Chapter 4

Earsplitting

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In 1969, two Phantoms were sent to sow fear in the skies of Cairo. A year later, Phantoms from the Patishim (“Hammers”) squadron did this in the skies of Damascus. This is how a bully demonstrates his strength. Over the years, we also used this method in the skies of Lebanon. But our enemies have never known the type of wholesale booms like those of recent weeks in Gaza. Anyone who has never awakened in a house full of children and infants at the sound of this thunder cannot understand how frightening it is. I once heard a boom like this over the Jenin refugee camp, and I was unable to breathe for a moment.

—Gideon Levy, describing the fear-mongering tactics of Israeli jets’ sonic booms over the Gaza Strip

Unjust Vibrations

Musicologists or not, most of us don’t have much control over music and sound in the grand scheme of things. We can elegantly theorize, analyze, and contextualize sonorous objects, but their unruly energies—their uses and abuses in daily life—take few cues from what we write or say. This doesn’t usually occur to us until we find ourselves facing unwanted noise: a roommate’s late-night racket, the thumping bass of a passing vehicle’s radio, Muzak at the mall, or rowdy teenage bullies at a diner. With some cases of noise pollution (say, another person’s car alarm), we have few means of addressing the offense. In other scenarios (raucous neighbors), we could be in a position to intervene, yet might choose not to act.
Noisy offenses breed suspicious minds. As we sit idly on the train, quietly fuming at the audacity of a commuter playing music through her iPhone’s speakers, we are prone to wonder: *Is she aware of how loud her music sounds to other passengers? Does she know and not care? Is she doing this on purpose, just to be cool and rebellious, to give a middle finger to the world, or even to get a rise out of me specifically, since I’m sitting right across from her and maybe trying too hard to look like I don’t notice?* This might not be the verbatim inner monologue of every disgruntled by-listener, but it gets to the heart of how acute annoyances can lead to chronic mistrust.\(^2\) Paranoia means we assume the worst of noisemakers. Are television commercials and Internet ads disproportionately, gratingly loud relative to the main programming (or is it just our imaginations)? Is the on-hold music of a company’s customer service line deliberately insipid, repetitive, and staticky in order to drive inquirers off the phone and to regulate call volumes? Are *vrooming* motorcyclists desperate for attention, measuring their badassery by the number of heads turned? Adopting paranoid relations to sound is to suspect and even to resent the acoustic output of service providers, marketers, motorists, and noisemakers at large—believing they are out to get us and make life less pleasant, vibe by vibe.

Such paranoia gets cranked up to eleven when the issue turns from everyday noise pollution to the deliberate weaponization of sound. An egregious example is music torture, which has received growing critical attention in recent years. In its war on terror, the American government has interrogated prisoners with systematic techniques of noise bombardment.\(^3\) As with any form of torture, a core issue is control: the detainee has none, while the interrogator has more than any human should have over another. The torture victim has reason to be perpetually paranoid, dreading the administration of intolerable, unpredictable punishments, which leave any hope for repair—relief, release, rejuvenation—beyond reach.\(^4\) With music torture, there’s also the matter of whether we are dealing with *music* at all. Suzanne Cusick observes:

> Whether the sounds used in detention camps functioned as music or not, among the most horrifying aspects of these practices is the degradation of the thing we call “music.” . . . The thing we have revered for an ineffability to which we attribute moral and ethical value is revealed as morally and ethically neutral—as just another tool in human beings’ blood-stained hands. This feels like the stripping away of a soul from a body, and therefore like some kind of violent, violating death. It is, therefore, as horrifying *for us* as it is for its obvi-
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ously intended victims (though not as painful), tearing away parts of
the collective subjectivity—the culture—we have for so long taken for
granted, and subsumed under the heading of “Western values.”

Have darker words about music ever been uttered? Cusick’s wrench-
ing statement pinpoints the difficulties of coming to terms with a world
where grave abuses of music exist. No art, to be sure, is inviolate. In
one sense, the idea of music torture sounds wildly unbelievable. But in
another sense, the tactic seems coolly logical. Loudness hurts. So with
advances in audio reproduction and amplification, wasn’t it only a mat-
ter of time before music crept into the interrogator’s arsenal?

In December 2014, media firestorms broke out following the U.S.
Senate Intelligence Committee’s damning report on the CIA’s torture
practices during the George W. Bush administration. The findings
exposed the CIA’s deceits, identified previously unknown victims, out-
lined heretofore unpublicized interrogation methods, and stressed tor-
ture’s ineffectiveness at obtaining accurate and actionable information.
The 525-page declassified portion of the report refers to over two dozen
cases of interrogators using loud music and white noise (figures 4.1, 4.2,
and 4.3). In every instance, sound-based tactics receive mention in con-
junction with additional torture methods: restraints, hoods, interrupted
sleep, sensory deprivation, and sexual humiliation, to name only a few.
At no point does the report isolate music or elaborate much on its spe-
cific abuses. Music torture gets lost in the mix, just one weapon in the
battalion, fading into the background amid the buzz surrounding tor-
ture scandals writ large.

Casting music torture into a heinous miscellany of interrogation
methods poses a problem—not because music torture is unequivocally
more or less abhorrent than other forms of torture, but rather because
of the exceptional ease with which perpetrators of music torture ratio-
nalize the practice as “no-touch torture” (or not “torture” at all), an
enhanced interrogation technique within legal and ethical bounds. It’s
just music and just vibrations, the argument goes—when, in actuality,
it may be the most unjust deployment of music imaginable. For espe-
cially when music is extremely loud, repetitive, and imposed, it can do
far more than touch. It pricks the skin, pummels the bone, penetrates
the viscera, and unhinges the mind. It can discombobulate, traumatize,
and humiliate. It breaks down subjectivity, rendering prisoners unable
to hear themselves think. The vibrations, while invisible, do leave visible
marks on their victims: twitches and tremors, the aftershocks of injury
Figure 4.1. Senate Committee on Intelligence report, 53 (my highlights)

(TS/FO///NF) On August 5, 2002, the day after Abu Zubaydah’s interrogation using the CIA’s enhanced interrogation techniques at DETENTION SITE GREEN began, CIA Headquarters authorized the proposed interrogation plan for al-Najjar, to include the use of loud music (at least that level that would cause physical harm such as permanent hearing loss), worse food (as long as it was nutritionally adequate for sustenance), sleep deprivation, and hooding.260

(TS/FO///NF) More than a month later, on September 21, 2002, CIA interrogators described al-Najjar as “clearly a broken man” and “on the verge of complete breakdown” as result of the isolation.261 The cable added that al-Najjar was willing to do whatever the CIA officer asked.262

(TS/FO///NF) In October 2002, officers from the U.S. military conducted a short debriefing of al-Najjar at DETENTION SITE COBALT and subsequently expressed an interest in a more thorough debriefing.263 On November 4, 2002, a U.S. military legal advisor visited DETENTION SITE COBALT and described it as a “CIA detention facility,” noting that “while CIA is the only user of the facility they contend it is a [Country __________] facility.”264 The U.S. military officer also noted that the junior CIA officer designated as warden of the facility “has little to no experience with interrogating or handling prisoners.” With respect to al-Najjar specifically, the legal advisor indicated that the CIA’s interrogation plan included “isolation in total darkness; lowering the quality of his food; keeping him at an uncomfortable temperature (cold); [playing music] 24 hours a day; and keeping him shackled and hooded.”

Figure 4.2. Senate Committee on Intelligence report, 136–37 (my highlights)
It’s all the more crucial, then, to ask what ideological, material, and ontological dimensions of music torture have enabled it (more so than, certainly, waterboarding and graphically shocking methods) to receive administrative sanction, elude media coverage, and fly under the public’s sonar.

One explanation has to do with music’s connotations of culturedness and leisure. Music, in the popular imagination, is a thing of pleasure. How bad can it be?
Failures of Imagination

[Torture] corrupts the whole social fabric because it prescribes a silencing of what has been happening between those two bodies, it forces people to make believe that nothing, in fact, has been happening, it necessitates that we lie to ourselves about what is being done not far from where we talk, while we munch a chocolate bar, smile at a lover, read a book, listen to a concerto, exercise in the morning. Torture obliges us to be deaf and blind and mute. Or we could not go on living. With that incessant awareness of the incessant horror, we could not go on living.

—Ariel Dorfman

In a Charmed episode titled “Primrose Empath,” a demon secretly curses the good witch Prue, granting her the capability to sense everyone else’s feelings. The scenario begins comically, with Prue catching the laughing bug from a dentist patient who’s under the effects of nitrous oxide. Then she begins empathizing willy-nilly with her sisters’ and friends’ emotions of love, shame, and denial. But soon, Prue finds herself shouldering the weight of the world. Murmurs of others’ anguish thunder through her mind until she becomes, in her words, “one big raw nerve ending.” She retreats to her basement and curls up into a ball, tortured and afraid. “There are these people and they’re in my head, and they’re in my heart, and it just hurts,” she cries (figure 4.4). A priest arrives and tells Prue to embrace the (dis)ability as a gift rather than a scourge. “You have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to feel the world’s emotions,” he proclaims. “All it means to be human: the good and the bad.” Prue listens, and then—in a display of resilience and overcoming—channels her motley feelings into sheer power, using a mix of magic and martial arts to vanquish the demon responsible for her affliction.

Ariel Dorfman, in his epigraph, declares that torture is a crime not just against the body, but also against the imagination. By this, he means that torture “craves the abrogation of our capacity to imagine others’ suffering, dehumanizing them so much that their pain is not our pain.” To go on with our ordinary lives, Dorfman says, we must turn off (or at least turn down) our empathic impulses and block out these victims’ presumed hollers of pain and pleas for relief. We, the nontortured, are impelled to compress these cries into white noise—random, indiscriminate frequencies emptied of meaning and human value. Although I find Dorfman’s assertion persuasive, it rubs against the common ways in which people, when talking about torture, try to put themselves in the detainee’s shoes. In a five-minute segment about “Sesame Street Music Torture” on the popular online news show Young Turks, the two hosts,
Cenk Uygur and Ana Kasparian, discuss the music torture used at Guantánamo Bay. Uygur and Kasparian play a few seconds of the *Sesame Street* theme song and note how the detainees were subjected to this music at extraordinarily loud volumes and long durations (matching the decibel level of a jackhammer for up to two hours). Here’s an excerpt from the segment:

**ANA KASPARIAN:** They used *Sesame Street* music to drive these detainees crazy during interrogation.

**CENK UYGUR:** I could hardly stand it [the *Sesame Street* theme] for five seconds. . . . Now imagine listening to that at deafening volume for hours on end. . . .

**KASPARIAN:** Imagine listening to a jackhammer for two hours. I could barely handle it when I’m walking by.

**UYGUR:** Yeah, and imagine—I think that it’s in some ways worse with music ’cause it’s so repetitive, and, you know, bores down into your head.”

As Kasparian and Uygur verbally work through their thoughts and feelings about music torture, they repeatedly call on the imperatives of imagination. Yet even as they say *imagine, imagine, imagine*, the chant rhetorically pronounces its own failings in light of unimaginable injury. Predictably, this *Young Turks* video also set its viewers’ imaginations on fire. Aside from the usual trolls dangling incendiary bait about religion and terrorism, hundreds of YouTube users offered ideas for the types
of music that could be most effective for music torture. People recommended dubstep, ABBA, Rebecca Black, and other genres and artists for interrogators’ playlists.

Misguided presumptions about torture’s imaginability may account in part for why debates persist at all about torture’s legality, the grounds for permissibility, and ticking time-bomb scenarios. In other words, moral opposition to torture is enabled largely by people’s ability to draw on their own memories of pain and the consequent efforts to empathize; yet the reason such opposition is not absolute or unanimous owes to the imperfections of such empathy. In everyday speech, people use the word “torture” to color and amplify expressions of distress, such as “why waiting in line is torture” (according to a New York Times op-ed) or the “little academic tortures” experienced by young scholars. (And sure enough, among the prevalent metaphors containing torture is the term tortured metaphor.) One could argue that these are just idioms, just verbal vibrations, hyperbolic yet harmless. But might the very circulation of torture’s metaphors signal a faulty imagination of torture’s realities? For if thorough understanding prevailed, could people really stand to deploy its linguistic charge in banal contexts? Is it possible that trite references to torture dilute the perceived severity of actual torture and thus mask the urgency of antitorture measures?

Media’s abundant representations of torture have long risked normalizing the practice and glorifying it as a way (and the only way) to obtain information from suspected criminals. We see torture in television (infamously, 24), film (Zero Dark Thirty), and even books popular with youths (Harry Potter and its Cruciatus curse). In the first season of the show Homeland, CIA agents capture a presumed al-Qaeda terrorist and detain him in a room. They subject him to cold temperatures, blinking lights, and a loud grindcore song (a cross between thrash, industrial, and punk). Every few seconds, the song cuts out before starting up again. Agents observe the room on a monitor for several hours. The detainee eventually gives up an email address that proves useful. As viewers of the show, we necessarily fail to grasp the nature and magnitude of what the music-based interrogation entails: the scene itself lasts only fifty seconds total; it alternates between shots of the detainee and shots of an agent watching the detainee on a monitor, hence allowing us to be twice removed via embedded screens; and we retain the option of turning down the volume of the torturous music as it pipes through our television speakers or our headphones (figure 4.5). This effort to represent
music torture remains hopelessly sanitized, glossed over by flat images and flattened (standardized-for-television) audio levels.

It’s further worth noting that, prior to this interrogation scene, the show’s protagonist (CIA agent Carrie Mathison) explicitly claims it to be not torture. During preparations, Carrie explains to onlooker Nicholas Brody that she needs to “unsettle [the detainee], to prove we have complete control, to demonstrate our omnipotence.”

“One question,” says Brody.

“Go ahead,” replies Carrie.

“Will he be tortured?”

Carrie breaks into a gentle smile and shakes her head sagely, almost patronizingly: “We don’t do that here.”

Cue music.

Although some shows and movies problematize torture, they nonetheless tend to depict it as effective and utilitarian, as a means of drastically injuring one person so that many others may live. In a mission from Rockstar Games’ acclaimed 2013 video game Grand Theft Auto V (GTA V), torture becomes a playable, interactive assignment. The player, controlling the protagonist Trevor Philips, is tasked with extracting information from an unarmed captive. Actions available to the player include...
electric shocks, blunt force, pulling teeth, and waterboarding (figures 4.6 and 4.7). If the captive isn’t pushed far enough, he won’t give up intelligence. But if the captive is pushed too far, he flatlines, and a shot of adrenaline is needed to revive him. The game asks the player to exercise cruel imagination and to think like a torturer: what is the right mix and sequence of injurious techniques needed to draw out actionable intelligence? It must be stressed that while GTA V has dozens of optional missions, this one is mandatory. The mission has to be undertaken to advance the game’s main story. The player thus faces a choice: either complete this torture simulation or forfeit the chance to play subsequent story missions. Even players who are turned off by the torture mission are likely to tough it out—regarding it as a necessary evil—so that they can get on with the rest of the game (a game they have presumably paid for and already sunk dozens of hours into). It almost doesn’t sound like a choice at all . . . except it is. Among the few people I’ve found who reported permanently quitting GTA V upon reaching the torture mission, one gamer wrote: “Witnessing a man beg for his life passively in a film like Reservoir Dogs as he has his ear forcibly removed and gets doused in gasoline is disturbing enough. But having to slowly and deliberately select which weapons to use before entering the button prompts to rip a man’s teeth out, break his kneecaps or almost drown him to death as he screams and begs for mercy is something else entirely.” Amnesty International, Freedom from Torture, and activist organizations protested this portion of GTA V. But fans defended the scene as satire. Just a game, just a simulation, they claimed; why so serious?

With all this talk of imagination, let’s conduct our own simulation. How might someone react upon hearing about music torture for the first time? For this hypothetical scenario, I extrapolate from several of my own experiences where I’ve mentioned the existence of music torture to people who had never before given the topic any thought. I encourage readers likewise to test out such conversations and see whether their outcomes align with or differ from mine. In any case, let’s call our interlocutor Jon. When Jon hears about how the American government has subjected detainees to the songs of Britney Spears and Barney the Dinosaur, he appears at first confused, even amused. As if by instinct, he lets out a chuckle—not because he’s a mean person, but because the case admitted sounds absurd. It doesn’t take long for Jon to recognize, however, that this is no laughing matter and that musical bombardment can be grievous indeed. Jon requires no hand-holding to arrive at this conclusion. He draws on his own memories of unpleasant noise, and tries to
Figure 4.6. Torture sequence in *Grand Theft Auto V*—pulling teeth

Figure 4.7. Torture sequence in *Grand Theft Auto V*—waterboarding
imagine these feelings boosted hundredfold. He comes to feel a little ashamed of his initial response. All he really needed was a few extra seconds to think through, on his own, the terrible potential of music when it is flagrantly repeated, amplified, and wielded as a weapon. But these extra few seconds are everything. The lag—the time it takes for comprehension to dawn, for bemusement to turn to horror, for a chuckle to be stifled—harbors the alibis of music torture, the sneaky reasoning that enables interrogators to pass off the practice as torture-lite. For even though it doesn’t take much thought to grasp the severity of music torture, it takes some thought nonetheless. And if people aren’t prompted to give this transgression any thought at all, then it’s already game over.

Jonathan Pieslak, who has studied music’s usages in psychological warfare, recounts how, when he presented a paper at a conference on this subject and played Barney’s “I Love You” on a loop for seventy-five seconds, “a chorus of groans and laughter erupted from the audience.”

Given that torture is no laughing matter, the audience’s laughter was riven with contradiction: on the one hand, audience members didn’t immediately grasp the true horrors of music torture (for if they did, they probably wouldn’t have been so quick to laugh); on the other hand, they may have perceived such an offense to be eminently graspable because, as Pieslak notes, they think they can “relate to the situation of having to listen to music they do not like,” and whether it’s “loud party or techno music blasting from a house at 3 am, the muzak of a doctor or dentist’s office, or a heavy metal guitarist practicing for hours in an adjacent apartment, the shared response to being annoyed by music often involves laughter.”

Many people, not least parents of young kids, know what it’s like to be irked by repetitive children’s songs. Such humdrum annoyance is a common irritant, as demonstrated by the existence of a YouTube video (linkable from the Young Turks torture feature) called “Can You Survive 10 Minutes of Barney Saying ‘I Love You?’” It’s easy to shame people for laughing during a presentation on torture. But one reason for such laughter owes to the fact that a seventy-five-second clip of “I Love You” is a far cry from a real interrogation scenario. Pieslak did not play the music for two hours at 130 decibels. A conference room is a safe space where attendees aren’t subjected to extreme temperatures, stress positions, starvation, humiliation, and other traumas that prisoners always suffer alongside music torture (as the Senate Committee on Intelligence report made brutally clear). Imagining music torture as involving only music—just vibrations—is to miss the broader regime of injury at the scene of criminal interrogation.
Given what I’ve said so far, a reader has reason to assume I would advocate against comparisons between music torture and quotidian sonic annoyances. Instead, I believe comparisons are necessary. I propose that, while we must not facilely conflate injuries big and small, we have to reflect on how our problematic mentalities toward acoustic offenses (big or small) intersect and interrelate. If people are antsy about the utterance of music torture and freakin’ car alarm in the same breath, it’s for fear of trivializing the former’s exceptional status. The (paranoid) assumption is that the speaker must be connecting the two examples and insensitively asserting their equivalency. But in some ways, what I see is overcorrection—a denial of any connection whatsoever, a denial that lets us off the hook. We cannot understand or work against music torture unless we glean why such extraordinary torture goes largely unquestioned in public domains. And this we cannot do without taking stock of social attitudes toward ordinary sonic disturbances. My most pressing question, specifically, is this: are we, as members of society, in any way capable of mobilizing our littlest everyday behaviors to illuminate (or even to counteract) the government’s grandest operations of music torture?

**Quiescence: Microrepair?**

First, let’s consider the most obvious means of protesting music torture: speaking out. Musicians have taken varied stances on the issue. In 2008, Christopher Cerf (composer for *Sesame Street*), Pearl Jam, R.E.M., Tom Morello, Rosanne Cash, Trent Reznor, and other artists formed a coalition called Zero dB to decry the use of music in interrogations. Stevie Benton of Drowning Pool, however, voiced the opposite, saying: “I take it as an honor to think that perhaps our song could be used to quell another 9/11 attack or something like that.” And then there’s the strange case of Canadian industrial band Skinny Puppy, who, upon learning that their music had been co-opted for purposes of torture, demanded a devilish $666,000 in royalties from the U.S. Department of Defense.

In academic circles, three leading music organizations—the American Musicological Society, the Society for Ethnomusicology, and the Society for American Music—proposed individual resolutions in 2007–8 condemning torture, with a focus on music torture. “Some critics,” Suzanne Cusick points out, “have dismissed these resolutions as ineffectual vainglory, ‘feel good’ gestures that served only to substitute public sanctimony for real political action.” Such dismissals target the ivory
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tower stereotype, the notion that academics, through bids for social relev-
eance, are all bark and no bite. Consider the resolution introduced at the 2007 Business Meeting of the Society for American Music:

Whereas, We, the Society for American Music, join the chorus of protest and dissent against the use of torture in military interro-
gations; whereas, we, as scholars and musicians, who devote our lives to sustaining American music, protest the contamination of our culture by the heinous misappropriation of music as part of psychological torture; whereas, art has an ethical, in fact spiritual dimension, no matter what style or genre, and its corruption shames us all; Resolved, we, the Society for American Music, condemn the use of music as torture in military interrogations and in particular the debasement of American music in such a fashion.28

This resolution is admirable, yet raises several questions. For all its emphasis on music’s ethical dimensions and musicians’ shame toward sound-based interrogation techniques, the text omits overt references to the victims of torture. The particular mention of American music also comes across unnecessarily narrow. Is it that this Society’s members feel qualified to speak out against torture only by citing their core expertise in American music? Does such wording reflect an excessive mind-set of compartmentalized protest—that musicologists should rally against music torture, queer theorists against sexual humiliation, and physicians against forced medication?29 Does the specter of aesthetic autonomy and disciplinary division haunt this resolution’s vocabularies?

Official petitions, public denunciations, and legal indictments can bring about change and awareness. But without discounting their efficacy, these interventions come off as socially conventional, as they seek, with paranoid motives, to expose the authorities and to out their sins. A more radical question—one that may yield reparative possibilities of a different stripe—pertains to how the everyday sonic habits of a general population resonate with its government’s interrogation strategies.30 Even if it sounds like a long stretch, how might we evaluate the responsibilities and complicities of a citizenry whose ruling bodies practice music torture?

A public’s role in regimes of acoustic offense can be plotted through a number of behaviors. First, we, the people, compose a culture of sonic impropriety when we inflict undesirable noise on others, contributing actively to cacophony by violating explicit laws or implicit customs for
the respective noise levels of neighborhoods, apartments, dormitories, hospitals, libraries, the Amtrak Quiet Car, and different times of day. Second, even if we’re mindful of our own sonic footprints, we can, through inaction and apathy, enable the proliferation of noisy infractions. When we abstain from asking a stranger on the subway, *Please turn down the loud music from your iPod*, we show passive acceptance of acoustic disturbance, hence forfeiting any janitorial duties we might bear with respect to noise. And third, we endorse the social glorification of loudness when we enter into spaces and events that pump up the volume in the name of celebration (New Year’s Eve in Times Square), competition (a football game), or basic pursuit of a good time (at a concert or a club).

In cultures that flaunt audio amplification, people reciprocally flaunt their tolerance of amplified sounds that verge on the intolerable—decibels that cause discomfort, even pain. At the risk of aural distress, we might bring earplugs to a rock concert but end up leaving them in our pockets because we decide that the volume isn’t *totally* unbearable. Or picture the nightclub: even if the music is too loud for our taste, we head onto the thumping dance floor because most of our friends are there and that’s where all the fun is, where actions speak louder than words. Once on the dance floor, there’s collective recognition of thunderous noise as the cost of clubbing cool. Thus even noise-averse patrons play along as convincingly as they can, grinding and merging into all the other shiny happy people and becoming worthy of emulation in turn. Enduring loudness becomes a point of pride, a show of strength and resilience. It’s a way of declaring that we can take it (yes, we can)!

A common urban occurrence involves fire trucks and ambulances screaming down the streets, bringing sounds that elicit despair as well as reassurance (signaling a nearby crisis while insisting that, have no fear, help is on its way). As a pedestrian, I sometimes cover my ears as the emergency vehicles zoom by—both ears if I can, or just one ear if I’m carrying something in my hand. Then there are times when I’m on the fence about whether covering my ears is necessary, and by the time I decide, the vehicles have passed, rendering the decision moot. Finally, there are instances when I feel the impulse to protect my ears, yet end up choosing not to, for fear of appearing weak, delicate, queer. As best as I can describe, I feel a twinge of embarrassment for instinctively wanting to cup my ears. Maybe it’s because the sirens of emergency vehicles are among the few sounds of the city that have legitimate reason to be loud. Their loudness literally helps save lives, enabling rescuers to cut through mazes of moving metal. Furthermore, the sirens need to be loud only
because the rest of the urban environment is so irrepressibly loud. They must drown out miscellaneous clamor to reach the ears of inhabitants who are keen on tuning out the city—iPod-carrying joggers, radio-piping drivers, and cyclists talking on headsets.\textsuperscript{31} As odd as it sounds, then, my hesitation to cover my ears might stem from an anxiety about showing disrespect. Perhaps I’m worried that my act of self-concern would look uncouth, as if, by raising my hands, I’d be gesturally linking my fleeting aural discomfort with the far graver suffering of the people whom the emergency vehicles are rushing to save.

Ambivalent anecdotes aside, all of this is to say that our relationships and responses to music and everyday sounds aren’t so simple. They can be riddled with uncertainty, irrationality, paranoia, and self-consciousness. We make a lot of noise, don’t always redress others’ noisy habits, and put up with noise at detrimental amplitudes out of peer pressure, habit, or vanity. Given sound’s phenomenal pretext as somehow ephemeral and relatively innocuous, people might overlook or downplay how noises can put them in bad moods, deprive them of rest, and impair overall well-being. Quiescence toward noise ripples through society. It may not causally or straightforwardly trickle up to a political administration’s practices of music torture, but civilian complacency does validate noise’s free passes on smaller levels, codifying cultures where acoustic violations are too easily waved off with \textit{Eh, not that bad}. With each display of passivity, sonic offenses inch toward the boundary of the normal, fortifying their status as typical and tolerable. And although it’s scientifically evident that sustained exposure to loud sounds can lead to hearing loss, people continue to underestimate such consequences in part because this loss is so gradual.

Not all noise needs suppressing. We can opt to celebrate loud sounds knowing full well the risks; admire people who blast music as champions of social audacity, artistry, and free speech; and embrace emergency sirens as gratifying signals of medical aid. We can, in sum, try to absorb and absolve a rip-roaring world through a rose-tinted aural lens, listening to and through the noise for hints of playfulness, generosity, humor, pride, love, and invigorating affects. A reparative acoustemology would accommodate these possibilities while calling for simultaneous pursuits of alternative sonic regimes. To achieve more aurally tolerable and accessible environments, we have to play the long game. The goal? Not to dial down noise per se, but maybe to edge toward a world where something such as music torture would be \textit{inconceivable as anything but unequivocal torture}—where the question of whether music torture can be torturous
wouldn’t be asked in the first place. The same could be said of torture in general: the goal isn’t just to pass and follow laws that prohibit torture, but moreover to work toward a world where torture’s absolute prohibition starts sounding axiomatic and feeling commonsensical. These lofty objectives bubble with idealism, but their means are grounded in the real: palpable actions, rectifications, and results. “The ideal, then, is real,” muses Martha Nussbaum. “At the same time, the real also contains the ideal. Real people aspire. They imagine possibilities better than the world they know, and they try to actualize them.” One has to start somewhere, sometime. So why not here, now? And if not us, then who?

In the spring of 2015, I taught an undergraduate course at Dartmouth College on music, media, and politics. For a unit called “Defense against the Dark Arts,” during which we discussed music’s weaponization, the students received the following assignment:

**Step 1.** Find a situation involving what you perceive to be a noise violation.

**Step 2.** Do something about the infraction, or don’t. Do not put yourself in any danger (when in doubt, play it safe).

**Step 3.** Attempt to articulate the social, psychological, and circumstantial factors that drove you to action or inaction.

Over the course of a few weeks, students found situations that included noisy dormmates, ruckus in the library, a disruptive passenger on a bus, and the music of Phi Delta Alpha, a Dartmouth frat house notorious for the way it blasts songs every evening using outward-facing loudspeakers. Two of the ten students chose action: one simply asked a dormmate to turn down his music (took all of three seconds), while the other met with a friend from Phi Delta Alpha for a half-hour debate over why the frat members insist on dominating the sonic airspace of Webster Avenue night after night. Other students shied away from direct confrontation and resorted to throwing dirty glances, sighing audibly, putting on headphones, and venting on social media.

One student wrote about a time when she was the source of noise. She and her marching band had gone around campus giving a late-night tour to prospective Dartmouth students. Although the band members didn’t think they were bothering anyone, they decided to consult Yik Yak, an app that lets users post and view anonymous messages (sortable by up-votes) within a ten-mile radius. “We checked Yik Yak,” the student noted, “and saw such Yaks as ‘not saying that I wanted to sleep, but if I
did, it’d be great if the band would shut up’ and ‘The marching band needs to get the f**k off gold coast lawn.’ We gained an insight to the true thoughts and feelings of our fellow students. . . . We laughed at the fact that people thought we were on the Gold Coast lawn, which is half way across campus, but also realized how far our sound traveled, and how many people we were disturbing.”

In the following class, all students read their papers out loud and together worked through their motives for action or inaction. Consensus formed around factors such as anxiety about confrontation, concerns of shaming or being shamed, and fear of developing a reputation as a whiner. In simple terms, complaining about noise isn’t cool, least of all for college students. Doing so hurts their hip image and can make them come across as curmudgeson who gripe about damn kids and their music. For what it’s worth, musicologists aren’t supposed to rant about noise either. Scholars are presumably meant to exemplify open-mindedness, to recuperate noise as art, and to study soundscapes without moral judgment.

Little inactions add up. But for all the paranoia that can inflect our relations to noise, reparative orientations are possible. A request or gesture to quell a disturbance, a brief reflection on sound’s infractions and inevitabilities—little victories add up too. In the romantic chaos of consequence, the flutter of an insect’s wings makes a sound, vibrations beget vibrations, and difference is made. Call it what you will: the butterfly effect, grassroots activism, bottom-up democracy, affective citizenship, or minority influence. If these models sound like optimism for suckers, we could recall how, even as children, we were taught that change begins with a single person, that every recycled bottle matters, and that only we can prevent forest fires. For all the talk about microaggressions in daily life (concerning race, class, sexuality, disability), we can think constructively about microrepair—little acts that add up to something big. A “micro-politics of justice,” suggests Michael Shapiro, “references a process in which individuals and collectives, who are affected by legality/illegalities, participate in a culture of feelings or sensibilities and subsequently engage in discursive encounters about what is just.” Micropolitics can productively challenge and complement justice’s macropolitics, namely how “states, through their decision-making bodies, promulgate, execute, and administer the law.” Individual optimism doesn’t have to breed complacency. Believing things could get better is sometimes precisely what cheers us to fight harder for a world worth redeeming.

Insisting on greater attention to noise and its potential harms isn’t
antithetical to respecting articulations of Deaf Gain (countering notions of deafness as deficit), biodiversity, and alternate embodiments. (Some Deaf people, for that matter, might pick up and prefer loud voices in conversations, or enjoy high-volume music and its sensational pressures on the dance floor.) Nor is this to say that normative hearing abilities are universally desirable and extra-deserving of preservation. The point is to recognize the injustices and calls for help that sometimes don’t get heard—or seen, signed, felt, sensed, cared for—amid the competing clamor of modern life. We often don’t speak up against public disturbances because, as my students pointed out, these awkward interventions are prone to mark us as peculiar and, in terms of societal expectations, veritably queer. To keep noise abatement from crossing into censorship and sanctimony, the focus can’t be on the indiscriminate silencing or bullying of noisemakers, as this would introduce yet more shame into networks of paranoid exchange. The objective, where possible, is to find creative means of retuning the world. In certain cases, the relief can feel very real, not just for ourselves but also for people around us—even if they don’t thank us out loud.

Overloaded / Understanding

If an agenda of quiescence still sounds too idealistic, it’s worth keeping in mind the individuals for whom quiet can be an especially valuable commodity. Some people on the autism spectrum, for example, experience sensory overload in everyday settings (variably called sensory defensive disorder or sensory integration disorder). Buzzing machinery, flickering lights, scents, tastes, fabrics, temperatures, and other stimuli can feel disturbing and even overwhelming. Cynthia Kim, an Autistic adult, describes her aural sensitivities born of Asperger’s syndrome: “It’s not like I want to hear the person sitting next to me in the library chewing gum and typing and breathing, but I can’t not hear it. This barrage of sound often results in sensory overload in public places, especially crowded public places like stores, restaurants, or public transit. It can also make it difficult to follow conversations or make out speech in environments with a lot of background noise.” Educators invested in inclusivity have advocated for sensory-friendly environments and for students’ freedom to customize the intake of their surroundings via noise-canceling headphones, sunglasses, and additional devices. Students who begin to feel overloaded may also benefit from the option of temporarily leaving the
classroom and accessing a sensory retreat (a quiet and peaceful room) elsewhere in the school.

Such accommodations are important because they make good on the understanding that not everyone hears or feels the world in the same way, and just as crucially, that it’s vital yet difficult to empathize with the sensory experiences of others. Consider the free browser simulation *Auti-Sim*, designed by Taylan Kay for the 2013 Hacking Health Vancouver event, which brought together “health professionals and technologists to work together to prototype and problem-solve new ways to deliver healthcare.” Kay’s interactive *Auti-Sim* sought to depict the following encounter:

The player navigates through a playground as an autistic child with auditory hypersensitivity. Proximity to loud children causes sensory overload for the player, impacting cognitive functions. This impact is represented as visual noise and blur, as well as audio distortion. Participants described the experience as visceral, insightful and compelling.

According to players’ comments, reactions in fact varied widely. Some appreciated the simulation and thanked the creator for a revelatory experience. But others, including those who identified as Autistic, scorned the simulation for misrepresenting the sensory realities of their everyday lives and for portraying all Autistic subjects as hopelessly anti-social. Case in point: if the player’s avatar spends too much time around raucous (and supposedly nondisabled) children, the visual and auditory output whips up a machine-like aesthetic of autism’s sensorium. Static, shrieks, blips, and alarming signs of failure verge on dehumanizing the protagonist, conjuring a broken, glitched victim (figure 4.8). The simulation presents the child as someone tortured by noises that, to most ears, sound harmless, even good (laughter, conversation, and euphony of children at play).

The designer of *Auti-Sim* displayed good intentions and, in his responses to players’ feedback, has expressed willingness to take criticism under advisement. But despite the potential for *Auti-Sim* to raise awareness and to do good, the problem with the simulation—indeed, with any program or exercise in imagination—is that it may lead participants to feel overconfident about their understanding of the condition and lifestyle in question. Critics of *Auti-Sim* worry that “having taken part in a simulation exercise, non-disabled people will believe they fully
understand disability. [People with disabilities] say that unless you are disabled and live with the knock-on consequences like unemployment, pain and prejudice, it doesn’t give a true picture.” Overconfidence can be the enemy of empathy if it fast-tracks to complacency and halts further inquiry. When we’re too certain that we know what it’s like to live in someone else’s mind and body, we risk feeling entitled to cease listening to their stories. The apparent catch in empathy simulations is that, for people who actually endure challenging conditions, the game is reality and doesn’t have easy solutions. (Besides disability simulations, controversial examples of recent empathy exercises have included Tyra Banks wearing a fat suit to incur judgmental stares and to understand obesity, Gwyneth Paltrow trying—and failing—to live on food stamps for a week, and rampant cases of slum and poverty tourism. Banks took off her fat suit after one day, Paltrow went back to eating like a millionaire, and tourists, by definition, always return home.)

Recall the many pleas for imagination and the crises of empathy throughout this chapter’s discussions of sound, injury, and quiescence: Prue in Charmed experiencing sensory overload and, against her will, empathically absorbing the world’s chronic pain; the imagine, imagine, imagine rhetoric of the Young Turks hosts as they pondered music torture; the necessarily imperfect and even misleading simulations of torture in Homeland and Grand Theft Auto V; a conference audience groaning and laughing as Jonathan Pieslak played a few iterations of Barney’s “I Love You”; and Gideon Levy, in his epigraph, insisting that if you’ve never experienced the roof-knocking sonic booms of fighter planes, you

Figure 4.8. (left) Approaching crowds on the playground (loud and blurry stimuli) and (right) moving away from crowds in Auti-Sim
can’t understand how it feels. Empathy, according to Martha Nussbaum, involves “a kind of ‘twofold attention,’ in which one both imagines what it is like to be in the sufferer’s place and, at the same time, retains securely the awareness that one is not in that place.” Because empathy entails affective approximation rather than total equation, it remains, as Susan Brison argues, a necessary but not sufficient foundation for justice. Hurdles in empathy, however, don’t release us from attempting and hoping to empathize widely, creatively, and generously. Challenges of care and compassion serve as reminders that, beyond our verbal claims of resonating with one another (I feel you), the next step is action (… and I’d like to help).

Action might mean dialing down noise. But on some occasions, it could demand the opposite: cranking up the volume in the name of all-out protest.