Just Vibrations

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Suspicious Times

In hard times, suspicion is always in style. It’s a survival tactic, a way of life that lets us anticipate and avert bad surprises. At the most mundane, suspicion comes through in an arched eyebrow or a glance over the shoulder. Taken to extremes, it balloons into clinical paranoia and conspiracy mongering. With digital technology, our everyday means of deception and fabrication have multiplied, giving consumers persistent cause to wonder whether a broadcast is truly live, whether Beyoncé lip-synched the national anthem, whether leaked nude photos of Jennifer Lawrence are the real deal, and whether any of these matters are worth one’s time to begin with. In the wake of Edward Snowden and whistleblown scandals, citizenries have plenty of reasons to keep up their guards and watch what they say. Fears of falling skies feel justified, grounded in the realities of climate change, unending wars on terror, and a global buildup
of nuclear weapons capable of annihilating the planet many times over (overkill in the most literal sense).\(^3\) News cycles paradoxically broadcast constant states of emergency—threats and catastrophes, just a channel or click away. Browse WebMD or watch *House* long enough and you will start believing you have the rarest of diseases. Cynics and hypochondriacs lack no vindication.

Even (or especially) in moments when we do feel safe—in precious instances when the world seems transparent and uneventful—we might manufacture dissent, stirring up drama for drama’s sake: by engaging the made-up foes of games; fanning flame wars on Internet forums; impulsively spreading rumors at school or by the water cooler; nitpicking at the tiny faults in near-perfect relationships; fashioning self-fulfilling omens; or otherwise making waves where waters were once calm. Nowadays, observes Bruno Latour, “The smoke of the event has not yet finished settling before dozens of conspiracy theories begin revising the official account, adding even more ruins to the ruins, adding even more smoke to the smoke.”\(^4\) Latour terms this “instant revisionism,” a social mesh of immediate feedback, pushback, and blowback.\(^5\) Deborah Tannen calls it “argument culture,” the perpetuation of a “pervasive warlike atmosphere that makes us approach public dialogue, and just about anything we need to accomplish, as if it were a fight.”\(^6\) Yet even when we are the makers of mischief, it’s tempting to see ourselves as embattled protagonists, to fixate on personal impediments and play up antagonistic presence. *Me against the world* is the mantra of the modern (neo)liberal individual, the spirit by which we console and congratulate ourselves as the scrappy heroes of spectacular adventures.

Academics frequently view their work and workplace as institutions under budgetary and ideological siege.\(^7\) Hardly a day goes by without multiple articles in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* reporting the financial gutting of universities. Anti-intellectualism evokes barbarians rattling the gates of the ivory tower, but adversariality also rages within the tower itself: notwithstanding the conventions and collegiality of mutual citation, scholars learn not just to write, but to write *against*—to uproot status quo, fill in lacunae, and change up the game.\(^8\) Musicologists, toiling on the fringes of academia’s better-known fields, may find particular cause to believe they have something to prove. Music’s reputation as an object of leisure—frivolous, recreational, merely pleasurable—has shaped the development and discontents of musicology since its inception.\(^9\) The discipline’s unsung status stands to enervate as well as energize its students, inspiring vigorous allegations against visual biases and
the tuned-out sensorium. Prefatory tsk-tsks about ocularcentrism have become a reliable gambit, a way to open up discourses for sounds in need of bended ears.10

Revisionist critiques, at their most fruitful, build dialectical momentum and foster constructive dialogue. In less productive cases, this rhetoric can descend into knee-jerk contrarianism and mudslinging. Big-name academics tend to generate high-profile rivalries. Each discipline has its Godzillas and Mothras, the clarion giants whose radioactive words edify, entertain, or perturb the younger colleagues who might not feel personally or professionally safe enough to enter the fray. There’s the adage that academic politics are so vicious because the stakes are so low.11 This saying is not only anti-intellectualist in its accusation but also infantilizing in its tone. It likens scholars to children who play at war, who feel free to engage in bombastic verbiage precisely because the procedures and consequences are thought to be virtual, a lot of simulated sound and fury, signifying nothing.12

**Big Talk**

What transformation would need to occur before those who pursue academic discourse can be “heard” (which I take to mean “respected”), not in spite of our mental disabilities, but with and through them?

—Margaret Price13

Against the monopoly of virtuosic paranoid readings, it’s not easy to devise or trust alternate modes of scholarly production. Academics may find little incentive to rock the boat in the first place. One possibility lies, however, in what Sedgwick calls reparative reading—a way of approaching texts, events, and people with refreshing surges of positive affect. In one of her articles on music and torture, Suzanne Cusick glosses and builds on the reparative as follows:

The paranoid, [Sedgwick] showed, believes in the efficacy of knowledge, exposure and demystification. By contrast, the critical practices that result from the reparative position aim toward “a sustained seeking of pleasure.” Reparative critical practices produce weak theory with only locally applicable explanatory power, and they are easy to dismiss (from a paranoid position) as “merely aesthetic” or “merely reformist.” And yet, Sedgwick concludes, the reparative is “no less realistic,
no less attached to a project of survival, and neither less nor more delusional or fantasmatic” than the paranoid. Unlike the paranoid, however, it leads us toward moments when joy (not “gotcha!”) can be a guarantor of truth, when practices that are weak, sappy or anti-intellectual may bespeak the spiritually and psychologically healthy reclamation of sustaining pleasure from a world that may not have intended to sustain us.¹⁴

The reparative is unflinchingly reflexive and reflective, unafraid to linger on the naked reasons for why and how we produce critical work. “Faced with the depressing realization that people are fragile and the world hostile,” remarks Ellis Hanson, “a reparative reading focuses not on the exposure of political outrages that we already know about but rather on the process of reconstructing a sustainable life in their wake.”¹⁵ On its face, this mode of reading can come across as preachy and gooey. For doesn’t sentimentality belong to greeting cards, romantic comedies, after-school specials, and cutesy banter between lovers? There’s no crying in criticism; cynicism is safer, stronger.¹⁶ The reparative’s plea of Can’t we all just get along? is answered by the paranoid’s Maybe . . . but why risk it? and Better safe than sorry! Sounding strong feels good. Paranoid rhetoric stakes out authority and quashes opposition. Lauren Berlant reminds us that the “intellectual referent of the word ‘smart’ derives from its root in physical pain. Smartness is what hurts, or to say that something smarts is to say that it hurts—it’s sharp, it stings, and it’s ruthless. It is as though to be smart is to pose a threat of impending acuteness (L. acutus—sharp).”¹⁷ Sharp tongues and rapier wits make powerful tools for combating others and shielding oneself.

Everyday acts of writing and speaking compel us to harness the voices of peers, mentors, and interlocutors who leave their marks on our linguistic habits and intellectual conscience. Paranoid motives amplify these voices to forge them into armor: that’s not quite what I said, that’s not quite what I said, and so on. One irony is that the paranoid’s myth-busting “strong theory” tends to rely on open-ended, wavering words and syntax: “seems,” “might,” “maybe,” “one could say,” “simultaneously A and not A,” and other guarded constructions. Contrast this with reparative readings, which dare to be fallible and thus don’t shy away from “is,” “in fact,” “I believe that,” and affirmative language that leaves the writer open to contradiction. To embrace “weak theory,” then, takes some strength as well, a willingness to risk being wrong—and being wronged.
Weak theory has close ties to “low theory,” which Jack Halberstam posits as “theoretical knowledge that works at many levels at once . . . one of these modes of transmission that revels in the detours, twists, and turns through knowing and confusion, and that seeks not to explain but to involve.” Low theory, in Halberstam’s formulation, isn’t indebted to interpretative cohesion. It can appear protean and even scattered. Carolyn Abbate uses similar terminology in comparing “low hermeneutics” and “soft hermeneutics,” a distinction that “separates a musical hermeneutics craving the blessing of history or the dead and seeing immanent supra-audible content in musical artifacts from the past (low) from that which acknowledges such content as a product born in messy collisions between interpreting subject and musical object (soft).” Abbate goes on, all the same, to expose this differentiation as illusory. “In fact,” she cautions, “soft hermeneutics inevitably becomes low as well; hermeneutics’ fundamental gesture is determining and summoning authority, not leaving open or withdrawing.” In recent years, scholars have also begun seeking alternatives to anthropologist Clifford Geertz’s influential ideal of “thick description,” which favors ethnographic disclosures of meaning and depth. Whereas thick description follows, as John Jackson Jr. notes, a seductive “totalizing ethos” that “imagines itself able to amass more and more factual information,” the principles of “thin description” locate value in dialogues, surface behaviors, and “a way of knowing that privileges continued nonknowing.”

Weak, soft, low, thin—terms often pejoratively writ, connoting something fluffy or flimsy or sissy. As antidotes to paranoid readings, however, they take on antinormative forces of their own, performing disobedience and offering queer possibilities. Reparative work, after all, doesn’t shoot for perfect compromise or intellectual homogeneity. Its goal isn’t the elision of difference or the suspension of critical faculties, but rather a recognition that such faculties may prove meaningful even when they prioritize (rather than blackball) peace and pleasure. Reparative scholarship acknowledges that the transactions of power in rhetorical exchanges have potential to harm and to heal. Its aspirations go beyond the merely constitutive, the act of putting things and selves back together again. Its greater aims are creative and creational, making promises and moments anew.

Shortcomings of repair lie in the stark implausibility of its own lofty promises. It’s impossible to behave reparatively around the clock and unfeasible to write only ever in the reparative mode. Sedgwick’s own reparative calls contain paranoid traces of insecurity, despondence, and
even *gotcha!*—feelings that undoubtedly show up in *Just Vibrations* and in all of our writing. “So many of us feel compelled to answer Sedgwick’s call to reparation, which cracks us out of academic business as usual and promises good things both for Sedgwick and for us,” says Heather Love. “But I also think we need to answer the call to paranoia and aggression. Sedgwick taught me to let the affect in, but it’s clear that by doing so I won’t only be letting the sunshine in.” Not only sunshine, but also shadows and chills: the point, perhaps, is to *allow* feelings in and out, to make room for affective archives at the hearths where we tell stories. Just because repair isn’t promptly achievable shouldn’t deter us from desiring its fulfillment. In efforts to do well and to do good, people can hold paranoia and repair in perpetual tension, recognizing that neither means (or feels like) much without the other.

Paranoid motives, whether born out of play or panic, boil down to power. Inhabiting a world believed to be overbearing and antipathetic, paranoiacs work to claim knowledge over fates and surroundings. And if paranoid readings prize control above all (seizing critical authority to prove, persuade, and even punish), then the reparative has the task of defetishizing control as a de facto positive value. This agenda can sound counterintuitive—for what does scholarship showcase if not intellectual control over subject matter? As a start, the reparative could acknowledge the improprieties and vices that the pursuit of power might entail; reflect on the ethics and politics of rhetorical norms; and decenter the tacit enviability of *ability* by shifting focus to adjunct rubrics of accessibility and accommodation. It’s satisfying to play master of a situation, but there’s also wisdom, humanity, and even joy in surrendering to swirls of circumstances beyond our command. Whether we’re dealing with an improv recital, an online multiplayer game, BDSM, or a conference Q & A gone off the rails, life’s out-of-control moments pose humbling reminders that we can’t always stay in charge.

A reparative discourse would pick up negation as an option rather than as an obligation. In his controversial 2003 book, *Decentering Music*, Kevin Korsyn painted a dire portrait of contemporary musical research. He likened the institution of musicology to the Tower of Babel:

*The situation [in musicology] recalls the biblical story of the attempt to build a tower that would touch the heavens. God frustrates this scheme by sowing linguistic confusion. . . . We can easily imagine how the exasperated builders might have turned to violence when their companions answered them in gibberish. Something similar has.*
happened to music, although the violence is rhetorical rather than physical. Members of opposing groups seem to be speaking different languages or playing different language games. . . . As voices become increasingly shrill, the hope of building a community, of joining a common enterprise, lies in ruins.27

If we can “easily imagine” that violence would arise simply from Babel’s “linguistic confusion,” then might we be giving people too little credit?28 If being answered in “gibberish” is cause for turbulence, it may owe to a paranoia about being mocked or disrespected in foreign tongues, about being insulted without even knowing it. If the Tower lies in disrepair, the solution comes with learning to get along not despite but precisely because of human biodiversity and its ethical possibilities.29 “The hope of harmony in the contemporary world,” writes Amartya Sen, “lies to a great extent in a clearer understanding of the pluralities of human identity, and in the appreciation that they cut across each other and work against a sharp separation along one single hardened line of impenetrable division.”30 It goes without saying that people who sound different, or who do not express themselves well, or who do not (or cannot) speak at all—or talk only in weak or soft or low or thin or queer lingo—are not automatic candidates for exclusion or injury, and no less deserving of care.31

A shared language, in any case, doesn’t accomplish much if uttered in sour tones. Prospects of repair depend as much on what we say as on how we say it. It doesn’t take a musicologist to point out how intonation can make all the difference. It doesn’t take a poststructuralist theorist of voice to observe how verbal inflections and modulations exceed and excite semantic content. Even over the phone, we (think we) can discern good or ill will in a voice, and hear a smile in how it gently sweetens the speech flowing through. Maybe some of us have traveled to countries where we didn’t speak the native language, yet encountered the rare vendor or passerby who sang some pleasantry of such warmth that we felt the uncanny confidence of believing we knew not just the kind intentions behind the words, but exactly what those words were saying. Same goes for a colleague whose work we don’t fully understand, or whose work doesn’t fit our preconceptions of what is or is not valuable. Incomprehension doesn’t justify instant dismissal or cynicism, much less rhetorical violence. If Babel is our reality, the challenge involves acting and speaking in manners that won’t give others—especially those with whom communications seem difficult—reasons to feel shame.
A bickering Babel evokes noises of people talking fast—maybe talking at and past one another, neglecting to listen and to learn. But tone aside, our daily communications also run up against expectations of tempo: how quickly we’re supposed to talk, how efficiently we deliver information, and the idiosyncratic pacing that enables us to sound well spoken. At the beginning of this book, I asked what we’re running from, running to, and running for. Some answers so far show that we run from monstrous failures, run toward success, and hopefully at times, run for something other than just our own pride and preservation. Hard to deny is that we’re indeed constantly running. In an era of social media and flash-in-the-pan phenomena, there’s little time for slow.

Over the last decade, however, a far-reaching philosophy called the Slow Movement has gained popular traction. It encompasses everything from slow food (versus fast food) and slow dating (versus speed dating and swipe-happy Tinder) to slow reading (savoring words, countering the hypermediated bombardment of modern information) and slow travel (enjoying leisurely journeys rather than rushing to destinations). Advocates for slow scholarship and slow writing point to the potential harms in academia’s breakneck mentalities: “Slowing down involves resisting neoliberal regimes of harried time by working with care while also caring for ourselves and others. A feminist mode of slow scholarship works for deep reflexive thought, engaged research, joy in writing and working with concepts and ideas driven by our passions.” Nevertheless, universities encourage competition, efficiency, and self-reliance. Neoliberalism, in higher education and elsewhere, tends to operate via “linear time—an end-product driven time.” Its implicit questions to laborers are What do you have to say for yourself? and How soon can you do as you say?

Scholars and activists have lately used the term “crip time” to describe the temporal pressures and accommodations pertaining to disability in particular. Margaret Price emphasizes that crip time alludes to more than simply giving people extra time to complete tasks. At academic conferences, for example, “Adhering to crip time might mean permitting more than fifteen minutes between sessions; it might mean recognizing that people will arrive at various intervals, and designing sessions accordingly; and it might also mean recognizing that audience members are processing language at various rates and adjusting the pace of conversation.” The larger message here is a call for flexibility and for
the destigmatization of slowness. People with phonic tics might seemingly speak *out of turn*, interrupting a conversation or disrupting a presentation. People who stutter could likewise be accused of speaking *out of time*, that is, out of sync with normative pace and taking too long to convey a thought. Unsympathetic listeners would fault speech impairments for erecting communication barriers, causing delays, and holding up queues. A crip-activist perspective would instead draw attention to how societies are too quick to privilege speediness and semantic economy. Business, academia, and everyday situations show prejudice against redundancy, roundabout rhetoric, and circular reasoning. Slow is bad. Repetitiveness is bad. By contrast, clear informational trajectories and efficient delivery sound good.

To crip (or to queer) normative attitudes toward time and teleology is foremost to ask why fluency holds so much sway, how disfluencies can be accommodated, and what the capital of time (*time is money*) says about human values and priorities. One problem is that not everyone can afford to slow down. Institutional, financial, and emotional penalties might await people who dare to lag behind others. “Self-help slow experts can advise us to improve our own lives by going slower,” points out Luke Martell. “But this is not too far away from university managers who respond to stress and overload by pushing it away from the institution and structures on to individuals, by proposing solutions such as stress counselling or time-management training.”37 Put another way, a lone musician cannot just take a *ritardando* if the orchestra is going *a tempo* (or *presto*). Doing so would earn the wrath of the maestro and peers, with consequences sure to follow.

Norms of speed can lead some researchers and instructors to feel not merely slow by comparison, but veritably stuck—trapped on a treadmill powered by unrealistic expectations. In a recent spate of “quit lit,” people have described how and why they left academia. Debra Erickson, observing these writers’ analogies of confinement, notes how academia “has been unfavorably compared to many things: a cult, a bad boyfriend, fraternity-style hazing, or indentured servitude. In all of those analogs, victims are bound to perpetrators in such a way that the victims believe they have chosen to stay in dysfunctional relationships, when in reality they have been manipulated or coerced into them.”38 Within ensnaring relationships, care is lacking, yet leaving is hard. People on the cusp of escape are often ironically urged to *slow down* and wait it out, to take time and hold off on rash decisions. Exit barriers include peer pressure, anxieties about sunk costs, the lure of part-time (yet glass-ceilinged)
instruction, and an inability to envision or obtain satisfying alternatives to academic work.

Another significant deterrent—more sentimental than circumstantial—may be someone’s genuine love for scholarly work. Academics learn to care for one of academia’s most obvious goals: the fostering of learning. But is there really such a thing as just learning for learning’s sake? Are cravings for knowledge always self-justified? Do paths to truth ever come with unforeseen tolls?

**Truth and Care**

*I see misplaced notions of aesthetic autonomy—misplaced Romanticism—impeding the writing of history. . . . It is all too obvious by now that teaching people that their love of Schubert makes them better people teaches them nothing more than self-regard, and inspires attitudes that are the very opposite of humane. There are—there must be—better reasons to cherish art.*

—Richard Taruskin

A dream come true, stay true to yourself, tell the truth and shame the devil—by most measures and idioms, truth is good, a sign of something veridical and verifiable. Scholars seek truth, even if the word or idea itself is taboo (too taut, too arrogant): instead of insisting our claims to be true as such, we call them timely, relevant, or interesting. Ambivalence feels responsible and, for all its virtuosity, sounds humble. With admissions that certain truths may be unattainable or inexpressible, we submit narratives that work to enhance or revise collective wisdoms.

Pursuits of truth have dark sides. Agendas of truthers (pushing 9/11 conspiracy theories), birthers (demanding Barack Obama’s birth certificate), and deathers (insisting Osama bin Laden is alive) tend to upset the mainstream populace. On more personal levels, disclosures can be disgraceful and uncomfortable—for why else would the game Truth or Dare pose a quandary? We’re not always ready to acknowledge or share facts about ourselves, and we tell white lies to spare others’ feelings. Moral and legal maxims say that truth can set us free, but, as Susan Brison reflects, there is also “something deadening about the requirement for truth.” A judicial process may demand a victim to restate ad nauseam the horrifying truths about a trauma she would rather forget. Attempts to get the truth out of a suspected criminal might lead interrogators to use and justify injurious techniques.
the truths about their doubts and discontents can sink good relationships without good cause. Truth, when mandated or coerced, isn’t freely given, and therefore not necessarily freeing.

If paranoid readings thirst for truth, reparative readings find satisfaction elsewhere. For all of truth’s virtues, we can conceive of things no less important: love, for one; beauty, too. If we believe, as John Keats wrote, that beauty is truth, and truth beauty, then there’s no conflict of interest here. We might sense ineffable truths about the beauties we behold. A beautiful object invites replication, compelling us to draw it, photograph it, describe it, remix it, and retweet it in order to share it with more and more people who may in turn come to appreciate that, yes, this is beautiful, something about it rings true. Beauty, moreover, can complicate and illuminate our sense of self. It can move us to action, hopefully to do good. “It may even be the case,” muses Elaine Scarry, “that far from damaging our capacity to attend to problems of injustice, [beauty] instead intensifies the pressure we feel to repair existing injuries.” Scarry offers this hypothesis to counter the presumption that “beauty, by preoccupying our attention, distracts attention from wrong social arrangements.” Yet there are cases in which, at least on the surface, a fixation on beautiful objects seems partially responsible for the beholder’s neglect of justice and care. Recall the AMS audience member who, in Lydia Hamessley’s anecdote, stood up and proclaimed that the safety of female graduate students was not his problem. Is it possible he said this out of a belief that his concerns lay primarily in musicological truths and musical beauties?

Concepts of music’s aesthetic autonomy—that musical pieces can claim value apart from societal, political, and personal concerns—have in recent years become passé, synonymous with fuddy-duddy insularity and intellectual conservatism. In the 1990s, music’s alleged autonomy floundered against the rise of feminist and queer provocations. Predictably, some people refused to get onboard these new trains of thought. Among the most notorious polemics came from Pieter van den Toorn, who criticized Susan McClary’s musical hermeneutics of gender and sex as advancing “ulterior motives” and “naked self-interest.” Van den Toorn, doubtful of women’s “self-proclaimed oppressed status,” insisted that “arguments about sex and music are largely a form of propaganda, an attempt to advertise blanket claims of special disadvantage and oppression which, in contemporary life in the West generally, are dubious and farfetched.” Van den Toorn’s tirade crescendoed toward an invective that feminists’ allegations of injustice and injury amounted
to self-victimizing bids for sympathetic attention. For all his keen ear-training as a music theorist, Van den Toorn heard the emphatic calls of feminism but didn’t think to listen for its silences (the discontents not voiced, the charges not filed, the muted wounds of women facing discrimination, battery, rape). With entire articles and books devoted to caesuras, Kundry, and 4′33″, musicologists of all people know that silence speaks volumes. In a response to Van den Toorn, Ruth Solie asserted that we’re not dealing with rhetorical exercises or games of make-believe: “A reader might be tempted to seek refuge in amusement at the exactitude with which [Van den Toorn’s] rhetoric enacts the very rage and aggression he says he’s unfairly accused of. But there is no such refuge: on this side of the curtain it’s not an academic exercise. A female is raped every six minutes in this country. . . . Amidst the routine inequities and accepted aggressions of that culture, my welfare remains precarious, and so does the welfare of the students I teach—who are also women. If this is ‘naked self-interest,’ so be it.”

Although this skirmish took place a quarter-century ago, its frictions remain relevant. A misogynist (or a one-in-five denier) would tell Solie that her reply cries rape, that such an appeal to real-world violations is a cheap trick in the courts of academia, a trump card to shut men up. But crises of sexual assault do continue to strike universities nationwide. Bonnie Gordon, writing about Rolling Stone’s controversial 2014 report of an alleged gang rape at the University of Virginia, observes that there can be “very visceral reasons” for teaching courses on music and gender. By critically reading rape in history and in musical texts, students acquire versatile “tools to identify the structures of patriarchal control that perpetuate rape culture and to exploit this knowledge in order to effect change.” Classes on Claudio Monteverdi’s L’Arianna or Giovanni Battista Guarini’s L’Idropica, says Gordon, enable students to engage the disturbing narration and aesthetic presentation of nonconsensual sexual acts. If instructors and students are willing to go there—there, meaning beyond the sanitized conventions of polite pedagogy—even musical artifacts from long ago can impart urgent strategies for listening and speaking up.

If the idea of art for art’s sake is dead, our autopsy would show that it perished not simply from unrealistic ideals, ontological falsity, and hero worship, but also from its moral untenability. To my ears, aesthetic autonomy brings echoes of academic freedom. It’s not that they’re synonymous, but that recommendations of Let music be music bear injunctive similarities to Let scholars be scholars, the belief that academics have a right to pursue their work free from political pressures and without fear of ter-
Such freedom can nurture creative thought. But how can one ethically claim such extreme immunities without also attending to others’ extreme vulnerabilities? Scarry declares there’s nothing about being a scholar that exempts her from matters of justice. If anything, being a scholar “actually increases [her] obligation,” given her privileged capacity for research and her position to engage with and care for students. Scarry admits various impediments to reparative work, including “the difficulty of seeing an injury, the sense of futility of one’s own small efforts, the shame or embarrassment of acting, and the special difficulty of lifting complex ideas into the public space.” She concludes, however, that believing any issue to be a lost cause is never sufficient reason to waive duties as caregivers and social agents.

In the wake of aesthetic autonomy, a fashionable rebranding of agency has flourished. Proponents of actor-network theory (ANT), thing theory, and object-oriented ontology nominate alternatives to anthropocentric models of effectivity and action. Everyday objects—computers, musical instruments, baseballs—are said to possess agency by virtue of having an impact on the world and its labors. This might sound at once progressive and regressive: progressive, because it poses an exciting challenge to human exceptionalism and egotism; regressive, because a vision of things coming to life already abounds in childhood fantasies and kids’ cartoons (think of the toys in Toy Story, the kitchenware in Sleeping Beauty, and the backpack in Dora the Explorer). ANT isn’t infantile, but it is, on some level, epistemologically playful. For adults, one question is whether these games of imagination are ethical. Just because we’re intellectually capable of theorizing the agencies of a yoga mat or a teddy bear, does this make it a morally expedient enterprise?

For ANT’s subscribers, attending to a plethora of implements and agents may enable us to understand better the power relations in the world. ANT, argues Bruno Latour, compels us to be “scrupulous in checking whether power and domination are explained by the multiplicity of objects given a central role and transported by vehicles which should be empirically visible.” ANT anchors its conversations with materials, the gritty safety valves that preclude us from talking about authority and asymmetry in the abstract. For Richard Taruskin, however, a Latourian social world appears virtually anarchic. It is, he says, “a place I don’t want to live in. If guns are actors then it is they who kill people and we can empty our jails. . . . I don’t want anyone to have an alibi. I want actors to take responsibility, and I think it a waste of time to argue about whether a gun, a chanson, or a context is a responsible actor.” As with aesthetic
autonomy, ANT (especially in the eyes of people who read only a summary of it, or cherry-pick quotes without sufficient context) can come across as a wishful thought experiment, one that does not hold up in real-world courts where matters of life and death hang in the balance.

Some fans of ANT thus claim it to be ethically sound, while other (mis)interpreters somehow see the exact opposite, complaining that notions of nonliving agents are too weightless, too ethereal to sit on the scales of justice. This debate can be recalibrated by stressing one point. Taruskin states that, by attributing agency to nonconscious beings, “the concept of action is emptied of real meaning . . . to no good purpose.”

Good and purpose are key words. If, according to Latour, actors are entities that “make a difference,” our attention should linger on questions about the differences worth making. Rethinking human agency can do a lot of good. It can impugn social hierarchies, promote animal rights, and rectify the disempowering and dehumanizing representations of people who identify as disabled or queer. These are a few concrete examples of issues that stand to benefit from ANT’s reflexive critiques of actors (who), networks (who else), and theories (inquiries therefrom).

In his 2015 Dewey lecture, philosopher Peter Railton spoke about the academic imperatives of pursuing theories and truths. Toward the end of his talk, he disclosed his personal battles with depression. Depression, he said, cannot be fended off with sheer logic or “steely-eyed, careful critique.” It can be crushing and its stigmatization equally so. “I know what has held me back all these years,” remarked Railton. “Would people think less of me? Would I seem to be tainted, reduced in their eyes, someone with an inner failing whom no one would want to hire or whom no one would want to marry or have children [with]? Would even friends start tip-toeing around my psyche? Would colleagues trust me with responsibility?”

Railton acknowledged that his status as an established scholar came with the privilege of mitigating some, though not all, of these anxieties. Yet, he continued, “Think how these questions can resonate in the mind of a depressed undergraduate or graduate student, trying and failing to do his work, trying to earn the confidence and esteem of his teachers, worried what his friends and parents will think, afraid to show his face in the Department, struggling to find his first job. Will he feel free to come forward and ask for help?”

Speaking about one’s depression—like speaking about chronic pain, or about queerness or disability—can involve difficult processes of coming out. Railton’s words touch on a chief quandary of professionalism’s meritocratic logic. Scholars of high standing have relative freedom to divulge
personal ails without compromising job security, while junior scholars, whose careers remain contingent, are the ones who are urged to succeed by merit alone, to eschew first-person narratives, and to let their research do the talking (figure 2.1). In brief, those who may most desperately need to share private stories of self-doubt, vulnerability, and discrimination are the same people who are advised to leave identity politics behind and simply to work hard, keep their heads down, and try, try again. I’m not sure what to call this. A bitter irony? A paradox? A necessary evil? In recent years, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and similar outlets have increasingly featured articles about academics facing challenges of mental health. Given how, as one writer puts it, “academia promotes the blurring of lines between the personal and the professional,” scholars “are seldom trained in how to firmly draw that line and value themselves beyond their work.”

How close do such issues need to hit home before we reach out to shelter others?

Celia Cain declares that disability, “visible or non-visible, is seen as ugly, malformed, queer.” The same could be said about depression and debility. “Our colleagues fear contagion,” says Cain. “We fear they smell weakness, so we remain hidden, speaking in whispers, silenced when the visibly healthy walk by. When caught, we downplay, dismiss and deny the centrality of pain or impairment in our lives—betrayed by survival instinct and our bodies. When else is ‘coming out’ seen as weakness?” (Not usually when it comes to mainstream showcases of LGBTQ pride, as the next chapter soon shows.) Truth and care pose a false yet stubborn dichotomy in intellectual pursuits and in ideas of moral personhood. Maladies of academia inhere in the very question of whether a scholar’s physical and psychological well-being truly constitutes a matter of scholarship. Shouldn’t there be ways to determine an individual’s personhood beyond lines on a CV or apparent contributions to the field? Although *curriculum vitae* loosely translates to *the course of my life*, it can’t be the only course of life and livelihood worth caring about. Publish-or-perish models of career advancement insist that we prioritize mind over matter and, as Chomsky might say, production over people. Resisting this neoliberal mindset goes hand in hand with a radical commitment to reparative motions. It begins with finding truth in care, and with reevaluating what really matters across efforts to sound good and to be heard.

These days, the advent of job wikis has created new arenas of convenient yet sometimes combative exchange. Wikis allow academics to post job listings, share updates, and comment anonymously. Many users
foster a tone of collegiality and even congratulate successful job recipients; on other occasions, the websites break into venting and gossip. Complaints pertain to unethical hiring practices, the monetary expenses of applications (when, say, Interfolio is required), the underappreciation of (and systemic overreliance on) contingent faculty, and the sheer dearth of employment opportunities. Despondency, anger, and jealousy expectedly rear their heads and threaten to cast down the better angels of respect and generosity. Some users have even tried to discern and out others’ identities by tracing IP addresses or via deduction. Phil Gentry, in a blog post, bleakly described the 2009 Musicology Wiki experience as follows: “False rumors are spread willy-nilly, useful discussions are summarily (and anonymously) deleted. Job postings were hidden until after the deadline date. The nadir was when one anonymous participant threatened to commit suicide if s/he didn’t find employment by year’s end. A few urged him or her to seek help, but really, what can you do?” To take Gentry’s important question seriously (and nonrhetorically) is first to acknowledge that the apparent hopelessness of the collective situation—What can we do?—does not, as Scarry would say, a priori exempt us from working toward solutions nonetheless. Emily Wilbourne was one of the people who reached out to the suicidal Wiki user. I’ve asked Emily if she could recall what she posted, since the 2009 Musicology Wiki has been taken down and its contents are no longer viewable online. She replied: “I imagine I just said [to this person] to talk to someone real (not a computer screen) and to remind themselves to dif-
ferentiate between a system that is constructed to grind up the people, and the other people who were subject to similar situations; that they weren’t alone, though it was easy to feel that way.”

Emily’s gesture of care resonates with her reflections on the lessons imparted by her own mentor, Suzanne Cusick, who “has lent her ear and her time to countless peers and junior scholars, bending her considerable intellect to their problems.” Receiving care—knowing what it feels like and sensing the difference it makes—can serve as a significant impetus for showing care in turn and paying things forward.

In the face of job market meltdowns, financial need, professional strife, and outright pain, declarations of support—especially when posted online by anonymous colleagues (many of whom are competing for the same pool of scarce resources)—may not sound helpful or sincere enough. Strangers who voice care are trying to do good, but no one can guarantee that it gets better. Indeed, paranoid conventions of criticism have given academics, as much as anyone, cause to be suspicious of optimism and optimistic endeavors, such as the famous It Gets Better Project aimed at queer youths. Hope, like care, can itself feel queer because it doesn’t traffic normatively in reason or hard evidence. As far as reparative affects go, hope is simultaneously a misfit and a necessity in moments of gravest precarity. How does someone stay hopeful when facing a stark absence of justifications for staying at all (staying in a profession, staying in difficult relationships, staying alive)? As good as hope sounds, what are we left with when its tune starts to crack?