

Michael Winterbottom and  
Mat Whitecross, dirs. *The Road to  
Guantánamo*, 2006. "The 'music  
treatment:'"



# Across an Invisible Line: A Conversation about Music and Torture

SUZANNE G. CUSICK AND BRANDEN W. JOSEPH

*From the moment the use of music as a component of physical and psychological torture at U.S.-run detention centers, such as those in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, and Bagram Air Base, Afghanistan, was brought to light, it has been a topic of discussion in both academic circles and the popular press. Conferences devoted to the topic of music and torture have taken place at the Human Rights Project at Bard College in New York State (2009), the Hebbel-am-Ufer in Berlin, Germany (2010), and La Virreina Centre de la Imatge in Barcelona, Spain (2010). Both the Society for Ethnomusicology and the American Musicological Society have passed resolutions condemning the use of music in interrogation techniques, and in October 2009 an alliance of prominent popular musicians, including members of Pearl Jam, Nine Inch Nails, and Rage Against the Machine, cosponsored a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) public records request filed by the National Security Archive in hopes of shedding light on the extent to which their music—and that of other groups—has been used within techniques of so-called no-touch torture. Suzanne G. Cusick, professor of music at New York University, was one of the first academic musicologists to investigate the variety of issues surrounding the intersection of music and torture, and her publications on the topic have been pioneering both within the discipline of musicology and within the humanities as a whole. Branden W. Joseph sat down with Cusick in New York in November 2009 to discuss the critical stakes and continuing relevance of the topic.*

**Branden W. Joseph:** For several years now, from before the advent of the Obama administration, you've been involved in a discussion of how sound, and particularly music, operates in contemporary practices of torture. My question to start is, what's the status of that discussion now? Although, for instance, reports of the United States' continued operation of "black site" prisons have come out of Afghanistan—prisons in which certain types of acoustical bombardment are still being used—it seems that scholars concerned with such issues have been placed in the position traditionally ascribed to the historian: continuing to address things that other people

would rather not discuss anymore, issues that other people think have disappeared or become historical.<sup>1</sup> This position coincides with some of the most prevalent intellectual and journalistic discussions of our country's recent experience of torture as an aberrant episode, a "dark and painful chapter in our history," as President Obama himself called it. As narrated in a book like Jane Mayer's *The Dark Side*, the contemporary engagement with torture was an anomalous development within an otherwise exceptional, even exemplary, history of the U.S. defense of individual liberty.<sup>2</sup> So, where are we now? And what are some of the narratives in which one might intervene?

**Suzanne G. Cusick:** In answer to the question of why one would continue to raise the issue now, I think that there's a certain amount of cultural permission to talk about torture during the Obama administration, whereas there was almost no permission to talk about it during the Bush administration. That permission, I think, has led to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request that Trent Reznor of Nine Inch Nails, Tom Morello of Rage Against the Machine, and others filed in October 2009.<sup>3</sup> It had been in the works for years but until quite recently the coalition hadn't been able to find representation or get the National Security Archive to be cosponsors. There's also an imperative to speak now about the United States' use of torture, including acoustical torture, because the Obama administration seems to have withdrawn from some of its campaign promises to repeal the Bush administration's policies on detention and harsh conditions of detention and interrogation . . .

**BWJ:** . . . and rendition.

**SGC:** And rendition. Certainly they've modified their positions on closing Guantánamo, and they've modified their positions on what constitutes a black site. For instance, the dark prison in Afghanistan, which has for years been described as administered by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) is now described as administered by special forces and therefore not covered by the order to close CIA-operated black sites. This is a sleight of hand, one that seems to be part of a larger shifting of ground.

To cite another example, the use of sound and other "irritants" (to use a euphemism) is currently described as a condition of detention, not a tactic of interrogation. When it's described as a condition of detention, it's removed from the usual legal definitions of torture, which are about getting information out of someone. Yet the description of acoustical irritation, what we might call "extreme acoustical irritation," is completely consistent with what we know was going on in Iraq at Camp Cropper in 2006; it's consistent with what we believe

was going on at the dark prison in Afghanistan all along; and it's consistent with what we've heard to have been the actual condition for most detainees who got the "music treatment" at Guantánamo. Detainees were not asked questions while subjected to music; they were subjected to music and then sent back to their cells to sleep it off and be interrogated the next day.<sup>4</sup> The use of music to manipulate prisoners' behavior has always been a "condition of detention," but subsuming acoustical violence at these levels of intensity under that rubric is another sleight of hand. A third sleight of hand concerns the claim from anecdotal and unattributed evidence that interrogations are now conducted only by contractors, not by Department of Defense uniformed personnel or those in "other governmental agencies," which is government document slang for the CIA, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), National Security Agency (NSA), and others. Whether these contractors are covered by the Geneva conventions or the regulations of the field manual for the collection of human intelligence is murky legal water. To assign or attribute the practices of "harsh interrogation" to contractors is a way of dodging potential accusations of war crimes.

Yet another example of rhetorical slipperiness was the Obama administration's early declaration that all interrogations would be subject to the field manual, because the field manual continues to permit and authorize approaches to interrogation called "futility" and "incentive," which were the very approaches to interrogation used to justify sexual coercion, gender coercion, and the use of loud music in the notorious 2002–2003 interrogation of Mohammed al-Qahtani. If interrogation is still governed by the field manual, those techniques are still permitted.<sup>5</sup>

**BWJ:** Maybe here is where we can address the second part of my question. In some of the dominant emerging narratives about the contemporary use of torture, such as *The Dark Side*, it is portrayed as an aberrant episode within the history of U.S. foreign policy. Yet, we are faced not only with the potential backsliding between what was promised in the Obama campaign and what has subsequently gone on under his administration, but also, and equally important, with the fact that these practices have gone on for a long time. This is one of the issues that has to be faced. There's obviously a longer and stronger investment in certain techniques, strategies, or aspects of foreign policy in which such methods of abuse are engaged, if not in our name, certainly under our auspices as the U.S. government. Stephanie Athey has described the narrative in which torture is portrayed as "a new temptation," as something more than simply historical amnesia. She argues that it is a type of fantasy in which U.S. citizens can understand themselves as free of the taint of torture,

disavowing the fact that in actuality torture is “simply relegated . . . to certain spaces and client states, certain agencies or prisons, certain theaters of operation, certain populations.”<sup>6</sup> One reason to continue speaking about torture at the current time is not only because there is a potentially larger cultural and political space in which to do so, but also because one can confront the fact that a certain engagement with torture is endemic to aspects of U.S. foreign policy and has been for a long time. Or do you think that’s too strong a statement to put forward?

**SGC:** I don’t think it’s too strong a statement. I’ve been saying for some time that what happened in the Bush administration is that, either through arrogance or ineptitude, they let us know what we’ve been doing as a country for fifty years. The problem now is that we actually have to deal with it. Probably, most of us would rather not deal with it because then we would have to face the extent to which our country has farmed out its torturing to client states such as Egypt, Syria, and the Philippines. It’s a form of outsourcing, contracting labor that we don’t want to dirty our hands with officially. Violence against the citizens of other countries seems to be necessary for the so-called American way of life, a way of life that, at the moment at least, is predicated on using other peoples’ resources to fuel our economy. Whether it’s Chinese dollars or Arabian oil, it’s other peoples’ resources. In this sense, the torture issue is a microcosm of the situation we’re in as an imperial power, and one aspect of the situation that becomes moving, compelling, and horrifying revolves around the fact that every torture narrative forces us to see it as an individual experience in which one American is led, sooner or later, to violate the dignity and integrity of one non-American. They’re acting in our name, whether we’ve consciously agreed to it or not.

**BWJ:** Aside from a personal or professional interest in music, it occurs to me that one potentially compelling reason to focus on its use within techniques of torture revolves around its apparent innocuousness. In the majority of reports and discussions of interrogation procedures that I’ve read, acoustical bombardment is the technique that almost invariably falls off the list earliest. It’s the most easily abridged or forgotten among the panoply of seemingly “more important” or “more harmful” techniques. Even authors specifically interested in sound, such as Jonathan Pieslak, have asserted, for instance, that waterboarding is much more severe than acoustical bombardment.<sup>7</sup> In this manner, music appears to be a rhetorical—not actual, but rhetorical—“weak link,” one of the techniques that is most easily belittled or dismissed. Thus, if the impact of acoustical

bombardment were properly understood, if the devastating impacts of this type of treatment were really properly understood by the public at large, it might lead to a more comprehensive understanding of what's at play and at stake in torture more generally. If you can convince people that the subjection to music is actually as torturous as it is, then it would seem very easy to convince them that the other techniques, some of which are also routinely rhetorically dismissed, are as or more clearly torturous in their effects.

**SGC:** That's a really tricky question. I'm not exactly sure why music would be a weaker rhetorical link than temperature manipulation or sleep deprivation, since all three—unwanted noise, temperatures that are too cold or too hot, and sleep disruption—are quite commonplace American experiences that make life miserable from time to time in this very city. I see them as equally blurry, precisely because they are features of ordinary life that have been understood by military intelligence (although not by the powers of the nation-state that we live in) to be pushable across an invisible line. Across that invisible line ordinary experience becomes extraordinary, horrible, and capable of breaking your very subjectivity. Indeed, one of the things that is most off-putting about all of the so-called harsh interrogation techniques except waterboarding is that they are all so ordinary. Once we accept that such techniques are torture, we then wonder when, in our own individual lives, our subjectivities are being damaged.

**BWJ:** You're right to point to the complex formed by so-called no-touch torture techniques: acoustical bombardment, hot and cold temperature transformations, sleep deprivation . . .

**SGC:** . . . gender coercion . . .

**BWJ:** . . . and, to some extent, light bombardment. As we know, most of these techniques are deployed in combination, particularly acoustical bombardment, stress positions, and temperature manipulation. They all fall into an area that can be more difficult for people to wrap their heads around or to decide that they want to wrap their heads around. Part of the difficulty derives from the fact that in these techniques we are confronted with a continuum that runs from a "normal" or "acceptable" amount of exposure to an abnormal or pathological amount, an amount that amounts to torture. This is a different ethical landscape than a situation of "good" versus "bad." The framing of the debate is most often along the lines of "Are stress positions," for example, "allowable or not allowable? good or bad?" rather than understanding that it is a continuum in which a small

amount can be little more than an annoyance and a large amount—once one crosses that invisible line, which is ultimately generalizable among all human beings but on another level is particular to each human being individually—can transform an annoyance into something physically, psychologically, and even metaphysically devastating. Even Darius Rejali, in his encyclopedic *Torture and Democracy*, makes a quip that if exposure to Metallica or the theme song to *Barney the Purple Dinosaur* were really to be considered torture, Amnesty International should be looking to the American suburbs where they would find lots of it.<sup>8</sup> There's a whole range of techniques that people want to separate from physical hitting, slapping, Palestinian hanging [strappado], waterboarding, electroshock, and other practices that they see as the real torture, whereas “harsh interrogation” methods such as acoustical bombardment are “torture lite.”

**SGC:** The more I think about it, the more I'm struck that the notion that music could be used to destroy a person's subjectivity, which is the notion that seems to underlie this practice in detention, is based upon the Western notion of music as an experience that gives human beings access to the sublime and to an experience of transcendence. So, curiously, the practice of using music as a form of torture is based on a set of beliefs that we can trace back to Rousseau's distinction between music and song in the eighteenth century and E.T.A. Hoffmann's location of the sublime in Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, the famous review that practically created musical romanticism, the cultural hero that is Beethoven, and the whole culture of classical music in this country and in Europe.<sup>9</sup> Gary Tomlinson has argued that the notion of music as giving access to the sublime and the transcendent was the most powerful means by which Western philosophers distinguished the West from the rest of the world from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth century.<sup>10</sup> He argues that the twin disciplines of musicology and ethnomusicology have served for the last 150 years to sustain the fantasy that the West has such a transcendental music and the rest of the world has other things that, however interesting acoustically and however pleasurable, don't have the capacity to substitute for the divine, which is what the whole culture of music as a sublime experience is about. The use of music in torture is an absolute degradation, maybe the ultimate degradation, of that idea.

**BWJ:** Degradation, or, potentially, instrumentalization.

**SGC:** Instrumentalization, certainly, because if one believes that music can produce a subjectivity, which is the belief that comes

attached to the notion of music providing access to the sublime, it then follows that a godlike music that can, so to speak, give life, can also take it away. Thus the disciplinary stakes, for me, are about this fundamental belief in the power of music that seems, following Tomlinson, to lie at the cultural heart of the Western domination of the rest of the world. If you start from Tomlinson's understanding of the definition of music in Western culture, it's logical that you would end up using that music to batter people.

**BWJ:** Your characterization sounds like the argument in Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, in which a cultural attitude that serves at a certain point to create subjectivity (in their case, Enlightenment) comes to be a dominating force that crushes subjectivity according to its instrumentalization.<sup>11</sup> Between the song of the Sirens and the subjection of people to soul-annihilating acoustical bombardment, we encounter this narrative once again.

**SGC:** If we imagine a "primal scene," so to speak, of torture, what I always picture is Ruhai Ahmed, one of the Tipton Three, in a stress position being bombarded with sound as portrayed in the film *The Road to Guantánamo* (2006). From our point of view, the thing that's happening is the bombarding of this man both with music and with the idea we have of music. From his point of view the experience is characterized by the violence embedded in that idea. One of the rhetorical handmaidens of the idea of music as sublime (as giving access to the transcendent) is the understanding that music is ineffable: we can't see it; we can't taste it; we can't touch it; it's just sort of there. Yet, no one who actually spends time in a musical environment thinks that music is ineffable. It's a crazy belief. Ruhai Ahmed knows that music is not ineffable and so does the U.S. government. Both know that the simple bombardment of a human body with acoustical energy will change that body. It may feel like a beating, which is what one former detainee told me several times: when it's over, he stated, you feel as though you've been "beaten with a hammer." Yet, even if it doesn't feel like a beating, every bone in the body of the person being bombarded with sound has no choice but to vibrate sympathetically with the sound. The entire body is forced to make music. That's always the case. If you and I go to the symphony tonight, we voluntarily subject ourselves to vibrating sympathetically with patterns invented by Beethoven for our pleasure or enlightenment. But if we are involuntarily forced to vibrate with such patterns, then we are forced, at least temporarily, to become creatures of a culture we did not choose. That, I think, is profoundly violating.



**BWJ:** In a book called *American Methods*, Kristian Williams argues that torture is the individual technique of which empire is the larger manifestation.<sup>12</sup> Likewise, in *The Shock Doctrine*, Naomi Klein describes individual torture and the manifestation of state violence on a larger scale as microcosm and macrocosm of precisely the same thing.<sup>13</sup> Here, with the question of the operations of power upon a body within a certain power regime, we move from *Dialectic of Enlightenment* to Michel Foucault's discussion of biopolitics.

**SGC:** My intuition says that music is actually the perfect medium for contemporary practices of torture, because the current empires are all based on what could be called “no-touch” principles of control, principles of controlling bodies in which there's no person you can blame, for instance, for the shifts in labor relations that characterize neoliberalism. There's never anyone to blame, because it's so systemic. The very feature that led to music's definition as ineffable, the fact that it produces presence in the vibrating air you breathe, makes it the perfect vehicle to stand for that kind of empire.

**BWJ:** Jessica Wolfendale, in an interesting article titled “The Myth of ‘Torture Lite,’” makes two points.<sup>14</sup> The first concerns the manner in which the idea of “torture lite” allows us, as American citizens, to have our cake and eat it too. We can conceive of ourselves as a people who don't torture, even though we do torture, because “we don't do torture, we do ‘torture lite.’” The second concerns the manner in which most so-called no-touch torture, including acoustical bombardment, effectively severs the one-to-one, face-to-face relationship between the torturer and the person being tortured. You put someone in a stress position, with acoustical bombardment, light bombardment, and intense cold, in a room or a shipping container—a place you call “the disco” (or if you're in Brazil you might call it “the fridge,” or in England in the 1970s, “the music room”)—and you leave them to be softened up, and then you come back. The act of leaving, severing the one-to-one, cause-and-effect relationship to the victim, allows the inflicting individual not to think of him- or herself as a torturer. But this also relates to the notion of empire you just discussed: it would be the microcosmic level of which the blameless, neoliberal empire would be the macrocosm.

I'd like to return here to the question about the cultural production of subjectivity that you addressed earlier via the musicological discourse surrounding Western music. In something of the complement or inverse of what you just discussed, Judith Butler has speculated on the manner in which torture is employed not simply to target vulnerabilities in individual subjects but actually to produce a subject defined by certain vulnerabilities. Referring to the mili-

tary's almost exclusive reliance on the essentialist tenets of the book *The Arab Mind* and its conception of Islamic peoples, Butler contends that the sexual nature of certain techniques of humiliation and torture "was not merely an effort to find ways to shame and humiliate the prisoners of Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo on the basis of their presumptive cultural formation. The torture was also a way to coercively produce the Arab subject and the Arab mind. That means that regardless of the complex cultural formations of the prisoners, they were compelled to embody the cultural reduction described by the anthropological text."<sup>15</sup>

In this case, Butler is referring most specifically to gender coercion, the idea that "they" (Arab men) can't take sexual provocations. She could just as easily have been referring to the much discussed fear of dogs, the discursive idea that Arab men are afraid of dogs, as though anybody would not feel fear when confronted by an attacking German shepherd. Through such maneuvers, "we" construct a fantasy in which "they" are particularly vulnerable. It seems to me that music discursively, if not instrumentally, operates in somewhat the same fashion when it's reported, for instance, that "they" can't take heavy metal or country music or—in a manner that connects the discourses surrounding acoustical bombardment and gender coercion—that "they" can't take music with suggestive sexual references (the infamous use of Christina Aguilera's songs). Even though we know very clearly that no one would be able to withstand music at the levels of volume and for the amounts of time that detainees have been subjected to, we construct a subject that supposedly "can't take it" while we, fantasmatically, feel that we "can." I'm thinking here specifically of certain discussions in which it is stated that "they like Michael Jackson" or "they like N'Sync," but they can't take heavy metal because they think it's satanic. Such discursive constructions about music instantiate the "other" as someone who is less civilized, less modern, less worldly, and so on, than we are. Some of the cultural connotations that we attach to the music used in interrogations play a role in the construction of a "vulnerable" other.

**SGC:** I think that's completely right. When I read Butler's text, I thought immediately, both discursively and in the material world, of the notorious interrogation of Mohammed al-Qahtani, which has a kind of discursive life because it was published on *Time* magazine's website.

**BWJ:** Detainee 063.

**SGC:** Al-Qahtani didn't get the music treatment until after they started talking to him about music and engaging him in a conversa-

tion about whether or not he, as a devout Muslim man, was allowed to listen to music that wasn't intended to lead him to the divine. Unlike in Western aesthetics, in which access to the ineffable transcendent ideally comes from listening to wordless instrumental music, in Islamic aesthetics access to the divine comes from listening to devotional poetry produced by human voices. It was only after he failed to be able to quote any passage in the Quran that would specifically forbid music, that he was subjected to music.<sup>16</sup> So he was forced to produce himself as a scripturally and doctrinally ignorant Muslim man, and as a Muslim man who couldn't "take it," in language; and then he was forced to live out the awfulness of being the Muslim man who couldn't take it for weeks before they gave up on that particular approach and moved on to something else. I completely agree with you that that's an important way in which such narratives distinguish "us" from "them," but I want to add that it is also true that we are literally producing that response in the embodied men that have been treated this way. Indeed, any number of them listened to all kinds of Western music. Moazzam Begg is one; he was a fully assimilated Western guy in Birmingham.<sup>17</sup> The German detainee who has published a memoir, Murat Kurnaz, worked as a bouncer at a disco in his youth.<sup>18</sup> Now, however, they no longer listen to Western pop music. They can't stand it. They listen only to Quranic chant, Quranic recitation, and some devotional music.

**BWJ:** That's a particularly apt example of precisely the type of subject formation Butler discusses.

**SGC:** Exactly, but then what does one do with the American-born veteran I talked to who also returned from his unjustified imprisonment at Camp Cropper allergic to the sound of music and to a lot of other sounds as well, but who is now no longer allergic to music? He's gone back to being able to listen to music. Maybe because he knew how to resist, because he'd spoken to people who had been through military SERE (Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape) training, he's been able, however traumatized he remains, to return to his preimprisonment musical practices. It may also be his political position. The men who have been released in the United Kingdom are pariahs. They have not returned to normal life, nor will they in the foreseeable future return to anything like normal life. The American has returned to his home environment, where no one thinks of him as a pariah. All his problems are in his head.

**BWJ:** It also points to the need for further discussion and research. There are emerging narratives, ones that seem very close to taking hold, from journalistic accounts to academic arguments, that "they"

can't take Metallica or that "they" can't take country music. Such narratives have effects on our culture's thinking about what is allowable or what we are and aren't upset about when the U.S. government perpetrates it in our name. The fact that interrogators predominantly use music rather than white noise (which is also used, despite some recent accounts to the contrary) is a cultural choice. Whether it's official policy or whether it's just a decision made by a person who happens to have an MP3 player, it's still a cultural choice, and the popular political understanding of torture is thoroughly involved with the cultural aspects surrounding it. Whether acoustical bombardment actually needs a cultural supplement above and beyond white noise in order to have an actual physical and psychological impact doesn't, in some sense, matter because it is always already there as a matter of fact.

**SGC:** It does matter, because it's with music that you can most easily make an argument analogous to the one that Butler makes about gender and sex. The discourse about the use of music produces and reproduces narratives that, for want of a better word, "otherize" the enemy. This discussion makes me think that it's more important than ever to keep bringing up the example of the American held at Camp Cropper, who can't stand country music and is quite articulate about what he doesn't like about it. In what way is he different from "they" who can't stand country music? A lot of people can't stand country, or can't stand metal, or can't stand rap; their tastes are not marks of Arab or Muslim subjectivity.

**BWJ:** One of the roles played by music in the public discourse around contemporary torture may be analogous to the manner in which the infamous photographs of Abu Ghraib functioned. Mark Danner, when he discussed the Abu Ghraib photos, described the manner in which they essentially acted as their own alibi in the sense that the evident sadism and sexual depravity of these photographs, and even the seeming absurdity of some of the techniques of humiliation, made it relatively easy (both officially and culturally) to see a pointed and almost certainly authorized set of techniques as the work of a couple of rogue individuals—in the infamous words of James Schlesinger, "Animal house on the night shift."<sup>19</sup> Faced with the sheer depravity of the photographic evidence, it became all too easy to believe that it was simply an aberration. Not dissimilarly, reports that Christina Aguilera's music or the theme song from *Barney the Purple Dinosaur* has been played at a detainee seem to undercut the seriousness of the effects of the physical and psychological abuse of which it is a part. We're able to laugh off the form of abuse on account of the associations of its content. And once we

laugh at it, we effectively, although almost surreptitiously, break through the absolute ban on torture. Once we laugh at one technique, belittle it, and think it doesn't have a significant effect, we've already entered a space—whether we know it or not—in which we, as a culture, accept a form of torture as something we can think about without horror. At the same time, your sense of familiarity with the particular choice of music, and even with having been annoyed at music, can mislead you into feeling that you can identify with the person subjected to the technique, and say to yourself, on a completely imaginary level, "I know how it feels to be subjected to music I don't like." Once made, such a fantasmatic identification in turn allows, or even compels, a false sense of superiority, because one erroneously thinks one can withstand the technique, while the "other" can't. Here we're in Butler territory again. A false sense of self-possession comes to compound a series of racial and cultural prejudices that reinforce the otherness of the victim, leading to a false feeling of enhanced masculinity ("I can take it and they can't") or enhanced modernity . . .

**SGC:** . . . or enhanced maturity. Think about the use of the theme song to *Barney the Purple Dinosaur*. It's a children's song.

**BWJ:** Yes, enhanced maturity too, against which the other is defined as effeminate, primitive, childlike, and so on. These, it seems to me, are some of the ways in which music, when used in interrogation techniques, serves as its own alibi. The more ridiculous the choice, the easier it is for us to be complicit in its use. The discourse about music functions, for those of us not in the theater of operations on either the giving or receiving end of these techniques, in very important ways because it defines a fantasmatic community of people: we who can listen to it versus those who can't. All those counterexamples you just gave of detainees who formerly lived in Birmingham or who were working at discos in Germany and so on don't seem to have enough rhetorical or discursive power to interrupt the fantasmatic discussion going on within the public sphere and even within some parts of the academic community.

**SGC:** We might also want to add to the counterexamples the things that we could know about, say, musical life in Baghdad before the war, including the presence of a heavy metal scene. It was not news to bombard these guys with heavy metal, although in our fantasies, we think it's the first time they've ever heard of it. There's a documentary about one of these bands, *Acrassicauda*, an Iraqi word that means Black Scorpion.<sup>20</sup> It's been released all over the world and even won a prize at the Toronto Film Festival, but was not at all

widely released in the United States. We're not going to get to know about this band unless we troll around to find it on YouTube.

**BWJ:** Again, that's part of our cultural self-construction. This is where, if you'll recall, right after 9/11, there were all these very opportunistic statements to the effect that "now things get real. All that postmodernism, all that theory, all that stuff's got to go. We don't have time for that stuff anymore." None of which seemed to have anything to do with the fact that people were dying just blocks away from where we're speaking now. Yet you realize when you discuss something like torture—whether direct "body on body" or "body on body mediated by something like the acoustical waves of music"—that there's no way that any actual physical engagement with or application of power escapes from, or is not enabled by, an entire cultural formation, one that is not just complex, but literally operative in the manner in which people's reception of and beliefs about the practices form and inform the very material essence of those practices. The seemingly "pragmatic" attitude is nowhere near pragmatic enough, because the actual pragmatics are in the cultural material, and it's the cultural material that has to be unraveled for us to understand what we as a culture think about the practices that we allow to happen in our names, whether openly or hidden from us somewhere.

## Notes

Special thanks to Lucy Tang for transcribing this conversation.

1. On “black site” prisons, see Alissa J. Rubin, “Afghans Detail U.S. Detention in ‘Black Jail’ at U.S. Base,” *New York Times*, 28 November 2009, A1, A20.

2. Barack Obama, “Statement of President Barack Obama on Release of OLC Memos,” The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 16 April 2009, [http://www.whitehouse.gov/the\\_press\\_office/Statement-of-President-Barack-Obama-on-Release-of-OLC-Memos/](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Statement-of-President-Barack-Obama-on-Release-of-OLC-Memos/). Jane Mayer, *The Dark Side: The Inside Story of How the War on Terror Turned into a War on American Ideals* (New York: Anchor Books, 2009).

3. For more on the FOIA request, filed in conjunction with the National Committee to Close Guantánamo, see Sam Stein, “Music Stars Demand Records on Bush Administration’s Use of Music for Torture,” *Huffington Post*, 21 October 2009, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/10/21/music-stars-demand-record\\_n\\_329476.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/10/21/music-stars-demand-record_n_329476.html); and Joe Heim, “Torture Songs Spur a Protest Most Vocal: Musicians Call for Records on Guantánamo Detainee Treatment,” *Washington Post*, 22 October 2009, C1.

4. For detailed descriptions of the acoustical practices in U.S. detention sites, see Suzanne G. Cusick, “‘You Are in a Place That Is Out of the World’: Music in the Detention Camps of the ‘Global War on Terror,’” *Journal of the Society for American Music* 2, no. 1 (2008): 1–26; and Suzanne G. Cusick, “Toward an Acoustemology of Detention in the ‘Global War on Terror,’” in *Music, Sound, and the Reconfiguration of Public and Private Space*, ed. Georgina Born and Tom Rice (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

5. For a log of Mohammed al-Qahtani’s interrogation, see “Interrogation Log: Detainee 063,” *Time*, 3 March 2006, <http://www.time.com/time/2006/log/log.pdf>. For the current interrogation field manual of the U.S. Army, see Department of the Army, *Human Intelligence Collector Operations*, FM 2-22.3 (FM 34-52) (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2006), <http://www.army.mil/institution/armypublicaffairs/pdf/fm2-22-3.pdf>.

6. Stephanie Athey, “The Terrorist We Torture: The Tale of Abdul Hakim Murad,” *South Central Review* 24, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 84.

7. Jonathan Pieslak, *Sound Targets: American Soldiers and Music in the Iraq War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 91.

8. Darius Rejali, *Torture and Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 379.

9. See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Essay on the Origin of Languages and Writings Related to Music*, trans. John T. Scott (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1998); and E.T.A. Hoffman, “Beethoven’s Instrumental Music,” in *Source Readings in Music History*, ed. Oliver Strunk (New York: Norton, 1950), 775–781.

10. Gary Tomlinson, “Self, Other, and the Emergence of Musical Modernity,” in *Music and Historical Critique* (London: Ashgate, 2007), 189–196.

11. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002).

12. Kristian Williams, *American Methods: Torture and the Logic of Domination* (Boston: South End Press, 2006), 216–217: “Torture is not only the means by which the state gains control, it is also an expression of triumphant power. The more absolute the power of the state, the more total its control over its subjects, the more likely abuse. This is not simply violence in the pursuit of power, it is violence

as the exercise of power. At times, it may even constitute the reward of power.”

13. Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Picador, 2007).

14. Jessica Wolfendale, “The Myth of ‘Torture Lite,’” *Ethics and International Affairs* 23, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 47–61.

15. Judith Butler, “Sexual Politics, Torture, and Time,” in *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009), 126.

16. The Quran contains no such passage. Islamic ideas about the permissibility of listening to music are found in the hadith, and these ideas are complicated, varying among different theological traditions. For an overview, see Amnon Shiloah, *Music in the World of Islam: A Socio-Cultural Study* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995). An argument in favor of music is Al-Ghazzali, *On Listening to Music*, trans. Muhammed Nur Abdus Salam, Great Books of the Islamic World, series ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (Chicago: Kazi Publications, 2003).

17. Moazzam Begg, *Enemy Combatant: My Imprisonment at Guantánamo, Bagram, and Kandahar* (New York: The New Press, 2006).

18. Murat Kurnaz, *Five Years of My Life: An Innocent Man in Guantanamo*, trans. Jefferson Chase (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

19. Mark Danner, “The Secret Road to Abu Ghraib,” in *Torture and Truth: America, Abu Ghraib, and the War on Terror* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2004), 26–49. See also Schuyler W. Henderson, “Disregarding the Suffering of Others: Narrative, Comedy, and Torture,” *Literature and Medicine* 24, no. 2 (Fall 2005): 181–208.

20. See *Heavy Metal in Baghdad*, DVD, directed by Suroosh Alvi and Eddy Moretti (New York: Arts Alliance America, 2008); and Andy Capper and Gabi Sifre, *Heavy Metal in Baghdad: The Story of Acrassicauda* (New York: MTV Books/Pocket Books, 2009).