Just Vibrations
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Coda

If We Break ... 

✦ ✦ ✦

This book has been concerned with ideas and ideologies of music as I have apprehended them. . . . It would be silly to conclude it on a note of prediction. A coda is no place for presentiments. I draw attention to the above trends as hopes, not as predictions: as hopes for motion.

—Joseph Kerman, Contemplating Music, final lines

Unvoiced

As I write this, America is burning. Protests sweep the country coast to coast, from Ferguson to Baltimore to Chicago; from Mizzou to Yale to Dartmouth College. Windows and hearts are breaking amid civilian demonstrations against police brutality, racism, hate crimes, and systemic injustice. Shouts of Black Lives Matter have reached fever pitch yet somehow, in various political and social domains, still seem to go unheard. In addition to using batons, tear gas, stun guns, smoke grenades, and rubber bullets, officers in several cities have been employing Long Range Acoustic Devices (LRADs), which can weigh over three hundred pounds and fire cones of noise up to almost 150 dB and 2.5 kHz. Development efforts for the LRAD originated in the wake of the 2000 terrorist attack on the USS Cole in Yemen. Since then, the LRAD Corporation, based in San Diego, has sold its line of products to military and security personnel worldwide. Thanks to strong international business, LRAD’s revenues
toted $24.6 million in the fiscal year 2014, up 44 percent from $17.1 million the year before. As of today, more than seventy countries have purchased LRAD systems.

The LRAD Corporation markets its devices in benevolent, caring terms. Promotional materials stress LRADs’ utility for wildlife protection, emergency mass notification, public safety, and rescue operations (such as talking a suicidal person off a bridge or communicating with stranded hikers on a mountain). The website states, complete with emphases: “LRAD is not a weapon; LRAD is a highly intelligible, long range communication system and a safer alternative to kinetic force.” Nonkinetic, no-touch maneuvers—we’ve heard this claim before. A blanket denial of LRADs as weapons runs counter to the maker’s proud claims about the devices’ potential to scare off sea pirates and overcome enemy combatants in wars abroad. “If [LRADs’] maker tempered its initial [weapon] metaphors,” Juliette Volcler points out, “it’s because this allows distributors to sidestep the U.S. and European prohibitions on weapons sales to China that have been in place since the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989. It allows . . . the LRAD Corp. to publish glowing notices after its products are used to distribute information to survivors of natural disasters, such as in Haiti, or to counter anti-capitalist protesters in Canada.”

LRADs use a technology called piezoelectric transducers to focus sound waves into a narrow field of impact (hence their moniker of sound cannons). In January 2010, the Disorder Control Unit of the NYPD released a seven-page briefing on the LRAD (figure 5.1). One section stated that “while the sound being emitted in front of the LRAD may be very loud, it is substantially quieter outside the ‘cone’ of sound produced by the device. In fact, someone could stand next to the device or just behind it and hear the noise being emitted at much lower levels than someone standing several hundred feet away, but within the ‘cone’ of sound being emitted.” Security forces and governing bodies to date have not subjected LRADs to extensive regulation, presumably because the devices fly under the radar as weapons in their own right.

Underestimations of LRADs’ deleterious potential can contribute to their treatment by police as mere tools or even toys. LRADs’ ability to focus sound into a narrow field doesn’t eliminate the risk of collateral damage. In any case, the promise of exactitude doesn’t make LRADs less problematic than drones (with purported capacity to carry out precision strikes) or sniper rifles (in the hands of a mass murderer). More generally, there’s a lack of research on LRADs’ injurious capabilities. Here’s
Amnesty International’s report on the use of LRADs in the Ferguson protests:

On the night of Aug. 18 [2014] at approximately 10:00 p.m., following the reported throwing of bottles at police and a group of protesters stopping in front of a police line in defiance of the five second rule, law enforcement activated a Long Range Acoustic Device (LRAD). The LRAD was pointed at a group of stationary protestors on the street approximately fifteen feet away. Members of the media and observers were likewise about the same distance from the device. No warning from law enforcement that an LRAD would be used was given to the protesters. After providing earplugs to a member of Amnesty International, a St. Louis County police officer says, “This noise will make you sick.” Several members of the delegation reported feeling nauseous from the noise of the LRAD until it was turned off at approximately 10:15 p.m. LRADs emit high volume sounds at various frequencies, with some ability to target the sound to particular areas. Used at close range, loud volume and/or excessive lengths of time, LRADs can pose serious health risks which range from tempo-
rary pain, loss of balance and eardrum rupture, to permanent hearing damage. LRADs also target people relatively indiscriminately, and can have markedly different effects on different individuals and in different environments. Further research into the use of LRADs for law enforcement is urgently needed.7

A well-documented case of LRAD’s power took place during the protests at the G-20 Summit in Pittsburgh on 24 September 2009. Karen Piper, a scholar of globalization and a visiting professor at Carnegie Mellon University, stopped to take photographs of protesters and their signs. Suddenly, she found herself caught in the blast zone of an LRAD, activated with no warning (figure 5.2). Later, Piper filed a lawsuit, describing how she “suffered immediate pain in her ears,” became nauseated, and “was forced to sit down . . . unable to walk.”8 Her long-term injuries included “permanent nerve hearing loss; tinnitus; barotrauma; left ear pain and fluid drainage.”9 In an interview with the American Civil Liberties Union, Piper recalled how the LRAD’s noise made her think she was dying of an aneurysm.10 She won a (meager) settlement of $72,000 from the city of Pittsburgh.

Despite Piper’s lawsuit, LRADs have only grown in popularity among security personnel. On 12 December 2014, attorney Gideon Orion Oliver sent the NYPD commissioner a memo on behalf of several people who claimed to have been injured by an LRAD while protesting the Staten Island grand jury’s failure to indict the primary police officer involved in the death of Eric Garner.11 Oliver requested that the NYPD refrain from using LRADs until thorough and independent testing has been conducted, until guidelines have been drafted and published, and until officers have received appropriate training to operate these devices. But a hurdle in such pleas lies in a lack of public awareness and empathy. Unless, like Karen Piper, you’ve been bombarded by an LRAD, it’s difficult to imagine or even believe the degree and nature of pain that this sonic artillery can inflict. The fact that LRADs, like music torture, tend to leave few visible traces of injury on victims’ bodies doesn’t make the devices any less in need of regulation than, say, bullets and batons. LRADs are a sonorous smokescreen: because a relative absence of discernible wounds raises the victim’s burden of proof in a court of law, these devices require stricter, not laxer, operational guidelines. It’s too easy to write off an LRAD’s deployment as mere warning shots that precede escalation of true force. In a video that shows a nighttime demonstration in Ferguson, we first hear the sounds of LRADs and police instructions; then we hear
and see rubber bullets and tear gas lobbed into the crowd.¹² No matter how piercing the LRADs may have felt to this crowd, our attention (as YouTube viewers here and now, as protesters then and there) necessarily jerks toward the bullets once they start flying. Because look: bullets. During violent confrontations, nonlethal weaponry can serve practically as a euphemism for prelethal. The announcement of a technology that’s unlikely to kill nonetheless augurs the presence of external force and the weighted options of consequent lethality.¹³ By the same mortal token, a tragic reality in the name Black Lives Matter is how it comes fueled by laments that black deaths matter—for it is black deaths that repeatedly and horrifically make the news, inciting outrage and after-the-fact damage control.¹⁴

LRADs leave protesters with little choice but to cover their ears with both hands. There’s yet another brutal irony here given how one of the rallying cries of Black Lives Matter is precisely, “Hands up! Don’t shoot!” Many protesters in the above-mentioned Ferguson video already had their hands raised above their heads to signal their weaponless status and to decry police killings of unarmed individuals. Police actions that force protesters to cup their ears effectively strip the hands-up-don’t-shoot gesture of its symbolic charge. The raising of hands transforms from a deliberate sign of willful pacifism into a reflexive show of self-preservation.
So beyond the capacity of LRADs to inflict harm, the devices pervert the protesters’ choreographies of resistance. They also drown out protesters’ words and music, overriding free speech and rendering dialogue among assemblies inaudible. For the wielders of an LRAD, a major selling point is the clarity with which it amplifies the speech of those controlling it. The makers declare that “LRAD’s optimized driver and waveguide technology ensure every voice and deterrent tone broadcast cuts through wind, engine, and background noise to be clearly heard and understood.”

Voices transmitted through the devices boast exceptional intelligibility and range. But are such clarion vibrations just when protesters’ voices are getting muted? In this case of asymmetrical conflict, should police have access to a technology that broadcasts crystalline instructions when the people’s calls for reform are going unheard?

A Different Kind of Love Song

Concerning her pathbreaking research on music torture in the war on terror, Suzanne Cusick laments: “Nothing could be more paranoid (or less reparative) than my torture project. Accusatory in its taxonomies, brimming with conscious and unconscious projections of fear and rage toward practices motivated by exactly those affects, and so obviously premised on the paranoid’s belief in the power of exposure and demystification, it is the ultimate in paranoid musicology.” If reparative possibilities hinge on the salvage of love, then a “reparative musicology,” Cusick writes, “would restore love for music; would reconstruct musical experiences so that we could love them.” I agree with Cusick’s call, and would just add that a reparative musicology would simultaneously restore love for people and reconstruct the opportunities for care among them. It means reflecting on our incentives to do good work; dissolving all objections over whether a graduate student’s well-being is a scholarly concern; asking how we can make it better for people of all persuasions; and keeping the music—the conversations—going.

Because we all break from time to time. Our bodies, through torrents of pain. Our spirits, in times of depression and grief. Our group formations, when sirens make us scatter. Our selves, as shame takes over. A reparative stance has to urge collaboration and dialogue over pretension and coercion. For we see a surplus of humiliation as it is: childhood humiliation at the hands of schoolyard assailants, humiliation theory (the term used by Sedgwick and Tomkins) in academia, sexual humili-
tion in black-site interrogations, and humiliation tactics of *gotcha!* journalism. With modern media, opportunities for humiliation have indeed proliferated, from reality show pratfalls and political scandals to revenge porn and cyberbullying. Reparative endeavors involve holding accountable those who voice prejudice, sow injury, and do wrong. But just as important is learning to acknowledge people as more than the sum of their worst deeds and words. Mercy is an essential option, for others’ sake as well as our own.

One challenge with reparative and caring work is that we don’t always have a clear sense of what’s real and what’s fantasy. We roam a land of paper tigers: inflated targets of scholarly polemics; a music-blasting commuter who’s oblivious rather than intentionally heinous; and other threats overblown by misperception or paranoid construction. Then there are the hidden dragons in the mist: youth bullying that gets written off as playful teasing; music torture passing as torture-lite; and additional dangers that elude intervention. So whereas paranoia entails constant and sometimes irrational suspicion of bad things—call it a doubt of benefit (that is, of beneficence, of people’s trustworthiness and the world’s goodness)—repair, in reverse, has to advocate benefit of the doubt. More than offering words of corroboration and flattery, a reparative agenda would insist on an active search for positivity and potential. In academia, this might manifest in magnanimous attempts to recognize others’ expressions as worthwhile. With grading and peer reviews, we show this with compliment sandwiches, opening and closing with encouraging comments while tucking constructive criticism in between. We may, however, be so accustomed to such procedures that we follow them mostly out of courtesy and convention. A subtle but significant distinction exists between casually dispensing praise out of habit and actually cultivating the belief that there’s value in all colleagues’ and students’ effortful contributions, no matter how unusual a piece of writing appears or how far a presentation strays from the institutional expectations of able-minded, good-sounding rhetoric. Epistemologically, suspicion and trust are two sides of the same coin, both grappling with things either not yet proven or outright unprovable. The former fears the bad. The latter hopes for better.

Hope is a funny thing because it’s what we do when evidence remains incomplete. In ongoing situations, there’s at once never and always reason to hold on to hope—because reason isn’t omniscience. “The belief that things can, once and for all, be made right, makes no more sense than the belief (which takes hold of me, on average, once every few
months) that everything is totally, irreparably, ruined,” Susan Brison ponders. “But does it make any less sense?”18

Reader, it makes no less sense.

Calls for optimism don’t discount a recurring need for suspicion, outrage, and protest.19 As Barbara Ehrenreich warns, buying wholesale into cults of positive thinking can generate excessive pressure to be happy, counterproductively breeding discontent.20 But the paranoid and the reparative are not locked in a zero-sum game. A rule of thumb would be to pursue repair where possible and to rely on paranoia when necessary. For as important as it may be to shoot for the reparative, it’s even more vital to recognize that not everyone can afford to do so. Sociopolitically, foreshewing paranoia is a luxury reserved for those lucky enough to live under safe circumstances. It is not always a sound option for people oppressed by scarcity and states of emergency. And academically, the requirements for professional advancement still tend to favor scholarship that resembles paranoid criticism and its hermeneutics of suspicion (strong theories, virtuosic deconstruction, and spectacular demystification). Scholars who are seeking employment might therefore feel like they don’t have enough job security or financial wherewithal to experiment with reparative readings and alternative writing styles. From the outset of Just Vibrations, I’ve stressed that because repair is a privilege, its exigencies should weigh that much more heavily on the shoulders of those who are in the most secure positions to undertake the task.

The theme of repair informs one of the first nursery rhymes that English-speaking children learn. Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall, then had a great fall. Despite the efforts of all the king’s horses and men, he could not be put together again. Curiously, this is a story of failed repair, with pessimistic undertones belied by an uppity dactylic lilt. Although the ending isn’t as traumatic as the grim conclusions of many fairy tales, it’s a depressing narrative all the same, squeezed into just a few lines. We can imagine how youngsters, upon completing a concerted recitation of this bouncy rhyme, might feel rather melancholic about the cracked protagonist, letting the briefest moment of silence descend over the classroom before resuming their commitments to jovial noise. But maybe the rhyme’s takeaway lesson is how a rescue mission was launched at all. If Humpty Dumpty couldn’t be revived, it wasn’t for lack of trying. The king took extraordinary measures, sending every man and horse at his disposal. He made repair and caregiving a public matter (figure 5.3).21

Frivolous though they may sound, childhood vignettes bookend and anchor Just Vibrations because they channel ageless wisdoms. The terror
of bullies, the poison of gossip, and the aching need to believe it gets better don’t end with puberty or college or entry into esteemed jobs. Think about this game that children play shortly after learning the rudiments of language: you say something and they say, “Why?”; you respond thoughtfully, and then, “Why?”; you answer again, patience wearing thin, but still, “Why?”; and on it goes until you exclaim, “Okay, just stop!” (“Why?”—then finally, irritated silence). Children understandably find delight in this infinite deferral (they are keen little Derridas)—deferral not so much of meaning and context, but of bath times and bedtimes. Such a small word, so much power. As we age, these back-and-forth word
games live on. They go by fancier names, whether it’s dialectics or critique or legal adversariality. We uphold combative systems in the name of intellectual rigor, free speech, and fairness. In the process, we would do well to safeguard the reparative constellations of thriving in this world: love, care, empathy, respect, and other glints of good. Can we adopt these affects as foundations rather than as electives in everyday life, academic work, and relationships? Can we do so without fear of looking weak, feeling queer, or sounding like a clichéd cat poster or a self-help book or a Hallmark card?

Few of society’s subjects are more vulnerable than children. Few make ruckus with more abandon. Fragile in physique and easy to deceive, they have the most reason to be paranoid, yet they can be among the most trusting (sometimes at their own great peril). Granted, children play at paranoia, conjuring foes and dangers for their games, dancing through the dark and bounding through the noise. But for the children who are relatively fortunate—the ones with homes, health, resources, social advantages—the make-believe threats in their lives are usually short-lived: tag’s terrible It at recess becomes a friendly goofball once back in the classroom; the stuffed animals that look creepy at night revert to benign cuddle-things come daybreak; and the costumed scourge that overruns Halloween’s carnivalesque streets is gone by the end of the evening, leaving only litters of candy wrappers as proof of prior antics. After flights of fancy, after raids of ninjas, order is magically restored.

Should children ever become genuinely afraid, they rarely think twice about voicing their concerns. As adults, however, we’re no longer so quick to cop to anxieties and phobias. Paranoid about being judged, we obsess over showing strength, sounding good, racking up wins, and scrambling to the top of that wall. We’re afraid to lose, to yield, to fail. Yet as Jack Halberstam puts it, failure may be what “preserves some of the wondrous anarchy of childhood and disturbs the supposedly clean boundaries between adults and children, winners and losers.” Boundaries stand to fall; most walls fall with time.

In the event we sound bad, who will care? As we slow down, who will keep pace? If we break, who will come put us back together again? Should our lives shatter, whose reflections show up in the shards? Rejection, loss, and heartache can sting so fiercely that they fire up promises never to aspire again. The cost of failing at repair is continued or added injury, from which recovery may be arduous as ever. The cost of shunning reparative efforts altogether is that there may eventually be noth-
ing and no one worth recovering for anyway. Trust and suspicion, pride and shame, comfort and pain, love and indifference, hope and forfeit: a gamut of feelings rising early in life and shadowing us ever after. With each step, we face choices of how to face these shadows. Fear them, fight them, fold them into our innermost worlds—worlds for us to rue or repair, one vibe at a time.