Just Vibrations

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Running Games

In the spring of sixth grade, my friend Philip and I spent our lunch breaks running from a clan of corrupt ninjas. It was a dangerous time to be a student at Annie B. Jamieson Elementary in Vancouver, British Columbia. Ninjas were relentless, and since they blended so smoothly into the shadows, none of our other classmates believed they existed. Good thing Philip and I could fend for ourselves: we knew the ideal hiding spots, stayed swift on our feet, melded into crowds, and communicated over walkie-talkies in secret code (more or less Mandarin, given that the ninjas were reputedly French-Canadian). The affair concluded melodramatically one rainy recess at the monkey bars, with Philip dying in my arms while a flock of our peers looked on with genuine concern. Yet by the next day, everything returned to normal. Philip came back from the dead, and the ninjas vanished, as ninjas do.

In childhood, we played many games. Some games weren’t simply adversarial, but driven further by the imagination of clear and present dangers: cops and robbers, Bloody Mary in the mirror, the nominally dehumanized *It* of tag—always posing a sense of virtual villainy afoot. Play-fighting was par for the course; as animals boisterously show, it’s helpful should real threats ever strike. So we hid from the Seeker as
if our lives depended on it, scarpered when Mr. Wolf howled for dinner, and leaped across the nice furniture in the house because the floor seethed with lava. In adult life, even the most serious activities continue to be deemed game-like, from relationships and elections to drone operations and the war on drugs. As grownups, we remain experts at inventing and obsessing over bogeymen—no longer actual monsters under the bed (though superstitions can persist), but in the form of criminals, politicians, corporations, and ideologies. In the absence of immediate concerns, we might nonetheless go rooting out causes for outrage, jumping on social media pages to join the deluge of righteous protest that sweeps the Internet. From cradle to grave, we imagine dragons. They bring the world alive, fueling the fiery power grabs of daily existence.

Even when engaged as harmless games, the summoning of big bad adversaries channels a feeling of paranoia. Around the same time Philip and I were making a public display battling ninjas, I began stumbling privately toward a murky awareness of my gay identity. With neither the proper vocabulary nor maturity to process my emotions, I had only an inkling that something about me wasn’t right, wasn’t normal. Accompanying this impression was an equally vague anxiety about being found out. I couldn’t yet put my finger on what I was trying to hide, but whatever it was, I knew I wanted to keep it under wraps. Each day of an otherwise privileged upbringing was attended by a pulsing dread about how the secret might burst. Through a slip of the tongue? An off-pitch inflection or a limp twirl of the hand? A misdirected glance in the locker room? With dilated pupils?

In angst, I found sanctuary in two activities—playing piano and playing video games. With piano, the demands were simple: eighty-eight keys, make them sing. Video games were straightforward as well: a handful of buttons, beat the boss. Of particular comfort was the clarity of rules and goals. The flow of play afforded meditative escape into a protracted present. Aside from worries about the next cadence or the next castle, time fell away. Like many queer or questioning youths, I lived in cloudy fear of futurity, with scary tomorrows emptied of heterosexual prospects and cozy conformity. Getting in the groove of a Chopin waltz or *Mario Kart* was akin to hitting Pause on life, freezing the countdown to the outing sure to come. At worst, the hazards of playing piano were wrong notes, memory slips, and my teacher’s rebukes when I swayed too dramatically on the bench in precocious efforts to appear profound. Video games proved even more forthcoming in their concrete presentations of pitfalls and enemies. Although these pixelated obstacles were virtual, they—like
French-Canadian ninjas—sometimes felt more tangible than the dangers out there in the physical world, and infinitely more vanquishable than whatever demons rattled here in my psyche.

A pair of opposing metaphors from Chinese lore sums up the world’s queer and playful indeterminacies: paper tigers, things that seem more powerful than they really are; and hidden dragons, things that are more powerful than they initially seem. Paper tigers, spawned from paranoid imaginations, crumple like origami under investigative pressure. They are the spooky shadows cast by household objects, the freaky noises of branches scraping against the window, the flimsy strawmen invoked in polemics, and anything else we treat as threats until we acknowledge (with sheepish relief, maybe slight disenchantment) that they are not very threatening at all. Hidden dragons, by contrast, are underestimated forces, perchance dangers, that elude attention and care: environmental menaces (secondhand smoke, greenhouse gas emissions), medical misdiagnoses (severe health conditions masked by run-of-the-mill symptoms), hurtful words (leaving deep, latent cuts), and thorns that sting with extra savagery by virtue of rosy ruse. People disagree widely, of course, on what perils are real or false, urgent or trivial. This truism alone accounts for plenty of society’s ails. Opinions can diverge based on political partisanship, religious belief, philosophical dogma, and cultural affinity.

If any consensus exists, it’s that life is a dangerous game. No guarantees of extra lives or take-backs or do-overs. But even in a world overrun by red herrings and silent killers, we sometimes go looking for still more trouble, conjuring foes and obstacles where none existed. We might do this out of boredom, mischievous impulses, or efforts to distract ourselves from other problems at hand. Threats, by definition, bear directly on our happiness and survival. On this front, we have every reason to keep our priorities straight. Frequently, however, people show that they’re not above queering such priorities. On an unpredictable basis, we switch up our views of the booby-trapped universe, resist social mandates of what and whom we’re meant to fear and fight, dance away from paths of least resistance, and play fast and loose with dictums of self-preservation.

Paranoid impulses lurk in the recesses of academia. Years ago, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick came up with the term paranoid reading to describe the mainstream strategies of modern critical scholarship. Academics, according to Sedgwick, are trained to write in a manner that preemptively repels potential knocks against their work. With abundant qualifiers, quotes, caveats, and precautionary self-disparagement, the savvy
scholar anticipates and suppresses others’ grievances before they can be aired. Building on the ideas of Melanie Klein, Sedgwick found problems with these bids for power and, even more so, with aspirations to omnipotence. As Heather Love puts it, paranoid readings involve “familiar academic protocols like maintaining critical distance, outsmarting (and other forms of one-upmanship), refusing to be surprised (or if you are, then not letting on), believing the hierarchy, becoming boss.” Paranoid work desires authority. Driven by negative affects and a “hermeneutics of suspicion,” such scholarship aims to outfox, to enact power, and to produce results beyond reproach (figure I.1). It embodies a form of “strong theory” that is expository, generalizable, and glaringly ambitious, “disavowing its affective motive and force, and masquerading as the very stuff of truth.” By actively mining for the threats in the world, practitioners of paranoid readings rarely fail to unearth the truths that they are chasing. With seductive rhetoric and logic, they produce self-satisfying critiques, which in turn affirm, after the fact, that no one can ever be paranoid enough. Examples of paranoid reading sound like what many academics today would simply consider good scholarship. And this is the point: paranoid registers have become so common that they now pass as self-evident and normal. To attempt otherwise can come off as weak or weird. “In a world where no one need be delusional to find evidence of systemic oppression,” sighed Sedgwick, “to theorize out of anything but a paranoid critical stance has come to seem naïve, pious, or complaisant.”

Because paranoid readings work to stave off unfavorable judgment, they encourage a polyvocal writing style, one that mixes the author’s voice and values into an echo chamber of what others have said (citations and footnotes galore), what others would say (using impersonal pronouns such as the royal we or the universal one), and what others will say (anticipated criticisms). With rapid-fire delivery of points and counterpoints, this rhetoric performs a flashy fugue that spins out the authorial subject and its answers into multiple guises. In the paranoid mode, polyphony is key and complexity is king. Its fugue reverberates through a fun house of mirrors, a daunting setup that enables the writer-illusionist to keep the true self a moving target, leaving interlocutors guessing. A hermeneutics of suspicion plays peekaboo with signifiers and their vanishing traces, a dour game of semiotic cat and mouse. As Rita Felski points out, suspicious reading “is a language game in quite a literal sense of ‘game.’” As such, it combines rules and expectations with the possibility of unexpected moves and inventive calculations, enabling a form of care-
fully controlled play.”11 Trained as a musicologist, I’ve learned to play this game by parsing musical texts and moments through analysis, archival research, and fieldwork. Music scholars’ recent efforts to privilege sensation and performance have upped the ante, pushing for contemplation of ephemeral events, excitable bodies, and unruly choreographies.12 Although music comes with “broad shoulders” capable of supporting variable interpretations, riding around on these shoulders never feels all that steady.13 As impressive as any critical effort might be, there’s always more ground to cover, more notes to catch.

But as we scramble for authority—as we race for erudite discoveries and prestige—should we pause to check our moral pulse as well as the pulse of respective academic fields? Amid paranoid readings and dialectical games, what and whom are we really running for, running to, and running from? How do real and imagined monsters (critics, fears, failures) nip at our heels and dictate our courses? Can we ever afford to slow down? As we seek professional strength and safety, what important things might we be leaving in the dust? In the face of modern information and illusions, how can we renegotiate the means and purposes of careful labor, intellectual inquiry, and living soundly?

**Yes, It Is!**

Leading up to the 2009 conference for Feminist Theory and Music, Lydia Hamessley shared this memory:
The genesis of the first FTM can be traced to the American Musicological Society annual meeting in Baltimore, MD in 1988. At that conference, there was an unprecedented critical mass of panels and papers that focused on “women in music.” . . . At a Committee on the Status of Women meeting, Rosemary Killam rose in anger when a male audience member (I absolutely cannot remember who it was) suggested that it wasn’t his problem if his female students couldn’t work late in the library because they feared walking across campus late at night. “Oh yes, it is, sir; yes, it is!” she shouted.14

What institutional and intellectual alibis could lead a scholar (or any person) to voice a disregard for students’ safety? We can try to guess where this male audience member believed his priorities lay: in musicology, in the study of music—its beauty, import, intricacies. Music served as an out, enabling him to run from extracurricular care.

Maybe this man didn’t mean what he said. No doubt, we all say bad things and lamentably sound off from time to time. Maybe he regretted his words and quickly reformed his views. Most of us would agree, after all, that a professor does bear responsibilities for students’ well-being. It’s common sense and basic decency, an implicit clause in the job contract.15 Actually, it’s more than just a clause: arguably, it’s the moral bottom line. Students, not least women walking alone at night, have legitimate reasons to be on guard against incident of rape and violence. In September 2015, the Association of American Universities published results of a massive survey on sexual assault. Across twenty-seven universities, “the incidence of sexual assault and sexual misconduct due to physical force, threats of physical force, or incapacitation among female undergraduate student respondents was 23.1 percent, including 10.8 percent who experienced penetration.”16 Although some writers have since criticized this survey for its methodologies and possible inaccuracies, the disseminated results have helped boost awareness and action across campuses.17 Skeptics are entitled to continue quibbling about the infamous one-in-five or one-in-four statistic (the percentage of female college students who allegedly experience sexual assault), but at a certain point, the hairsplitting starts to sound apologist. Numerically, any study contains margins of error. The point is that ethically—when it comes to our collective obligations to address these injuries—the margin of error should be zero.

Let’s pose the question of scholarly priorities in a more challenging way. Is musicology about the safety of a female music student?18 No, it
isn’t, if we define musicology starkly as the study of music. But yes, it is, if we envision musicology as all the activities, care, and caregiving of people who identify as members of the musicology community. In a post-Obama *yes-we-can* era, Killam’s *yes, it is!* can serve anew as a disciplinary rallying cry. Beyond overtly activist work, what if we regularly upheld care not just as a bonus activity or a by-product of scholarship? In a world where injuries run rampant, what if care is the point?\(^{19}\)

Riffing on Marshall McLuhan and Andy Warhol, Phil Ford has characterized the discipline of musicology as “anything you can get away with.”\(^{20}\) By this, he means that rather than categorically insisting on what topics do or do not fall under musicology, let’s conceive of musicology as whatever self-identified musicologists choose to do. Disciplinary boundaries incessantly shift and shimmer anyway—so why not justify their flexibility via people’s diverse, quirky interests? “The primary pleasure that scholarship offers is the chance to encounter other minds and thereby expand one’s own,” Ford muses. “The full range of other minds constitutes the true horizon that bounds the humanist; nothing human should be alien to us.”\(^{21}\) But if musicology is anything we can get away *with*, a caveat is that the discipline must simultaneously encompass everything we cannot afford to run away *from*—care, compassion, and interpersonal concerns that don’t always sound scholarly as such. In other words, the purpose of disciplinary belonging isn’t to get away with your choice of labor, so as merely to survive. The purpose is to thrive and to enable others to do so in turn.\(^{22}\) For scholars fortunate enough to land on tenure tracks or obtain positions of influence, doesn’t the task of caring become even more pressing? Cynthia Wu declares that we shouldn’t “forget about the original purpose of tenure—to protect academic freedom.”\(^{23}\) Yet Wu also implores us not to forget the duties of academic freedom—namely, to advocate for people who do not possess such freedom and its privileges. Tenure, Jennifer Ruth believes, “enable[s] you to endure unpopularity for something bigger than yourself.”\(^{24}\) Academic freedom, then, isn’t a license to be carefree. It’s an *opportunity* to care widely, assertively, and generously.

Ford points to Susan McClary as an example of a scholar who endured unpopularity for her trailblazing overtures in feminist musicology. McClary’s initial adversity can remind us to “appreciate the license her work gave to all of us coming up behind her. She took a lot of crap—the critical response to *Feminine Endings* was perhaps the most epic bout of mansplaining in the history of musicology—but she . . . did it with style, and she got away with it.”\(^{25}\) The flair of McClary’s prose, Ford emphasizes,
went a long way in boosting the influence and controversies of *Feminine Endings*. As academics know, writing and speaking proficiently can carry enormous cachet. Sounding good grabs attention. It gets people to care.

With this in mind, *Just Vibrations* asks a small question with big answers: what is the purpose of sounding good? Rhetorically, sounding good entails writing and speaking in a seemingly intelligent manner, which can impress people, win arguments, and elevate one’s status. Paranoid criticism, as described by Sedgwick, exemplifies some of these dazzling tactics. An ability to reason artfully and communicate efficiently reaps rewards. Even in our most banal exchanges, we’re constantly navigating tricky tides of verbal and sonic propriety. Recognizing the importance of language to our self-presentation, we choose words and sounds that minimize our risks of being shamed or shot down. Fear of sounding bad, sounding off, or sounding wrong can deter expression altogether. If you write eloquently enough, will your paper get accepted by a top-ranked journal? If you speak normatively enough during a phone interview, can you pass as straight, able-bodied, white, and American, potentially improving your chances? If you sing melodiously enough, will your amateur YouTube recordings go viral? History has shown how mighty pens and silver tongues—just ink on a page, just vibrations in the air—can move mountains and make leaders. In this regard, sounding good is a means of doing well in society, if by well we mean claiming positions of power.

My proposal, simply put, is this: what if the primary purpose of sounding good isn’t to do well, but to do good? In competitive economies, doing well tends to mean pulling ahead of others. Doing good would involve reaching out and reaching back, lending help to those in need, and seeking opportunities for care and repair. Repair is a crucial word here. Its many significations include physical reassembly, bodily rehabilitation, restorative justice, monetary reparation, and disaster relief. But repair also attaches to crass synonyms of fix and cure, notions easily co-opted by a capitalist ethos of purportedly healthy competition and its reinvestments in inequality, resilience, and normativity. In *Just Vibrations*, I’m interested in the ethical tensions within repair’s connotations, and specifically in reparative horizons where speech acts and other sonic matter converge. Literate societies put huge stock in rhetorical ability—yet for reasons of alterity, disability, or disenfranchisement, some people do not speak well (by societal conventions), some are admonished for speaking too much (oversharing and making noise), some do not speak frequently (due to, say, shyness), some speak unusually (slowly,
or with a stutter, or via conspicuous technological assistance), some do not speak at all (from injury or trauma), and some speak but nevertheless go unheard. By the same token, some people hear (neuro)typically, whereas others hear less (by normative standards), hear differently (Deaf Gain), or hear too much (sensory overload, hyperacusis). None of these conditions should be grounds for depriving individuals of compassion and connection. Try to recall a time in your life when you found yourself speechless or supernoisy, whether from joyous news or devastating injuries, from a gorgeous sight or a terrible deed. Amid crushing silence or the din of shouts—at the apex of emotion—you felt, as the saying goes, beside yourself. As such, sounding good likely also felt beside the point, as you stayed mute or snorted or sobbed or hollered. Yet these are often the precise moments when we most desire companionship, consolation, and leeway. Beyond questions of words and feelings, Just Vibrations reimagines the viability of solidarity and optimism through our pressures to sound good and hear good in daily life, where sounding and hearing signify more capaciously than as the literal faculties of able minds and bodies.

An easy target for a societal dearth of care is neoliberalism, which insists on self-reliance over dependency, on cutthroat competition over mutual welfare. Akemi Nishida notes how “productivity, or hyperproductivity, is an expectation and desire within academia under neoliberalism.” Despite a nominally shared root, people who identify as social liberals tend to scorn neoliberals’ values of privatization and self-interest. But as for larger questions of who speaks and who gets heard, liberalism has its own shortcomings. “Liberalism invokes a notion of political participation in which one makes one’s voice heard,” points out Eva Feder Kittay. “It depends on a conception of the person as independent, rational, and capable of self-sufficiency.” Kittay has written extensively about her daughter Sesha, who lives with congenital cerebral palsy. Sesha cannot read, talk, or walk. Within liberal and neoliberal frameworks, her condition renders her a misfit in terms of autonomy and personhood. This is where care comes in. As Kittay avows, care “is a labor, an attitude, and a virtue. As labor, it is the work of maintaining ourselves and others when we are in a condition of need. It is most noticed in its absence, most needed when it can be least reciprocated.” Care is a labor of love. Sesha loves and is loved. She loves people and she loves listening to music. Kittay remarks that “music is [Sesha’s] life and Beethoven her best friend. At our home, listening to the Emperor Concerto, she gazes out the window enthralled, occasionally turning to us with a twinkle in her
eye when she anticipates some really good parts.”

Although Sesha may never be able to verbalize her enjoyment of Beethoven, her feelings feel evident for those who care to watch and listen.

As a musicologist, I’ve sometimes heard colleagues from other disciplines tell me how lucky I am to spend my days (they assume) listening to and thinking about music. Studying music, these envious comments imply, must be a labor of love. I’ve been led to wonder, therefore, whether musical skills ever enable or prime us to listen better to people and to take up love’s labors more broadly. Do musicians and musicologists—having undergone so much ear-training—possess any specialized aural capabilities or inclinations when it comes not just to music, but also to human interlocutors (how they sound, what they say, and unvoiced concerns)? People and musical pieces are obviously different entities, yet people routinely identify with music and identify as musical, sounding out subjectivities through melodies, lyrics, and bodies. Without painting an exceptionalist portrait of musicianship, is it possible that people who work with music for a living can lead by example in agendas of interpersonal care and communication? Could we go beyond modest understandings of empathy as a complement to musicality, and venture empathy as a resonant form of musicality? If part of musicianship can involve listening for better worlds, then musicology has the potential to initiate various progressive currents in ethics and critical thinking. To be clear, this isn’t saying that music makes us good people. It’s saying that certain aural positions may hold profound uses outside the music classroom, and that as much as anyone else, musicians and music scholars already recognize the immense challenges and rewards of listening creatively and caringly.

Care is, per John Rawls, a matter of fairness and a matter of justice. And justice, asserts Amartya Sen, can accommodate both reason and emotion. My caution here, however, has to do exactly with how societies privilege certain expressions of reason and emotion above others. If some people seem to lack rational faculties and rhetorical virtuosity, where do their voices fit in the chorus of just debate? Pain, impairment, intoxication, desire, and despair can all thwart our efforts to feel and appear reasonable. From time to time, lapses in judgment make us sound unintelligent, politically incorrect, or cold. To this end, my stance jibes with a memorable insight from the legal activist Bryan Stevenson, who works with the poor and the incarcerated: “Each of us is more than the worst thing we’ve ever done.” To this, I would add that each of us is potentially better than the worst things we’ve ever said. Sadly, society and
news media don’t operate under this assumption. Think of how swiftly celebrities who utter prejudicial slurs (Mel Gibson, Isaiah Washington, Paula Deen) fall from grace, or how easily singers who sound off (Milli Vanilli, Ashlee Simpson, Amy Winehouse) get booed off the stage. Vindictive societies can enchain people far longer than necessary. Within the discipline of musicology, recall the male audience member quoted by Lydia Hamessley, or the numerous scholars who responded in misogynist fashion to feminist and queer musicology. Our baser instinct is to immortalize these individuals as villains: once a jerk, always a jerk; once a sexist, always a sexist. But Stevenson’s merciful words would encourage us to believe that people can change, not least because people are more than what they once said.

Yet nor do I believe each of us is definable solely by the best thing we’ve ever said or done. We don’t get to rest on laurels, so long as the world needs work. Yes, abundant impediments can erode our resolve to bring care into the equation: self-interest; lack of motivation; believing we’re up against lost causes; and anxieties of being called a sanctimonious crusader. These deterrents don’t release us from reparative work. A profusion of obstacles means, if anything, that we must work that much harder.40

Besides the foundations of musicology writ large, this book builds on a triad of critical muses: affect theory, care ethics (refracted through disability studies and ideas of dependence), and queer theory. Affect continues to elude easy definition, but Kathleen Stewart captures one shade of it beautifully. Ordinary affects, Stewart says, are “things that happen. They happen in impulses, sensations, expectations, daydreams, encounters, and habits of relating, in strategies and their failures, in forms of persuasion, contagion, and compulsion, in modes of attention, attachment, and agency.”41 Focusing on affect means seriously considering feelings, pleasurable as well as painful. For my aims, hermeneutics and sensation enter into a lively tango, toeing into slippery spaces for rich discussions of sound and selfhood. Affective concerns resonate with care ethics in that both prioritize embodied encounters and the precarities of lived experience. Care ethics, in turn, maintains strong attachments to feminist inquiries. It is no coincidence that Hamessley’s anecdote, which raises questions about the care of female graduate students, pertains to the origins of the conferences for Feminist Theory and Music (now entering its twenty-fifth year).42 A call for care, as productive as it sounds, comes historically loaded because of societal and cultural presumptions about who is or is not responsible for giving care. Women, more so than men,
are expected to undertake care work and to make it work irrespective of professional obligations. Although some early proponents of feminist care ethics have argued that women are especially suited for caregiving, critics have rebuked these arguments as essentialist, parochial, and perpetuating female slave morality.

Insofar as care continues to be unjustly gendered, raced, classed, and allocated, I’m inclined to push care discourses out of their comfort zone and, in particular, to think of care as a queer matter. Calls for care can sound queer because they remain alien to straight-and-narrow mandates of professional life and capitalist systems. Care can benefit from greater scrutiny, yet it remains weirdly radical, a sentimental outlier against normative critical impulses. Although queer theory has a reputation for being angsty and abstract, optimistic and caring accounts are possible. One of my favorite vignettes of queerness comes from José Esteban Muñoz: “Some will say that all we have are the pleasures of this moment, but we must never settle for that minimal transport; we must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds. Queerness is a longing that propels us onward, beyond romances of the negative and toiling in the present. Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing.”

By this account, to perform queer and caring work is to recognize that things aren’t always what they seem and that things don’t have to stay the way they are. Queerness, more than an invitation for againstness, entails a sort of playfulness, a commitment to testing and transgressing boundaries in hopes of creatively thriving anew. One chapter in Just Vibrations deals overtly with LGBTQ subjects, yet queer inquiry at large serves to spark the book’s vast imaginations of livability and living on.

You, Reader

I still remember what it felt like to lose a tenure-track job in 1982, when the Reagan recession drove the college where I worked into bankruptcy, and what it felt like to live for ten years the grindingly hard life of ad hoc, marginal and marginalizing labor as a journeyman adjunct faculty member, what it felt like to teach at three institutions in a single day, preparing lectures in my head as I drove from place to place. But I do not want to patronize you, my un- and under-employed colleagues, nor do I want to slip into some patronizing, falsely
Momentum is building—not fast enough, but building all the same. The 2015 annual meeting of the American Musicological Society in Louisville, Kentucky, hosted more papers on accessibility, disability, labor, and public scholarship than ever before in AMS conference history. The program contained, however, a dire glitch. Among the most vital sessions was one called “Feminist Musicology and Contingent Labor,” featuring people who spoke at once powerfully and vulnerably about the challenges of justice, fairness, and parenthood in adjunct teaching and professional pursuits. The large room contained at least 150 chairs but, over the course of the session, drew no more than twenty audience members, including just three men (by my estimate). The low attendance owed unmistakably to the fact that this session took place at exactly the same time as the standing-room-only event of the LGBTQ Study Group, “A Serious Effort Not to Think Straight: Suzanne Cusick in Dialogue with Emily Wilbourne,” which likewise grappled with themes of love, care, and reform. Although the organizers and participants of both panels had previously pleaded with AMS officials to move the sessions to separate time slots, the appeals were denied. Without casting blame at administrators or coordinators (who hold the difficult and unenviable task of putting together a huge program), a cruel irony lay in how this scheduling conflict reproduced the precise issues of competition and scarcity that these two exceptional sessions aimed to address.

Questions of care and outreach have lately assembled under the umbrella initiatives of accessible musicology and public musicology, both of which push scholars to teach and learn from people outside the academy. Public musicology’s label is recent, but the practice is not. Agendas of justice, social change, and environmentalism have radiated through many of musicology’s siblings and study groups, from music education and music therapy to ecomusicology and applied ethnomusicology. By all appearances, public musicology has been happening for a while. And how could it not, given this wired era of social media and rapid informational exchange? Borrowing from Nicholas Cook: we are all public musicologists now. The only question is what kinds of scholars we choose to be and how to lead by example. Public scholarship, for what it’s worth, cannot flourish in the paranoid mode. Scholarship quali-
ifies as publicly salient only if it accommodates critiques by the public. It has to be accessible and comprehensible, open to praise and pushback from more than specialists alone. Addressing academics who aspire to public discourse, Mark Greif puts it this way: "Intellectuals: You—we— are the public… The public must not be anyone less smart and striving than you are, right now. It’s probably best that the imagined public even resemble the person you would like to be rather than who you are.”

Intellectual diligence can coexist with social relevance. Public scholarship means speaking up without talking down.

I dedicate Just Vibrations foremost to people concerned with reparative work, advocacy, and the distant yet colorful horizons of intellectual and interpersonal responsibility. Certain case studies will sound familiar primarily to music scholars, but the project aims to reach anyone invested in the intersections of care and criticism. The book is for the tenured Distinguished Professor who feels professionally secure enough to take on risky endeavors with relative freedom; and for not-yet-tenured junior colleagues or graduate students who tread nervously through minefields of institutional norms, expectations, and politics. The book is for over-worked, underpaid adjunct instructors who are multiply marginalized by bureaucracies, material scarcities, and the shrinking prospects of equitable employment; and for alternative academics who have ventured outside the ivory tower and wish to destigmatize the choices of alt-ac labor.

I don’t presume to speak on behalf of anyone who does not wish it. I speak to you, the reader, and hope to have an eventual opportunity to speak with you about our points of agreement and disagreement.

In this spirit, Just Vibrations listens for voices across diverse sources and mediums—not solely peer-reviewed print scholarship (still upheld as a gold standard in academia), but also trade books, queer memoirs, illness narratives, polemical blog posts, personal anecdotes, emotional email correspondences, and anonymous pleas for care on Internet forums. Without claiming to equate or democratize these disparate registers of expression, I unsettle conventional wisdoms about what sorts of publications are deemed more versus less valuable. One purpose is to let voices chime with each other. The result, though not always harmonious, can help destabilize the systemic dominance of so-called strong theory and writing. I want Just Vibrations to start a conversation. It isn’t—shouldn’t be—the last word.

Following Sedgwick’s gambit in Epistemology of the Closet, I lay bare three interlaced axioms for my book. First, that each of us has the potential to resonate molecularly, socially, and ethically with others.
Second, that by attending to how our convictions, relations, and actions ripple through public spaces, we can achieve a sense of how we matter and what matters most. And third, that sounds—things we say, music we make, noises we hear, pressures we feel—are too often and too facilely conceived as just (mere) vibrations, at times to the detriment of agendas that are just (fair, good, conscionable). Presumably ephemeral and invisible, sound’s offensive usages may escape commensurate prosecution and rectification, whether it’s the threatening words of bullies (waved off as pure threats versus sticks and stones) or the deafening force of police squads’ Long Range Acoustic Devices, deployed increasingly these days to quell protests. Music in particular, with its cultural connotations of leisure and pleasure, occasionally skirts moral scrutiny and serious intervention, even in such extreme cases as government-sanctioned music torture. Yet unjust, unethical vibrations can emotionally, physically rub us the wrong way and thus awaken us to action. Joachim-Ernst Berendt conceives of loud and disturbing sounds as such: the English word alarm, he points out, comes from the Italian allarme, “which in turn leads to all’arme, a call to arms. When we hear noise, we are constantly—but unconsciously—‘called to arms.’ We become alarmed.”

Chapter 1 traces the harrowing circumstances that moved me to undertake this project. Some years back, the onset of a chronic pain condition rendered me speechless for long spells at a time. Housebound and heavily medicated, I found myself unable to converse soundly, much less write properly. Pain swallowed language. My dialogues, internal and external, sounded fractured and feeble to my ears and, I assumed, to the ears of others. As an academic, I had taken rhetorical ability for granted. Its sudden recession left me adrift, unsure of my place in the world. Despite doctors’ use of stethoscopes, ultrasounds, MRIs, and other impressive equipment, I sometimes felt like I, the patient, wasn’t actually being heard. My intention behind these personal reflections isn’t to present an overcoming narrative. What I offer, rather, is a total disclosure of the situational and affective motives behind this book’s reparative slant. The goal isn’t to peddle inspiration, but to proffer insights that may come to us on the brink of expiration, when we feel curtains closing on lyrics left unsung.

Chapter 2 lends an ear to the powers and problems of sounding good in scholarly domains. Academic employment, promotions, and prestige
hinge on writing and speaking well. Paranoid readings showcase critical athleticism, playing awesome tennis with theses and antitheses, facts and counterfactuals. But such semantic sports can harden into habit. In recent years, scholars have proposed low, thin, and weak critical modes as alternatives to the traditional rubrics of high, thick, and strong. Irrespective of the scholarly practice in question, we can do good by reflecting on which truths matter most to us and to others. For all the care shown in academic production, we cannot neglect the care due to our peers. Reflections on early backlash against feminist and queer musicology bring echoes of Rosemary Killam’s yes, it is! and attendant feelings of responsibility. By applying pressure to concepts of aesthetic autonomy, academic freedom, and human agency, I aim to renovate the ivory tower’s architecture so as to shelter those who most need it.

Chapter 3 takes a queer turn toward the endangered currency of hope in our modern critical and social transactions. The archives of LGBTQ scholarship to date indicate that shame is topically sexy, full of secrets and affective turmoil. Pride, by contrast, is too plain, too easy. Queer theory seems gay-married to paranoid imperatives—but why? Drawing on Guerrilla Queer Bar, the It Gets Better Project, David Halperin’s peculiar visit to the AMS LGBTQ Study Group, and old debates about classical composers’ sexualities, I probe the dilemmas of shame, resiliency, and survival from childhood to adulthood. Among the most profound open secrets is that paranoia can breed more paranoia, and pain more pain. Breaking this vicious cycle requires a firmer grasp on the slippery reins of hope. It means opting out of the cultures of humiliation that pervade twenty-four-hour news cycles, social media, and spectacles of failure. Without promises of happily ever after, questions linger as to what attitudes and actions might offer some happiness and care, here and now.

Chapter 4 insists that reparative attitudes toward soundscapes can serve as barometers of better worlds. I stress-test this hypothesis by applying it to acoustic offenses that run the gamut: from tiny bleeps and clangs of urban noise pollution (exceedingly ordinary) to the American government’s use of music for torture (extraordinary, though not as rare as the dearth of public awareness would suggest). Practices of paranoid listening have proliferated alongside modes of paranoid reading. How we choose to think about the perpetration and tolerance of noise can lead us down ethical avenues of ruin or repair. I propose a vested awareness of how we might survive and thrive differently with the occasional hard reset on rote orientations toward scholarship, self, and sound. So
many opportunities exist for us to vibe empathically with those around us, even those who are emphatically not us.

At its heart, *Just Vibrations* is a voluminous thought experiment that brings a motley of musical, cultural, philosophical, pedagogical, and queer wisdoms to bear on modernity’s bitter truths and candied lies. The book charts a precarious escape route out of these suspicious games, sounding off against the power plays within and beyond music and musico-logy. From childhood onward, we get caught up in contests, facing real and imagined threats in daily routines. In academia, paranoid readings keep an iron grip on critical discourse. And in life as a whole, we rarely call time-outs or stage interventions for our mutually enabled dependencies on naysaying. But do alternatives to adversariality exist? If so, how can they resonate through the ways we write, identify, teach, learn, collaborate, perform, and love? What futures burst open when we temper our flares of chronic suspicion with cooling bouts of reparative belief, willful vulnerability, and childlike optimism? Looking to move against the grain, I try to do as I say—that is, to cultivate a tone that descants above the droning hums (and *hmms . . .* ) of paranoid imperatives. This book strives not for paranoid readings’ comprehensiveness or monumentality, but rather for impact and accessibility. The goal is prose that eschews the prosaic, opting instead to be conciliatory, flighty, upbeat: not blithe, but playful; not naive, yet radically wishful. By harmonizing rhetorical registers that are at once grave and gay—by setting the stark realities of the *here and now* against the important games of *as if* and *what if*—I feel my way through the noise, sounding out despair and pity and joy and pride. Tracking the pressures of dulcet and dissonant existence can ultimately work to illuminate our currencies of caring for a world that, in its morally bankrupt moments, seems to care so little for us.

*A Note on Scenes from Childhood*

Stories of youths flow freely through this book because they lend both weight and levity to explorations of optimism, imagination, and peril. Children do not, as a rule, sound good by societal standards: infants bawl on planes, kids say the darndest things, and moody teens clam up. Yet I cannot see a way to delve into a reparative project without diving for the trove of insights offered by youths as they mature, rebel, and resolve. My model isn’t some archetypal Freudian child, but rather a figure along the lines of Jack Halberstam’s description:
If, for the child, language is a playground where meaning is contingent, illusionary, motile, impermanent, and constantly shifting to keep up with the data flows that course across their inchoate consciousnesses, then maybe adults should improvise more, pick up terms, words, lexicons from children who, in many ways, live the world differently than we do, live it more closely, live it more intensely, and, sometimes, live it more critically.62

Childhood can be a queer, sometimes terrible, experience.63 Bullies, puberty, and tragic realities haunt kids coming of age. Gay youths (even more so, transgender youths and LGBTQ youths of color) continue to get left out in the cold, facing homelessness and violence at high rates. This makes childhood all the more central in urgent conversations about care and the need for good.

So before pushing forward, here’s one more glance back.

During my time at Annie B. Jamieson Elementary, students were required each year to bring earthquake preparedness kits, which teachers would collect and deposit in enormous steel boxes that sat on the playground. The idea was that if an earthquake trapped everyone within the school perimeter, students would find comfort in the kits’ personalized objects. All kits needed to include at least four items: emergency rations (typically candy bars), a flashlight, a game (such as a deck of cards), and a sealed envelope containing a loving letter from parents or guardians. The precautionary measure was merited by a lot of talk—which continues to this day—about Vancouver being overdue for an enormous quake (the Big One).

Needless to say, these preemptively reparative measures made the students paranoid. My friends and I spent time imagining how the world could literally crack open any day. At the end of each earthquake-free year, our kits were returned to us and we got to eat the stale candy inside, play our games, and read affectionate letters. Year after year, my parents kept it short and sweet with the same note:

_We love you! Don’t worry, be happy . . . bye-bye._

The vaguely morbid farewell was my parents’ English-as-second-language way of signing off (拜拜, the loanword of the English _by-bye_, is more commonly used by Mandarin-speakers than the actual native term for farewell). In third grade, a friend teased me about my parents’ silly choice of words. He called the letter _fobby_ (the slang adjective for fresh-off-the-
boat) and *Engrish*. I concurred with nervous laughter. Years later, I would come across an essay by Amy Tan in which she confessed her shame at having previously referred to her mother’s English as “broken,” which connotes a speech in need of repair, something that is “damaged and needed to be fixed, as if it lacked a certain wholeness and soundness.” Tan’s shame informed my own as I came to regret ever having belittled my parents’ language.

Because the point is that I still remember the earthquake letter. I happened to memorize its words because, as comically terse as they may be, the key sentiments are all there, idiomatic fault lines be damned:

> Love! Optimism, happiness . . . closure.

My translation; or, things that matter in the end.

And so what if the syntax came broken, as long as I caught the falling pieces and held them close after all these years?

They sounded good to me.