resolute. She sings: “Into the school of hard knocks, they say I’ve been around the clock. I’m here to tell you, I ain’t goin’ down.” In this scene, Rose is operating from within what Klein deems as the depressive position. Music provides Rose with an opportunity to integrate the bad and good aspects of her social and psychic world. The attempted synthesis of love and hate is necessary in order to work through the psychic injury of her traumatic separation from her mother and orient herself toward repair.

At The Broken Spoke, speaking quietly into the microphone, Rose dedicates her first performance on a big stage to her mother. Her mother has now been deported back to the Philippines and can only be virtually present. Rose’s Tita holds up a tablet in the audience intent on broadcasting the performance to her family who is watching across an ocean and in a different time zone. Information communication technologies like Skype, Facetime, and Facebook Messenger have shaped the possibilities of building intimacy across borders. In The Labor of Care, Valerie Francisco-Menchavez studies the reconfiguration of transnational Filipino families under neoliberal globalization. In her 5-year study of Filipina migrants and their transnational families, including children, she documents the emergent forms of care made possible through the ongoing development of digital technology. She argues that the simultaneity of experience via digital space enables a “continuum of multidirectional care work as a transnational practice” (11). As she demonstrates, care work is circulated by all family and kin relations through the exchange of skills and knowledge related to the use of communication technologies.

As Francisco-Menchavez describes, the movement of care flows between multiple networks of kin as caregivers and care receivers. Thus, she suggests that sometimes these technologies are the only available platforms that necessitate visual interactions between family members, and that these affective realities are a product of the political and economic demands of capitalism that
create livelihoods contingent on separation. For her research participants, the crafting of innovative strategies of staying connected in “real time” is only possible in a world where their very sustenance relies on their separation from their family. The “multidirectionality of care” (93) made possible through technology offers Rose an alternative mode of relating to her mother that is not prohibited by the assumption that care requires corporeal encounters. Given this distance, Rose uses music and technology as a method of bringing joy to her mother. In this scene, sound enables a queer intimacy that doesn’t forego the brutality of their separation (Rose is indeed deserving of her mother’s presence), but instead offers affective and material resources that help to bridge the gap, if not only temporarily.

**Conclusion**

The performance of music serves as an artistic process that can upend the burdens of representation and insistences on cultural authenticity. In hopes of recouping sound and performance as sites that reimagine racialized ascriptions of Filipinx performers, this article argues that what remains peripheral to the tropes that render Filipinx performers legible to others are forms of pleasure and agency that exceed identity politics. For Rose, being a country singer does not make her more legible to the American nation state, nor does it lead to a happy reunification with her mother. Rather, *Yellow Rose* is a story about how a child culls an aesthetic strategy to survive amidst the brutalizing force of racism and the enduring American imperial project. While it could be argued that Rose’s use of American country music interpellates her as being submissive to histories of colonial and racial subjugation, I suggest that her queer presence on stage and the queer sounds she produces allow for what See (2009) might call “alternative modes of proximity” to these histories (32). As I have described, queer sounds destabilize what we think we might know about social constructions of identity. Sound in the form of music has the potential to force confrontation with affects that might undo or queer us. Rose presents sounds that defy the hegemony of visual regimes and thus, she sonically harnesses new potential for social intimacies and ontological categories of knowability.

The colonial conditions of possibility that mark Rose’s songs and performances are inescapably present. She is a child, navigating the United States as an undocumented immigrant and has little access to Filipinx family and community. The responsibilities she shoulders in order to stay in the city she loves signal the enduring political economies of migration control and racial hierarchy. My analysis of the film responds to its foreboding sense of loss with a focus on the reparative force of art, in this case music, in the life of a child facing crisis. In *Audiotopia*, Kun (2005) suggests that “the formation of America depends upon the performance of songs by people whose singing of those songs defines their Americanness” (30). Rose contributes songs to an American landscape that refuses to submit to the allure and hegemony of the melting pot. She offers us sounds and performances that are enriched by their hybridity and works both the Americanized trappings of the genre and its inevitable limits as a means of making sense of her difference while also making something new.

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**ORCID iD**

Casey Mecija [https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7417-4738](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7417-4738)
Notes

1. Recently, Filipinx has emerged as a popular term for describing people and experiences related to the Philippines. Without a gendered imperative for either male or female (i.e. Filipino or Filipina), I employ this term in my own writing. However, some of the literature I have read and will discuss uses Filipino and/or Filipina, I do, at times, echo these terms in my writing.

2. The figure of “the child” in Western culture is consistently produced as “innocent” and in need of adult protection. The precipitate cultural politics of childhood innocence is the ground upon which the racialized and brutal consequences of undocumented immigration can be closely interrogated. Though Rose is on the precipice of young adulthood, I read her within the context of Childhood Studies for two reasons. First, I do so in order to question the ethics of care for racialized children caught within immigration systems; this issue has been importantly theorized by scholars such as Bhabha (2011) and Franciscisco-Menchavez (2018). Second, I do so to force confrontation with the colonial workings of the US empire in the Philippines that has systematically mechanized the infantilization of Filipinx adults in order to justify its imperial presence.

3. Hemphill (1970), Mann (2008), and Peterson (1992) argue that the genre of country music is historically associated with an imagined “white culture” in North America. Mann (2008) suggests that country music’s perceived whiteness is connected to a “nostalgic temporality” where lyrics, instrumentation, and country ‘twang’ hail white people into an ideological terrain of dehistoricized innocence and social disenfranchisement. Country music has sustained itself through the commodification of an unchanging whiteness that is “always simultaneously aesthetic and political” (91). The common conflation of country music with whiteness negates the fact that whiteness is not homogenous nor is there a “pure” white American culture and that country music emerges from an eclectic mix of music inclusive of African, African American, and Mexican sonic traditions (Mann, 75).

4. José Muñoz’s concept of disidentification has helped me to imagine how racialized and sexually marginalized subjects challenge hegemonic expectations of whiteness, heteronormativity, and citizenship. Muñoz argues that disidentification is about the “recycling and rethinking of encoded meaning” (Disidentifications 31). To disidentify is an act of political resistance against normative scripts that reveals how racialized people have been “rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture” (31) Rose’s love of country music can be read as a complicated disidentification where her engagement with the genre signals both a form of assimilation and resistance to the discursive construction of Filipinx children.

5. See Lee’s (2007) article The “Yellow Peril” and Asian Exclusion in the Americas Pacific Historical Review, Vol. 76, No. 4, pp. 537–562.

6. Proclamation No. 5574. The Rose Proclaimed the National Floral Emblem of the United States of America. Nov. 20, 1986.

7. Trudier Harris uses Anita Richmond Bunkley’s citation of the song in her book, “Emily, The Yellow Rose, p. iv.”

8. See “The Yellow Rose of Texas: A Different Cultural View” by Trudier Harris for an indepth examination of the songs contextual origins and connections to Black American history.

9. For a thorough discussion of how the trope of the “Little Brown Brother” leveraged scientific racism and an attention to being “short” or “little” as a racialized problem, see Gideon Lasco’s “‘Little Brown Brothers’: Height and the Philippine-American Colonial Encounter (1898–1946).” In it, Lasco writes, “Physical anthropology gave quantitative form to these differences, and photography allowed their visual representation to be transported to the West. Together, these representational practices as well as actual height differences between the colonizer and colonized led to the view that Filipinos are ‘short’ and ‘little’” (377). Here, I am interested in the tethering of height, and, in particular, the comparative framework that measures “little” Filipino bodies against “tall” American counterparts, to the corporeal dimensions of the Philippine-American encounter.

10. I would like to extend deep gratitude to my anonymous peer reviewers for their generative provocations around queering kinship and the importance of pointing out the agentic choices Rose makes in order to source other forms of support and a sense of safety.
11. Eve Sedgwick’s use of reparation insists on the creativity required to synthesize guilt into hope. Put differently, reparation involves creative reactions around negative motions like abjection, loss, and mourning. She argues that being hopeful entails not focusing too intently on the negative (or critique) of culture (Touching 146).

12. Geoff Mann argues that a cultural politics of nostalgia is connected to a time associated with dominant ideologies of whiteness in the contemporary US. See Geoff Mann, Why does country music sound white? Race and the voice of nostalgia (2008).

13. Francisco-Menchavez uses the term transnational family to defer the hegemony of nuclear configurations and to connote the production of family in two or more nation-states.

14. Some examples of how Filipinx people return the colonial gaze through performance are Christine Balance’s, How It Feels to Be Viral Me: Affective Labor and Asian American YouTube Performance, Broderick Chow’s, Feeling in Counterpoint: Complicit Spectatorship and the Filipino Performing Body, Theodore Gonsalves’, The Day the Dancers Stayed: Performing in the Filipino/American Diaspora, J. Lorenzo Perillio’s, “If I was not in prison, I would not be famous”: Discipline, Choreography, and Mimicry in the Philippines, and Karen Tongson’s Empty Orchestra: The Karaoke Standard and Pop Celebrity.

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**Author biography**

Casey Mecija is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication Studies and holds a PhD from the University of Toronto. Her current research theorizes sounds made in and beyond Filipinx diaspora to make an argument about a “queer sound” that permeates diasporic sensibilities. Her work suggests that media production enables diasporic people to create forms of belonging that defy racialized ascriptions born from racism, colonialism, and their gendered dimensions. She is also a musician and filmmaker, whose work has received several accolades and has been presented internationally.