Just Vibrations

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Many trauma survivors who endured much worse than I did, and for much longer, found, often years later, that it was impossible to go on. It is not a moral failing to leave a world that has become morally unacceptable. I wonder how some can ask, of battered women, “Why didn’t they leave?” while saying, of those driven to suicide by the brutal and inescapable aftermath of trauma, “Why didn’t they stay?”

—Susan Brison

Gay Bashes

Midway through my freshman year of college, a gay friend of mine (let’s call him Jerry) decided to throw a series of coming-out parties. These weren’t parties for gay-identified individuals; they were for dormmates he believed to be gay, but who had not confirmed this to be the case. Armed with noisemakers and snacks, Jerry rounded up peers decked out in bright costumes. The group would march into someone’s room and yell, “Welcome!” The first party supposedly went well: the honoree enjoyed the attention and playfully asked if he was so obvious. The second party didn’t happen: the person, it turned out, was gay-friendly but not gay, and casually waved off the undeserved festivity.

The third party was a disaster. I know this because I was there, eager to see what all the ruckus was about.

You can guess what went wrong. Although the guest of honor might have been gay, he definitely wasn’t ready to come out. This fêted young
man, eyes wide with horror, said nothing. Here’s how one of my friends remembers it (I reached out to her for factual corroboration):

[Jerry] had written a song for the occasion. I remember the refrain, “Hey, hey, hey, we’re so glad you’ve got some gaaaaaaaaay in you.” I recall him doing a dance that only he could do . . . arms waving slowly, eyes half closed, legs proceeding in a run-hop-run sort of pattern. I recall [another dormmate] was standing right behind him. She kept tapping him on the shoulder, saying, “Hey, maybe he doesn’t want to celebrate right now?!” Then I recall how you pulled [Jerry] backwards out the door, pinching the back of his “shirt,” a towel that he’d wrapped around himself along with streamers and Mardi Gras beads.2

Following the song and dance (which I’ve apparently blocked out of my memory), a painful awkwardness ensued. After what felt like minutes of frozen stares, I remember that Jerry bolted, beads jingling as he beelined for an exit at the end of the hall. The rest of us mumbled apologies, then shuffled away in silence.

A simple gloss of this encounter would report a collision between gay pride and gay shame. A bunch of out-and-proud, loud, musical freshmen ambushed a potentially closeted dormmate who, throughout the confrontation, stayed mute out of shame. Yet we, the queer posse, became ashamed in equal measure, disgraced and penitent for turning an exercise in good-humored recruitment into a crisis of forced conscription. Word got out that a group of hooting queens was going around East Florence Moore Hall kicking down people’s doors—news that must have caused some people considerable paranoia.

But there was no need to sound the alarm, for the group disbanded immediately after the embarrassing incident. Beads and noisemakers and rainbow scarves were stuffed back into closets or tossed out altogether, forfeit reminders of pride turned pitiful.

**Hoping against Hope**

*Even Adorno, the great belittler of popular pleasures, can be aghast at the ease with which intellectuals shit on people who hold on to a dream.*

—Lauren Berlant3

In queer life, paranoid and reparative drives remain odd bedfellows. “Even aside from the prestige that now attaches to a hermeneutics of sus-
piccion in critical theory as a whole,” noted Eve Sedgwick, “queer studies in particular has had a distinctive history of intimacy with the paranoid imperative.” For good reason: closeted individuals live in anxiety of being found out, while those who are out still face pressures of fitting in. On the other side of the rainbow, homophobes stew in panic about the great gay agenda, whether it’s same-sex marriage’s assault on traditional family values or, as Nadine Hubbs points out, the bigoted rumors in the twentieth century about a “gay mafia” ruling American classical music. Paranoid motives also summed up Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell. The defunct policy’s semantic symmetry (two pithy words on each side of the comma) spun cruel poetry, a flimsy Band-Aid tendering a win-win solution under the fair swap of I won’t show you mine if you don’t show me yours.

In 1968, one year before the Stonewall Riots, the Journal of Health and Social Behavior published an article called “Paranoia, Homosexuality and Game Theory.” The authors, sociologists Marvin Scott and Stanford Lyman, proposed that “[homosexuals] may come to see all or part of their world in terms of a conspiracy in which they must constantly be on guard against physical or financial harm, exploitation, or loss of status. . . . The paranoid explores, in game-theoretic fashion, the possibilities of all encounters.” As retrograde as this article sounds in its terminology and sensibilities, the authors’ framework of game theory remains intriguing. Paranoid individuals indeed seek strategic defenses in the face of plausible precarity. By performing “emotional eavesdropping” on people around them—by seeking a hyperawareness of what others know—paranoiacs work to separate friend from foe.

Although Scott and Lyman did not cite Sigmund Freud, their views resonate with this psychoanalyst’s sweeping hypothesis that paranoid delusions spring from repressed homosexual desires. Game theory aside, think of the various games at play in queer dealings more generally: guessing games (is he or isn’t he), reindeer games (activities predicated on exclusion and oppression), and language games (ciphers and circumlocutions that pussyfoot around the giant peacock in the room). These games aren’t just for laughs. Depending on the playing field, grievous penalties await.

Amid queer tensions, reparative affects are a hard sell in academic perspectives. Negativity, cynicism, antinormativity, and antifuturity come more easily, with promises of deconstructionist vigor and political vigilance. In a book on queerness and social class, Lisa Henderson points to queer studies’ “near-ubiquitous” reliance on paranoid readings, which offer “negativity as truth and the exposure of textual or social violence as grail.” Cumulatively, there’s far more theorization of gay shame than
of gay pride, with the latter relegated to, as Alice Kuzniar describes, “something almost to be embarrassed about,” or at least, something that doesn’t have to be written about (figure 3.1). One explanation for queer theory’s allergy to pride may be that pride doesn’t seem to need critical excavation to begin with. Unlike shame and its sexy covert essences, pride is already bombastically out there in the rainbow stripes, campy music, and parades where freak flags fly.

In 2007, the year I entered graduate school, an LGBTQ group called the Welcoming Committee launched an experiment by the name of Guerrilla Queer Bar (GQB) in the Greater Boston area. At the beginning of each month, organizers used social media to announce a planned takeover of an establishment. It began with bars and nightclubs: queers would show up en masse and turn the heterosexual majority on its head. If you got to the bar early in the evening, you could observe the regular crowd growing visibly confused about the steady trickle of gays onto the scene. The Welcoming Committee has since spread to ten U.S. cities and diversified its venues, hosting outings to sports games (Fengay Park), casinos, ski resorts, and Bette Midler concerts (where admittedly GQB’s efforts are unnecessary). Although its events push for queer visibility, the Welcoming Committee doesn’t frame its agenda in political terms. “It’s not a protest—it’s a party,” declares the GQB homepage. “Is it aggressive? No. Is it awesome? Yes.” GQB’s message takes pride as a given, then proceeds to insist that gays just want to have fun.

In recent years, authors have begun building up optimism and utopianism as rubrics of queer critique. It has been an uphill battle. “Optimism’s very sanguinity,” Michael Snediker says, “implies epistemological deficit.” Or, according to José Esteban Muñoz: “Shouting down utopia is an easy move. . . . The antiutopian critic of today has a well-worn war chest of poststructuralist pieties at her or his disposal to shut down lines of thought that delineate the concept of critical utopianism. Social theory that invokes the concept of utopia has always been vulnerable to charges of naiveté, impracticality, or lack of rigor.” Granted, positivity is by no means simple, nor is it the exclusive orientation of the allegedly simple-minded. As Snediker and Sara Ahmed point out, optimism is “interesting” in the way it gestures toward (yet necessarily fails to promise) happiness. Optimism, explains Lauren Berlant, can also be “cruel” when “something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing.” Berlant goes on to ask: “Why do people stay attached to conventional good-life fantasies—say, of enduring reciprocity in couples, families, political systems, institutions, markets, and at work—when the
Figure 3.1. My friend Michaela Bronstein brought this to my attention: the
Harvard library bookplate for Heather Love’s *Feeling Backward: Loss and
the Politics of Queer History* specifies a fund “to portray a positive image
of homosexuality and gay men and gay women”—which is by no means
what Love, in her rigorous book, straightforwardly portrays. In an email
exchange, Michaela remarked how she saw this as an example of a “clash
between academic paranoia and institutional optimism.”
evidence of their instability, fragility, and dear cost abounds?" Conversely, I have asked in *Just Vibrations* why people who have it pretty good might nevertheless anticipate, in paranoid and pessimistic fashion, the loss of present peace, obsessing over future adversity and the finitude of all good things. In the end, if reparative affects are elusive in queer theory and in criticism more generally, maybe it’s because they hide in plain sight. Much of queer theory *is* queer pride insofar as it contributes to compassionate understandings of diversity, tolerance, and justice, albeit via gloomy and tortuous avenues of inquiry. Pride pops up between the lines. Put another way, positives already tend to reside in the photonegatives of critical production.

For an overt example of reparative work outside academia, consider the crowdsourced It Gets Better Project (IGBP), initiated by Dan Savage and Terry Miller in September 2010 as a response to the suicides of bullied youths who were gay (or were suspected as much by their peers). Aiming to deter self-harm, the project amassed thousands of video contributions from celebrities, public officials, and ordinary people testifying that life improves after high school. The project sounded unabashedly promissory in its reparative agenda. Personal testimonies that it *got* better (from people who had overcome adversity in their own lives) slipped into general assurances that it *gets* better. Although some contributors admitted that fortune can be fickle, most messages were unequivocal in their vows of greener pastures. IGBP’s tone of certainty presumably aspired to maximize pride and uplift. According to this logic, what dejected youths needed was faith (things *will* get better), not reality or ambivalence (things *might* get better). By using the impersonal pronoun “it” as the subject, the slogan also painted bright futures as foregone conclusions rather than as points of personal or collective responsibility—“It gets better” in place of, say, “*Make* it better.”

Academic responses to IGBP came fast and, in some cases, furious. Scholars homed in on the project’s implicit inscriptions of white, male, and cis hegemony and the elisions of racial, ethnic, and class issues. Jumping off the insights of Tavia Nyong’o, Jasbir Puar described Savage’s motto as a sanctimonious “mandate to fold oneself into urban, neoliberal gay enclaves: a call to upward mobility.” Such mobility remains more feasible for someone like Savage, who is “able-bodied, monied, confident, well-travelled, suitably partnered,” than for “queer people of colour, trans, genderqueer and gender nonconforming youth, and lesbians.” The gist of these disclaimers is that, for some privileged people, it gets better *better*, while for others, it doesn’t get better at all. But although
it’s painfully true that life can get worse, IGBP wasn’t concerned with truth. Its purposes were foremost to offer selective care and to buy time. As with any politics of optimism, the project was epistemically treacherous yet pragmatically vital. And to the credit of the paperback anthology for IGBP, the editors include stories by diverse authors. Some stories even show flashes of skepticism about the viability of optimism, but, for better or for worse (that is the question), typically land on the sunnier side of hope. Here are a few excerpts from the anthology:

**JENNIFER FINNEY BOYLAN:** It’s hard to be gay, or lesbian. To be trans can be even harder. There have been plenty of times when I’ve lost hope. . . . Some of the people I most expected to lose, when I came out as trans, turned out to be loving, and compassionate, and kind.  

**ALEX R. ORUE (TRANSLATED FROM SPANISH):** I’m a nineteen-year-old, Latino gay guy from Mexico City. . . . I’d always gotten the message that being gay was wrong. That it was evil. That it was an illness. . . . Eventually you’ll find that person that will make you happy and whom you’ll make happy, too. But for that to happen, you gotta hold on.

**GABRIELLE RIVERA:** As a gay woman of color, I just want to let the youth know that it kind of doesn’t get better. All these straight, rich celebrities, I’m not even going to name them, they can tell you that it gets better because they’ve got money and people don’t care what they do. . . . So, do I say it gets easier? No, but you get stronger. And you get more beautiful. And you believe in yourself harder.

**MARK RAMIREZ (TRANSLATED FROM AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE):** I lost my hearing when I was nine years old. We don’t know exactly how it happened, maybe nerve damage, but it did. . . . I got suspended from school for participating in sexual activities with another male. . . . If you stand strong, be who you are, and know that even though people might not support you now, the days only get brighter if you believe in yourself.

Reading these stories, I think back to my own angsty adolescence and wonder whether a viral sensation such as IGBP would have given me heart. No, I wouldn’t have been able to relate to Dan Savage any more easily than I could to the Fab Five on *Queer Eye*. But I might have gone
searching for videos featuring Asian immigrants, for example, in hopes that someone might lend advice on how to come out to traditional Taiwanese parents. At age eighteen, I told my parents I was gay and got a serving of full-on denial. For the next four years, my mother sporadically pleaded and bargained with me, asking what it would take for me to straighten up. I saw before me the arduous task of extinguishing her grim wish day by day. Her optimism felt cruel. So I asked my girl friends to stop calling the home phone, explaining to them that if my mother picked up and heard their voices, she would convince herself that lady suitors were on the line. I also asked these friends, after evenings out, to drop me off a few blocks from my house so that my parents wouldn’t see us in the car together and get wrong ideas. Some of these games may sound childish and paranoid, but at the time, the battle felt heartbreaking and unwinnable. Seeing my sexuality as a repairable illness, my parents prayed for me to get better. So it was me versus them, hope against hope. From my perspective, I alone had the right to hope; they had to let theirs go. Eventually, they did, through blunt dialogue and raised voices and tears and work. Today, my parents are hoping tenfold for something different: for my chronic pain condition to resolve, for things to get better where it matters.

In an essay titled “It Gets Worse . . .,” Jack Halberstam calls out IGBP’s toxic masculinities and whitewashed sermonizing. Not all gay youth suicides, Halberstam adds, result definitively from despair about gayness. Halberstam’s criticisms build toward an all-out indictment of the project: “The touchy-feely notion embraced by this video campaign that teens can be pulled back from the brink of self-destruction by taped messages made by impossibly good looking and successful people smugly recounting the highlights of their fabulous lives is just PR for the status quo. . . . By all means make cute videos about you and your boyfriend, but don’t justify the self-indulgence by imagining you are saving a life.”26 In a paranoid reading of IGBP, Halberstam slams its schmaltzy, gallant ventures at repair, presuming self-centered motives and ineffectual efforts. Of course, most people who recorded videos for IGBP were imagining precisely that they could save a life, and my guess is that several lives were indeed bettered as a result. For that matter, if Halberstam or Puar or Nyong’o had made their own It Gets Better videos, in which they tried to queer IGBP by speaking about the project’s problematic normativities (and reflecting on their personal challenging paths toward becoming influential queer theorists and educators), their messages might have
reached receptive ears as well—maybe the ears of despondent high school or college students eager to engage queerness radically, critically, and colorfully.

But scholars by and large did not record videos for IGBP. I, for one, didn’t think to do so. Based on academics’ quotes above, you might assume this owed primarily to elitism (we know better) and ivory tower insularity. But I believe the answer is more complex. I believe there’s a worry that hope weakens critical inquiry—that when we cling to dreams, we slacken our grips on the darker realities of why hope is never enough. IGBP, for all its imperfections, helped some people. But perhaps it’s always too soon to celebrate, because for so many left unsaved, it was too late. So first, we mourn: we remind ourselves that all lives are grievable.27 Then, we dare to hope, recognizing that not good enough (critique’s impulse) shouldn’t have to mean not good at all. The bar isn’t always blanket revolution. Sometimes, things have to begin with patchwork repair, little efforts sewn together to cover those most vulnerable, as many as we can.

A common problem with demanding strength is how it implicitly dumps the onus of survival and flourishing on the individual—whether it’s enjoining queer kids to tough it out, or telling a chronic pain patient or underemployed instructor to hang in there, or mandating preemptive resiliency training in the U.S. Army so that returning veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder or physical injuries are less likely to ask for help and resources.28 It gets better—as mere mantra, as just vibrations—can’t always make good on its promises. Yet are the battle lines between camps like IGBP and academic skepticism necessary? Are they overdrawn? A do-it-yourself maker of an It Gets Better video and a scholar of postcolonial queer-of-color critique might not care much for (or even know much about) each other. These respective labors, however, depend on each other. They need to be held in tension and held mutually accountable, but one doesn’t need, in neoliberal fashion, to co-opt or cannibalize its counterpart.

Academics have legitimate reasons to feel disempowered by the thought that someone’s five-minute It Gets Better video could achieve more immediate results than a five-hundred-page monograph with a university press. As scholars lambast the pomp and pretentiousness of IGBP, they’re led to grapple with their own feelings of helplessness in facing youth suicides and other crises. In the end, the operative affect behind scholars’ heated reactions against IGBP is not, as I hear it, resentment or rage. It is anguish, a hope to hope, slipping all the while. No guarantees, no happily-ever-afters. Yet the overwhelming magnitude of
any reparative task doesn’t release us from trying. It simply means we try that much harder, in more ways than one, hoping against hope that some good can come to pass.

How to Sound Musicological

*There’s nothing like music to teach you that eventually if you work hard enough, it does get better. You see the results.*

—Chuck Todd

*All musicians, we must remember, are faggots in the parlance of the male locker room.*

—Philip Brett

Since the 1990s, feelings of pride and duty have driven musicologists toward queer topics. But especially in cases of classical composers, researchers have not typically positioned pride itself as an explicit affective locus in their work. Musicologists have tended to focus instead on aesthetic traces of passing and sublimation, from Handel’s psyche to Tchaikovsky’s angst, from Ravel’s repression to Elgar’s secrets. Although sorting out musical codes and closets served reparative agendas (remedying prior silences), pioneers of this work faced their own share of paranoia. Early scholars of queer musicology had to brace themselves for resistance and ridicule, worrying about reputation, employment, tenure, and professional adversity. Yet even with all of these risks, musicologists went around pinning postmortem rainbow badges onto canonical composers, thanking them (with elaborate hermeneutic tributes) for their brave service in the trenches of the creative arts.

Both homosexuality and musicality, as Philip Brett memorably noted, can connote deviance. For gay youths who “often experience a shutdown of all feeling as the result of sensing their parents’ and society’s disapproval of a basic part of their sentient life, music appears as a veritable lifeline.” This rings true to my own experience. On the one hand, my musicianship made me vulnerable to accusations of homosexuality: in school, I was called a fag or fairy on some occasions, though my male flutist friends got it worse. On the other hand, being a musician offered perfect plausible deniability. I could sound out gaily on the ivories while insisting that this is simply the way you play piano—just sounds, just vibrations, none of it admissible evidence in the court of bullies. If people
further assumed I took lessons due to pressure from a tigerish Asian mom, then I had license to play as queerly as I wanted (arch my wrists, trill with pinkies up), leaving no one the wiser.

At a 2014 conference in Milwaukee (jointly for the American Musicological Society and the Society for Music Theory), a session titled “Queer Music Theory” ruffled feathers when multiple presenters began harping on a common theme: that maybe music theory, particularly music formalism, has been queer for some time, certainly far queerer than its own early snipes at gay and lesbian musicology would suggest. The panelist Roger Mathew Grant remarked that it is not just the “play with surface and depth, visibility and invisibility that formalist music analysis shares with gay identity,” but that such “contemplation of art and pure form is also characteristic of the queer dandy, whose careful self-stylization and meticulous control over details allowed him to exist in a universe somehow distant from and untouched by the concerns of the surrounding quotidian world. Music theory’s world was and still is somewhat like this: rarefied, out-of-touch, completely obsessed with nuance, style, and form.” Gay sensibilities resonate in formalism’s doting demeanor and curatorial approaches to music. Analyses show careful labor, proof of effort and devotion. In this sense, music analysis can appear precious, even sentimental, belying its reputation as a severe and domineering task, a form of strong theory with a high barrier of intellectual entry. At the same Milwaukee panel, Judith Peraino stressed how music theory articles almost ubiquitously depend on the device of the reduction—Schenkerian, neo-Riemannian, and set theory diagrams that distill musical pieces into daunting lines and figures. Reductions jibe with paranoid readings in that both boast command over the text at hand, decrypting and reencrypting it via feats of interpretative and rhetorical prowess. A reduction can disorient certain readers not least by how it enfolds, distorts, and deconstructs the time frames and proportions of the original musical composition. Just as queer critics have lately rolled out sophisticated theories of futurity, asynchrony, and temporality, so music theory, Peraino observed, has relied on such time-bending devices for over a century.

Given the troubled history between music theory and queer musicology, it’s easy to find gratification and even glee in taking shots at the former’s own queer tendencies. It’s the same kind of satisfaction that some people derive from outing homophobic politicians who get caught tapping their feet under restroom stalls at airports, or from peeling back the veiled homoeroticism of slur-saturated rap lyrics. Crying hypocrite is a
national pastime. Go watch some reruns of the Daily Show or the Colbert Report, and you can see how most punch lines hinge on the faux pas and dry humor of hypocrisy in the news. But is the point really to fight fire with fire, to drum up paranoia through accusations of self-loathing? Or is it to recognize how insecurities drive us all to make mistakes from time to time, and then to find ways forward across bridges worth repairing?

From the AMS 2014 conference in Milwaukee, rewind one year to AMS 2013 in Pittsburgh, where an evening session for the LGBTQ Study Group welcomed the prominent scholar David Halperin. The session was called “How to Sound Gay,” and the abstract read: “Halperin and [Ryan] Dohoney will discuss the broad range of musical influences and implications of Halperin’s most recent book, How to Be Gay, including the role of music in the formation of LGBTQ cultures, sound’s ability to produce queer affect, and the role music plays in both queer identity-formation and dissolution.” Although the session drew a large and enthusiastic crowd, the mood of the room began to waver as the evening wore on, partly for one odd reason: despite How to Be Gay’s frank discussions of gay countertenors, opera queens, and Broadway musicals’ queer appeal, Halperin (who teaches in an English department) insisted to the audience over and over again that he was not a musicologist. He said so virtually every time he was asked by Dohoney (who remained deferential and patient throughout) about the musical dimensions of performance, gesture, and song. These repeated disavowals of disciplinary affiliation came to sound both comical and confusing. On the one hand, Halperin was replicating the identity games of the closet, producing queer resonances between ashamed claims of not gay! and cautious pronouncements of not a musicologist! On the other hand, Halperin, though far outnumbered at the event by scholars of a certain musical persuasion, voiced abject disclaimers that queered musicology itself—presuming musicology to be an Other, a camp resistant to newcomers who don’t fit the part. Halperin’s hemming and hawing ultimately led Emily Wilbourne from the audience to stand up and declare that, on behalf of her colleagues, she dubs him a musicologist. The beknighting drew chuckles and applause. Heather Hadlock recalls the moment:

Emily W made a final comment in which she granted Halperin the title and status of “musicologist” because he has written interesting things about music. . . . She recalled a conversation with a scholar in theater studies, where she referred to Wayne Koestenbaum as a musicologist and the theater scholar said, “Koestenbaum’s not a musi-
cologist,” and Emily said, “Sure he is, he’s written about opera and I
read him in musicology seminars,” and the theater scholar said some-
ting to the effect that Koestenbaum’s writing doesn’t have musical
eamples, ergo Not Musicologist. This seemed like a self-evidently
sily criterion, and got a big laugh.  

Is a lack of technical musical know-how enough to disqualify some-
one from claiming musicological identity? Perhaps not, yet Halperin’s
song and dance made him appear as if he feared speaking to a room of
music-analytical wizards who would condemn him for the slightest slip
in vocabulary or aesthetic judgment. Halperin, in short, evinced para-
noia about sounding bad (musicologically) and being shamed by people
(musicologists) he wouldn’t call his own. The original aims of this AMS
ession went off the rails through Halperin’s discomfort with musicologi-
al affinity, but this queer failure broached valuable issues nonetheless.
How does one sound musicological? And who’s to judge?

Rewind again, this time two more decades, to a musicological con-
troversy that pitted paranoia against repair: the inquisition of Franz
Schubert’s sexuality. The question went unresolved. No one managed
to forge a historicist or hermeneutic silver bullet to establish Schubert’s
orientation one way or the other—which was the takeaway lesson. The
whole affair exposed the means, stakes, and risks of music exegesis.
Alongside contemporaneous studies in critical musicology, the kerfuffle
around Schubert alerted the community to the importance of rhetori-
cal nuance. With expansive vocabularies and theoretical toolkits, judi-
cious scholars have since learned to lead with abundant disclaimers
about music’s semantic promiscuity and the contingencies of interpret-
tive frameworks, taking care not to overtax or overdetermine a musical
work’s evidentiary capacity.

Susan McClary penned some of the most high-profile contributions
regarding Schubert’s sexuality and subjectivity. Apart from the bat-
tles that McClary’s work stoked in academic circles, Marcia Citron has
described its curious reception in her own undergraduate classroom. I
quote Citron’s illuminating anecdote at length:

Each year in the survey of [classical] and romantic music that I teach
to sophomore-level music majors, we read Susan McClary’s article on
Schubert’s “Unfinished” Symphony. . . . With considerable contextu-
alization and explanation, McClary suggests that such a narrative [in
the second movement] might reflect an alternative sexual identity on
the part of the composer. She is careful to explain that this is not an essentialist relationship; she sets it up as a possibility. McClary also provides background by relating the fiasco of having presented this hypothesis at a [1992] Schubert symposium at the 92nd St. Y in New York, and of its disastrous reception at the time and in print: snide comments in the ladies’ room and the question session after the presentation, and the mocking post-mortems in the New York Times. As for my music history class, this is our first foray into gendered analysis, and one reason I choose the essay is because of its care in framing contentious issues. So imagine my surprise when, at least twice in recent years, the reaction to the article is something like, “Just say it! If you mean that Schubert was gay, and that’s what’s coming across in his music, then don’t apologize for it. Don’t bring all these other issues into it.” . . . Now, these are very smart students and excellent musicians, and they’re not just blowing off steam or a historical mindset. No—they value it. But I think they’re annoyed with the sensibility behind the arguments. They don’t want what they see as fudging; they’re ready to hear a direct call and seem to respect this approach more—or at least think they respect it more.46

What can be more disheartening and paranoia-inducing than overhearing “snide comments in the ladies’ room” about one’s research, like a scene straight out of Mean Girls?47 What better demonstration of how schoolyard bullying and petty gossip snake their way into adulthood? McClary’s project was caught in a double bind from the start. Some of Citron’s students were frustrated by the caution that McClary displayed, preferring that she not dance around what they took to be the point of her article—namely, the outing of Schubert through musical analysis. They wanted her to “just say it” (do ask, do tell). From the opposite corner, McClary’s professional detractors—those with rigid attachments to a heterosexual, masculine image of Schubert—wanted her to refrain from saying “it” (gay) at all, no matter how deft the euphemisms and rhetorical choreography. For some homophobes, even insinuation was too much. On the topic of Schubert and sexuality, the only acceptable stance was silence.48 Let music be music (or Let Schubert be Schubert), they’d argue—it’s just music, just vibrations; to which an activist might respond, Not until you let gays be gays (or, perhaps, Not until you let Schubert be Schubert).

Just say it, don’t say it: a no-win, can’t-please-everyone situation. Unfortunate, but also unsurprising given that there are no real winners when paranoia is in play. Suspicion begets more suspicion, more defensive for-
mations, and more ping-ponging of negative affects. To sail into reparative horizons is to get out of this game for a moment and to explore what lies outside its vicious magic circle. Because within this circle, good is scarce. Media reports often emphasize how youth suicides result from shame, humiliation, and bullying. Comparable emotions and offenses come up in academic exchanges, albeit with less (or, one could say, fewer) tragic consequences. Following the terminologies of psychologist Silvan Tomkins, Sedgwick used the label “humiliation theory” as another name for “strong theory.” Proceeding from paranoid motives, humiliation theory is “monopolistic” in its aim to ward off contradictions, and can “snowball” in its aspirations to colonize larger and larger swaths of epistemic terrain. Authors wield humiliation theories to avoid being humiliated by others’ criticisms. In the process, this writing might humiliate peers and predecessors so as to seize an intellectual high ground. Conventional wisdom tells us that bullies might bully because they have themselves been bullied (either at school or at home), and that they join in bullying to escape being bullied. Adversariality in scholarship isn’t so different. Sometimes it can feel like the only option to avoid being prey is to play predator.

**Hitting Close to Home (A Parable)**

*In this era of viral publicity, bullies morph into the bullied and back again with dizzying speed. We feel constantly pushed around and always on our last nerve.*

—Tavia Nyong’o

In an episode titled “Bully” from season 1 of the dramedy *Louie*, the protagonist (played by comedian Louis C.K.) goes to a New York diner with a date. Rowdy teenagers nearby start making noise, and Louie, unable to carry on a conversation, yells, “Guys! Can you keep it down, please? *Thank you.*” Moments later, one of these teens, knuckles bruised and face scarred, comes over to Louie’s table. He asks Louie when he last had his ass kicked, then asks if he’s scared. Louie says no, because he’s “a grown man” and “not afraid of some young kid, some high-school bully.” But as the teen escalates his threats, Louie grows visibly nervous about whether it’s just empty words. The teen says if Louie asks him nicely, maybe he won’t get beaten up. Facing a choice between pride and physical self-preservation, Louie mumbles: “Please don’t kick my ass, okay?” The amused teens take off, leaving Louie to sort out the aftermath of
emasculating with his date, who, throughout the ordeal, wore a mixed expression of disbelief and exasperation.

The story doesn’t end here. After parting ways with his turned-off lady friend, Louie catches sight of the teen bully at a subway entrance and, for whatever reason, follows him all the way to his house in New Jersey. Louie goes into the house and confronts the parents, tattling on this teen’s misdeeds. The father summons his son and, when he appears, begins to beat him. Louie immediately intervenes. “Stop hitting him! How do you think he turned out like this?” Louie exclaims to the dad. “You teach him to just hit people; what was he gonna be but a stupid bully? I mean, you never gave him a chance!” In a sardonic turn, the teen’s mother takes offense and goes after Louie for telling her how to raise her child. She calls Louie an “Obama-loving faggot” and chases him out of the house while smacking his head.

But against all odds, the scene ends with a whiff of repair. The boy’s father comes out of the house to see Louie, and the two smoke some cigarettes. They engage in calm, honest conversation. In response to Louie’s exhortation against spanking children, the father says: “Well, that’s what I know. My dad hit me, and his dad him.” The two men sit on the front stoop, swap more stories, then fall silent. The only sound that lingers is the wail of a distant siren.

Moments from this *Louie* episode capture many of the dilemmas born of bullying: the troubled teen’s use of brute intimidation; Louie’s feminized passivity (cowering in the diner) and exceptionally proactive gesture thereafter (following the boy home); the mother’s wholesale rejection of criticism and use of a politicized gay slur; and the father’s revelation of systemic violence. These are the sorts of concerns that ripple through queer life, academic toils, and everyday precarities. Even more revealing is how the episode ends on the front steps of a house, on the physical and symbolic threshold of a residence. Moral and behavioral lessons, this closing scene conveys, may begin and end at home, and yet, according to the teen’s abusive domestic life, not all homes feel safe. For scholars who consider musicology their disciplinary *home turf*, business might proceed as usual until a guest like David Halperin invites reconsiderations of what real and imagined boundaries circumscribe the field. For *homeless* queer youths whose voices and lives remain under-addressed by well-meaning projects such as It Gets Better, hope alone isn’t enough. Trans people, people with disabilities, and others who face stigmatization might not always feel *at home* in societies or even in their own bodies. So I repeat verbatim a question posed in the previous chap-
ter when I quoted Peter Railton’s reflections on depression, interpersonal responsibility, and the life of the mind: How close do issues need to hit home before we reach out to shelter others?

A musicological ear, by way of a final note, can read more deeply into how the Louie episode ends with the sound of a siren in the distance. In television shows and movies, sirens are a common sound effect, typically used (alongside honks of cars and general buzz of traffic) to delineate an urban, maybe disorderly, setting. But when we hear a siren in the real world, we rarely process it as just background noise. Whether we’re inside our house or at school or on the road, a siren compels us to wonder, Is it getting farther or closer? Loosely translated—is it someone else’s problem, or could the problem hit close to home? Is there reason to care? Sure, once out of earshot, the siren is out of mind. If it starts getting louder, however, the noise begins to remind us that emergencies can land on any of our doorsteps.

Sirens, alarms, and calls to arms: no mere vibrations.