

“You are in a place that is out of the world . . .”: Music in the Detention Camps of the “Global War on Terror”

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Abstract

Based on first-person accounts of interrogators and former detainees as well as unclassified military documents, this article outlines the variety of ways that “loud music” has been used in the detention camps of the United States’ “global war on terror.” A survey of practices at Bagram Air Force Base, Afghanistan; Camp Nama (Baghdad), Iraq; Forward Operating Base Tiger (Al-Qaim), Iraq; Mosul Air Force Base, Iraq; Guantánamo, Cuba; Camp Cropper (Baghdad), Iraq; and at the “dark prisons” from 2002 to 2006 reveals that the use of “loud music” was a standard, openly acknowledged component of “harsh interrogation.” Such music was understood to be one medium of the approach known as “futility” in both the 1992 and the 2006 editions of the US Army’s field manual for interrogation. The purpose of such “futility” techniques as “loud music” and “gender coercion” is to persuade a detainee that resistance to interrogation is futile, yet the military establishment itself teaches techniques by which “the music program” can be resisted. The article concludes with the first-person account of a young US citizen, working in Baghdad as a contractor, who endured military detention and “the music program” for ninety-seven days in mid-2006—a man who knew how to resist.

On 10 May 2003, an Algerian aid worker in Tanzania named Laid Saidi was arrested by unidentified men. Taken to an airfield near the border with Malawi, he was outfitted with a blindfold, sound-suppressing earmuffs and an anal plug, shackled, and flown to what he later described as

a “dark prison” filled with deafening Western music. The lights were barely turned on. . . . [O]ne man shouted at him through an interpreter, “You are in a place that is out of the world. No one knows where you are, no one is going to defend you.”¹

His is not the only account of a US-run “dark prison.” A report released by Human Rights Watch late in 2005 included the accounts of eight detainees at Guantánamo

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¹ Craig Smith, with Souad Mekhemmet and Mark Mazzetti, “Algerian Tells of Dark Odyssey in U.S. Hands,” *New York Times*, 7 July 2006.

who had given their attorneys consistent accounts of their detention in a place they, too, called the “dark prison.”² They, too, were “chained to walls, deprived of food and drinking water, and kept in total darkness with loud rap or heavy metal blaring for weeks at a time.” One detainee, known only as M.Z., reported that he had been held for four weeks in an underground cell “where there was loud music playing continuously,” before he was “interrogated in a room with a strobe light, and shackled to a ring on the floor.” Another, Ethiopian-born Londoner Benyam Mohammad, claimed he had been “‘hung up’ in a lightless cell for days at a time, as his legs swelled and his hands and wrists became numb. He said that loud music and ‘horrible ghost laughter’ was blasted into the cell.”³ Mohammad was not surprised by the music, however. Before he arrived at the “dark prison” he had been detained in two Pakistani prisons, then flown by CIA-chartered plane to Morocco where, he told his lawyers,

they cuffed me and put earphones on my head. They played hip-hop and rock music, very loud. I remember they played Meat Loaf and Aerosmith over and over. A couple of days later they did the same thing. Same music.⁴

Among the hundreds of brief detention narratives that can now be downloaded from the websites of human rights organizations, there are many from both former detainees and interrogators that mention the use of music in these places “out of the world.”⁵ While few narratives offer much musical detail, they constitute ample evidence that music and sound have been systematically used to harass, discipline, and in some cases “break” detainees for the entire duration of the so-called global war on terror. Although some US officials attribute the internal consistency among these accounts to an al-Qaeda training manual that encourages captives to claim they were abused, the fact is that many detainee accounts can be corroborated by former guards, former interrogators, even by the reports of internal investigations

² Carlotta Gall, “The Reach of War: Detainees’ Rights Group Reports Afghanistan Torture,” *New York Times*, 19 December 2005.

³ Benyam Muhammad’s experience is also recounted in Stephen Grey and Ian Cobain, “Suspect’s Tale of Travel and Torture,” *The Guardian*, 2 August 2005. Arrested in Pakistan in April 2002, Muhammad was detained and interrogated in two unnamed Pakistani prisons, in Morocco, in the “dark prison” at Kabul, and at Bagram Air Force Base before being sent to Guantánamo in September 2004, where he remained as of late August 2007.

The phrase “dark prison” may be especially salient for Muslims as a reference to something the Prophet referred to in an exchange with his son-in-law Ali as “the torture of the grave” (*adhāb al-qabr*). Saba Mahmood describes it as “the claustrophobic darkness that envelops one before the appearance of the angel of death, who takes an accounting of the life one has led.” See Mahmood, *Politics and Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005), 93.

⁴ Grey and Cobain, “Suspect’s Tale of Travel and Torture.”

⁵ Although women and children are known to have been or still are detained in Afghanistan and Iraq, I know of no accounts of women being held in the “dark prisons.” At least one woman, Iraqi businesswoman Huda Hafez Ahmed, was subjected to cold, enforced standing, sleep deprivation, slapping, and loud music in 2003, after she went to a prison under US military command in Baghdad to inquire after her detained sister. Her experience is described briefly in Amnesty International, “Iraq: Decades of Suffering, Now Women Deserve Better,” <http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGMDE140012005?open&of=ENG-IRQ> (accessed 10 October 2007); and more fully in Luke Harding, “After Abu Ghraib,” *The Guardian*, 20 September 2004, <http://www.doublestandards.org/harding1.html> (accessed 10 October 2007).

run by the Department of Defense. Moreover, the density of these accounts from certain prisons—Abu Ghraib, Bagram, Mosul, and Guantánamo—strongly implies that such use of music and sound have been entangled with other practices that the US government officially describes as “harsh interrogation,” and that some former detainees and human rights activists characterize as “torture.”

Historian Alfred McCoy and journalists John Conroy, Jane Mayer, and Michael Otterman have established that these practices (including the acoustical ones) constitute a coherently theorized arsenal of techniques developed from psychological research conducted in Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom in the 1950s, with funding from each country’s national security agencies.⁶ Codified in the 1963 CIA interrogation manual known as KUBARK, these “interrogation” techniques are generally believed to have been banned by the United States after the end of the Vietnam war.⁷ Nonetheless, there is reason to believe that these techniques continued to be taught by and to US personnel. Otterman has found evidence that they were part of the curriculum at the School of the Americas, at Fort Benning, Georgia, and thus were exported to a range of military and police forces in Latin America. Otterman, Mayer, and others have shown that ways to resist these techniques continue to form a basic part of the Special Forces training curriculum known as SERE (for Survive-Evade-Resist-Escape). Indeed, in a recent *New Yorker* article Mayer developed the persuasive hypothesis that these techniques returned to the practices of US intelligence and military communities with SERE-trained personnel, and moved from the CIA’s “dark prisons” early in the “global war on terror” to Guantánamo, and thence to the extensive network of US-run prisons that, as of this writing, house at least 24,000 detainees in Iraq and an unknown number (above 500) in Afghanistan.⁸

Whatever readers of this essay may think about the complex of overt and covert wars signified by the term “global war on terror,” and whatever readers may think about the similar complex of overt and covert wars signified by its predecessor category, the Cold War, it is an important, irrefutable fact that Americans have theorized and deployed music and sound as weapons of interrogation for at least

⁶ Alfred McCoy, *A Question of Torture: CIA Interrogation, From the Cold War to the War on Terror* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006); John Conroy, *Unspeakable Acts, Ordinary People: The Dynamics of Torture. An Examination of the Practice of Torture in Three Democracies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Michael Otterman, *American Torture from the Cold War to Abu Ghraib and Beyond* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2007); and Jane Mayer, “Outsourcing Torture: The Secret History of America’s ‘Extraordinary Rendition’ Program,” *The New Yorker*, 14 February 2005; “The Gitmo Experiment,” *The New Yorker*, 6 July 2006; and “The Black Sites: The CIA’s Interrogation Techniques,” *The New Yorker*, 8 August 2007.

⁷ Central Intelligence Agency, *KUBARK Counterintelligence Interrogation*, July 1963, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB122/CIA%20Kubark%201-60.pdf> (accessed 8 October 2007).

⁸ On the number of people in US detention in Iraq, see “‘Surge’ Has Led to More Detainees,” *Washington Post*, 15 August 2007. In February 2006 Bagram Air Force Base in Afghanistan held 500 detainees; in August 2005 the United States announced that some 20 percent of the over 600 detainees then housed at Guantánamo would be moved to Bagram for indefinite detention. See Tim Golden and Eric Schmitt, “A Growing Afghan Prison Rivals Bleak Guantánamo,” *New York Times*, 26 February 2006; and Josh White and Robin Wright, “Afghanistan Agrees to Accept Detainees,” *Washington Post*, 5 August 2005.

fifty years. It is not a phenomenon of the current administration or the current wars; it is not news. The only news is that in the last few years we have become increasingly aware of it; that, and perhaps the unnerving fact that our awareness of this practice has provoked no public outcry.

In my view, the fact that the United States has theorized and deployed music as a weapon of interrogation is a fact to be faced. It is a fact with the potential to shift radically the way we who are participants in and scholars of US musical culture understand ourselves and our subject. How has the weaponization of sound and music affected the apparently civilian musical and acoustical practices we think we know? How have apparently civilian musical and acoustical practices affected music's and sound's weaponization? How have these musical practices contributed to the aesthetic, psychological, and technical conditions that have enabled the substantial proportion of our population who have served in the military to think of music this way, despite an official musical culture that pretends to think of music as primarily a medium for entertainment or apolitical aesthetic pleasures?

One cannot begin to answer either these broad questions about US musical culture or the larger moral questions about the state's weaponizing of music without first knowing the fundamental facts of music's use in the detention camps. This essay attempts to meet the need to know those facts. What are the theories behind what SERE veterans call "the music program"? What, exactly, do US personnel do when they use it on detainees? What range of uses can we know about from the relatively few detailed accounts? How do detainees and their captors remember their experiences of it? When we know the basic facts, are we who are US citizens willing to condone this use of music, done in our name?

McCoy, Otterman, and Conroy have ably summarized the psychological research on which the use of music in interrogation was initially based, as they have summarized the transformation of research findings into interrogation techniques by the authors of the CIA's KUBARK manual. In brief, this research found that either sensory deprivation or sensory overload could be an extremely quick way of breaking down a human being's psychological ability to orient him- or herself in reality, distinguish the hallucinatory from the real, or resist interrogation. The KUBARK manual describes the goal of all its interrogation techniques thusly:

There is an interval—which may be extremely brief—of suspended animation, or psychological shock or paralysis. It is caused by a traumatic or subtraumatic experience which explodes, as it were, the world that is familiar to the subject as well as his image of himself within that world. [T]he more well-adjusted . . . the subject is, the more he is affected.⁹

The result, normally, is a strengthening of the subject's tendencies towards compliance.¹⁰ Whether loud or soft, unrelenting sound was believed to be as

⁹ KUBARK, 65–66.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 90.

effective as attempts to create a sound-free environment. Moreover, loud or frightening sound was understood to enhance the effect of systematic sleep deprivation, and to mask—that is, drown out—the inner thoughts of a detainee.

All persons who are to be released from US detention in the current complex of wars are required to sign a non-disclosure agreement, pledging to reveal nothing about their detention. Some are told that if they break the agreement they are liable to be picked up again for indefinite detention.¹¹ As a result, only a trickle of detailed first-person accounts have emerged. Yet this trickle, the trickle of former interrogators' published accounts, and a handful of leaked or unclassified government documents about interrogation practices combine to confirm, first, that the Cold War theories and techniques of sensory manipulation constitute a foundation for current practice; second, that in many cases they achieve their psychological aims; and, third, that the techniques are now intended, experienced, and interpreted somewhat differently than the Cold War documents have predicted.

“Sound is what you turn to”: Kandahar and Bagram

The most exhaustive English-language account of detention is the published memoir of Pakistani-Englishman Moazzam Begg, a native of Birmingham who was arrested by the CIA in Pakistan in February 2002 and held at Kandahar, Bagram, and Guantánamo before his release in January 2005.¹² In both his memoir and in conversation about his experiences, Begg is remarkably attentive to environmental sound.¹³ As he explained, “When your senses are removed from you and you're unable to see anything, sound is what you turn to, to ascertain where you are.”¹⁴ Writing of his first “processing” by US personnel, in Kandahar, Afghanistan, Begg remembered that from the clammy, stifling darkness of his sandbag hood “the noise was deafening: barking dogs, relentless verbal abuse, plane engines, electricity generators and screams of pain.”¹⁵ The constant “noise of generators” and “sounds of talking and shouting [in] Arabic, Pashtun, Urdu, Farsi and English” combined to make sleep difficult.¹⁶ But sound was also a source of both comfort and knowledge. Wafting over from the prison's general population area toward the area where US personnel subjected “high-value” prisoners like Begg to temporal, cultural,

¹¹ Roger Willemsen, *Guantánamo Speaking. Per la prima volta parlano gli ex-detenti. Interviste di Roger Willemsen*, trans. Ludovica Maggi (Napoli: Michele di Salvo Editore, 2006), preface, 10. Originally published as *Hier spricht Guantánamo: Roger Willemsen interviewt Ex-Häftlinge* (Frankfurt am Main: Zweitausendeins, 2006).

¹² I know of one other published autobiography of a detainee, Nazir Sassi's *Prisonnier 325. De Vénissieux à Guantánamo* (Paris: Editions Denoël, 2006). See also Willemsen, *Guantánamo Speaking*.

¹³ This account is based on Moazzam Begg, *Enemy Combatant: My Imprisonment at Guantánamo, Bagram, and Kandahar* (New York: New Press, 2006), and a seventy-minute telephone interview I had with Begg on 18 April 2007.

¹⁴ Begg, telephone interview with the author, 18 April 2007. The disruption of familiar sensory patterns is a fundamental intention of US interrogation practice; see KUBARK: “As the sights and sounds of an outside world fade away, its significance to the interrogatee tends to do likewise. That world is replaced by the interrogation room, its two occupants, and the dynamic between them” (58).

¹⁵ Begg, *Enemy Combatant*, 111.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 114.

and sensorial disorientation, the call to prayer helped him know “dawn, noon, afternoon, sunset and night. They [US personnel] would rather we didn’t know. The call was a spiritual communication, reverberating around the camp.”¹⁷

At Bagram, too, Begg found the call to prayer a comfortingly familiar sound in a place where “everything else was so unfamiliar; I had nothing of my own.”¹⁸ An official regime of strict silence prevailed there, with both conversation among detainees and congregational prayer forbidden.¹⁹ Still, Begg recalls hearing “the sounds of Qur’anic recitation in the middle of the night, the sound of people crying in their prayers. . . . Sounds there were few and far between, other than the footsteps of soldiers, roll call, . . . shackles, . . . sounds of soldiers calling detainee numbers out. Most frightening of all was the sound of screaming . . . of detainees during interrogation, detainees in what was obviously excruciating pain.”²⁰ Frightening or not, these sounds allowed Begg to orient himself in the unfamiliar world of Bagram. He was not, like the detainees of dark prisons, in a place out of the world.

Obviously the silence that Begg attributes to Bagram in early 2002 was relative, less an acoustical reality than it was an express intention to silence all detainee vocalizations that did not respond compliantly to their interrogators. By autumn 2002 the once-silenced world of Bagram had become raucous with “the use of highly intensified music, to break down and disorientate . . . the new prisoners.”²¹

Things had changed a lot since I first arrived, when there had only been about twenty prisoners. Now they had built isolation rooms, and the regime had changed so that every single person who was brought in was put on sleep deprivation. Later on they built other cells for sleep deprivation, constantly playing ear-splitting heavy metal tracks by Marilyn Manson to break down new detainees. Once they even played the Bee Gees *Saturday Night Fever* sound track all night long. “Hardly,” I thought, “enough to break anyone I knew.”

Many of the soldiers, being from the South, liked listening to country and western music, which most detainees regarded the same as all other “English” music. But I had the misfortune of knowing better.

“We’ll talk. We’ll all talk,” I said in half jest when they played it, “just turn that crap off please!”²²

The cells in which the music was blasted were six-foot square, built of plywood that would have resonated as well as the walls of a schoolchild’s first violin. Newly arrived prisoners were stripped naked and held inside these plywood boxes for

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 122.

¹⁸ Begg, telephone interview with the author. Bagram Air Force Base, once a key site for the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, is twenty-seven miles north of Kabul. At the time of Begg’s detention, the detention area is believed to have been inside a large and cavernous machine shop dating from the Soviet era.

¹⁹ Begg, *Enemy Combatant*, 137–39.

²⁰ Begg, telephone interview with the author. For a long time, Begg believed (incorrectly) that one of the women whose screams he heard, whom he eventually knew as Detainee number 650, was his wife. See Begg, *Enemy Combatant*, 161. Begg’s colleagues at *Cageprisoners.com* now believe she may have been Afez Sadiki, a woman who had studied psychiatry in the United States, who was held at Bagram for two years that correspond with his time there, and who has since disappeared, along with her children.

²¹ Begg, telephone interview with the author.

²² Begg, *Enemy Combatant*, 170. In our interview, Begg recalled hearing Eminem from these cells, too.

several days, “subjected constantly to loud, very loud music” that could be heard from anywhere in the building.²³ Begg, who spent a few days in such a cell as punishment for resisting interrogation, described the experience:

It was terrible, there was no light at all, it was so tight, so hot, stifling in there, You can't see or do anything, nothing to see, nobody to talk to, nothing to do but bang the walls. And then to have the music blasting. . . . I met several people who'd been in there, . . . [who were] ready to tell the Americans anything they wanted, whether it was true or not.²⁴

Begg himself was not subjected to the music when he was in the isolation cell. He speculates that his interrogators knew he would not be as unnerved by it as others were.

In a sense the music didn't bother me. I'd grown up in Britain, I knew what it was. But Afghan villagers, Yemenis, these guys were dazed, dazzled and confused, bewildered, completely out of it.²⁵

Outside the plywood boxes, where Bagram's long-term prisoners sat in pens with walls made of concertina and razor wire, the music that dazed, dazzled, and confused the isolation prisoners was nearly as loud as the music in a dance club.²⁶ Replacing the soundscape of muffled recitation, soldiers' footsteps, and screams by which Bagram's first detainees had learned to orient themselves, Bagram's soundscape began intermittently to resemble those of the dark prisons. Begg remembers hearing the music “every single night, particularly toward the end of my time there,” and that “it became almost impossible to sleep.”

If even footsteps echoed in the building, you can imagine what full blast Marilyn Manson would sound like. Sometimes it would stop at 3 am or so, but your ability to sleep was already disturbed. You lose the ability to have a routine sleep. . . . The other thing that they did was play the music at various times, . . . the random aspect of when it would start or end was frustrating, makes you tired, agitated, upset, on top of all the other situations of not knowing when you're going to be released, interrogated, or moved to those cells. Many people suffered from various kinds of anxiety attacks. People hyperventilated, losing control of their senses, hitting their bottle of water against the cell, against other people, trying to scrape their hands against the concertina wire, sometimes breaking down and crying.²⁷

In short, the music at Bagram was by the book; it did what it was supposed to do.

Since his release, Moazzam Begg has become the official spokesman of a charitable organization called *Cageprisoners.com* that advocates for people who have been (or still are) detained in the “global war on terror”; he is paid to speak publicly on behalf of released detainees who dare not violate the terms of their non-disclosure agreements. Begg freely admits that in the 1990s he provided financial and material assistance to Muslim rebels in Chechnya, Kashmir, and Afghanistan, and to the humanitarian relief agencies that served the Muslim populations of Bosnia and

²³ Begg, telephone interview with the author.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

Herzegovina. British security forces twice arrested him for these and other suspicious activities in the 1990s. Thus there might be reason to suppose that his account of Bagram is tendentious, perhaps even that it is part of a deliberate campaign of jihadist disinformation. There *might* be reason, except that his account resonates with those that former military interrogators have given about the use of music in detention camps at Camp Nama, Forward Operating Base “Tiger,” and Mosul Air Force Base in Iraq. These accounts make perfectly clear that an intentionally abusive use of music was standard operating procedure. They also reveal the effects of that music on the interrogators themselves.

The “Black Room,” the First Wrong Answer, and “The Disco”: Three Interrogators Speak

In the Human Rights Watch report “*No Blood No Foul*”: *Soldiers’ Accounts of Detainee Abuse in Iraq*, a pseudonymous “Sgt. Jeff Perry” described his work as an interrogator for the interagency Task Force 6–26 at Camp Nama, Baghdad, in early 2004.²⁸ His account makes clear that “loud music” was a fully integrated part of the military’s interrogation system.

In addition to a medical screening room (which also served as the setting for Saddam Hussein’s televised dental check after his arrest), Camp Nama had four rooms used specifically for interrogation: a “soft room” furnished with “nice rugs, couches, prayer rugs hanging on the wall . . . three or four black leather chairs” for interrogating highly respected detainees; a “blue” and a “red” room, furnished more sparsely, each used for interrogations that were meant to feel like conversations; and a “black room” for “harsh interrogations.” As Perry described it,

the black room was twelve by twelve [feet]. It was painted black floor to ceiling. The door was black, everything was black. It had speakers in the corners, all four corners, up at the ceiling. It had a small table in one of the corners, and maybe some chairs. But usually in the black room nobody was sitting down. It was standing, stress positions. The table would be for the boom box and the computer. We patched it into the speakers and made the noise and stuff.²⁹

According to Perry, interrogators obtained official authorization for the “black room” techniques by filling out an online form.³⁰ When he and some other interrogators complained about what seemed to them obvious abuses, they received a

²⁸ Human Rights Watch, “*No Blood, No Foul*”: *Soldiers’ Accounts of Detainee Abuse in Iraq*, Report 18/3 (July 2006), 8–24. Located at Baghdad International Airport, Camp Nama had allegedly been a detention and torture facility during Saddam Hussein’s regime. After the fall of Baghdad, US personnel used it as a high-value detention center staffed by an interagency interrogation team that allegedly included Navy Seals, Army Special Forces personnel, and civilian interrogators who probably worked for the CIA and/or the FBI. See Eric Schmitt and Carolyn Marshall, “Task Force 6–26: Inside Camp Nama; In Secret Unit’s ‘Black Room,’ A Grim Portrait of U.S. Abuse,” *New York Times*, 19 March 2006. Reports of abuse investigations are available at <http://www.aclu.org/torturefoia/released/030705>. When Camp Nama was closed in 2004, its interrogation operation was allegedly moved to Balad Air Force Base, described by Globalsecurity.org as “the largest and busiest aerial port in Iraq.”

²⁹ Human Rights Watch, “*No Blood, No Foul*,” 9.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.

two-hour PowerPoint briefing from representatives of the Judge Advocate General Corps, assuring them that everything they did was considered legal, given the United States' assertion that the people they detained were not prisoners of war, and therefore not covered by the Geneva Conventions.³¹

Whereas music seems to have been used only for "harsh interrogations" at Camp Nama, and at Forward Operating Base Tiger, near al-Qaim, it was more common, a kind of entry point adumbrating the harshness that might follow.³² Detainees typically spent their first twenty-four hours there standing blindfolded and naked, their hands bound behind their backs, without access to food, water, or the toilet, in a metal shipping container where, in summer 2003, the temperatures rose to between 135 and 145 degrees Fahrenheit.³³ Guards like pseudonymous "Sgt. Nick Forrester" of the 82nd Airborne were instructed to shout or bang on the containers during the night to ensure that the new detainees did not sleep. On their second day, detainees were taken to interrogation.

They'd sit you down in a chair, they start off with some softball questions, getting your name, getting [you] wound up, stuff like that. And then, at the first "no," at the first "I don't know," at the first "I don't have any information," at the first wrong answer—that's when the lights went off, they put some strobe lights on, put some kind of heavy metal on—just some kind of loud music, whatever they could put on. One time, they put Barney on real loud and it annoyed the hell out of me.³⁴ You listen to that over and over for two hours and it's really annoying.

So, typical first-time interrogation consisted of some kind of heavy metal music really loud, strobe light, lot of yelled questions and stuff like that, until they finally would break down and say "I don't know anything . . ." He's on his knees, usually with a rifle pointed at him, strobe light going, music going, whatever. Then the guys sitting at the desk asking him questions directly. It was always yelling at that point—you had to, in order to hear [over the music]. . . . They'd ask and ask and ask and ask.³⁵

The music alone was often so loud that soldiers standing thirty feet away, guarding the metal shipping containers, had to yell at each other to be heard. According to Sgt. Forrester, the interrogation sound system at FOB Tiger was so good they used it for Fourth of July celebrations. Not so the system used in Mosul Air Force Base's "disco."

In his memoir *Fear Up Harsh*, former army interrogator Tony Lagouranis describes the moment that the interrogation room known at Mosul AFB as "the disco" was created.³⁶

³¹ Ibid., 14.

³² Al-Qa'im is a small city on the Euphrates River in northeastern Anbar Province, near the Syrian border.

³³ Human Rights Watch, "No Blood, No Foul," 26–40, based on the account of "Sgt. Nick Forrester," a guard at FOB Tiger.

³⁴ Forrester refers to the signature song of the character from children's culture known as Barney the Purple Dinosaur. Its lyrics begin "I love you, you love me. . . ."

³⁵ Human Rights Watch, "No Blood, No Foul," 30–31.

³⁶ Tony Lagouranis and Allen Mikaelian, *Fear Up Harsh: An Army Interrogator's Dark Journey Through Iraq* (New York: NAL Caliber, 2007). Lagouranis served with the rank of Specialist in the 202nd Military Intelligence Battalion from early 2004 to July 2005. He was stationed at Mosul from February through April 2004.

Putting a barking dog in a prisoner's face wasn't working, so where to now? Across the camp, in their off-limits compound, the elite forces among us were supposedly getting great intelligence. At least they went on a lot of raids and scooped up plenty of prisoners. Few of us ever saw what went on there, but descriptions of their techniques kept coming back, from both guards and prisoners. These reports served as inspiration for our next escalation.

Pitt [his commander] pointed to a shipping container right outside the wire of the prison and described what he wanted us to do. He obtained a strobe light from aviation and a boom box from a private. He asked the guards for CDs of the most awful death metal music they had. He gave us these new tools and told Evan and me to clear the container out and get it ready for use as an interrogation chamber, saying, with finality, "I want to do this."³⁷

By then, Lagouranis and his colleagues had long known that music could be used in interrogations. They had heard about it during training at Fort Gordon, Georgia, in 2003, but not from their official teachers. Veteran interrogators returning from tours of duty in Afghanistan and Iraq told them "how interrogation is really done . . . stress positions, loud music, lights, sleep 'adjustments,' sexual humiliation, . . . manipulation of diet . . . using the cold weather to stress the detainee."³⁸ Indeed, detainees that Lagouranis interrogated at Mosul told him their CIA interrogators had used the full range of these techniques, and his commanders had told him that they were permissible according to the Interrogation Rules of Engagement (IROE) in force in some detention camps.³⁹ The first prisoner to be interrogated in Mosul's disco was "a big dumb guy with a soft face and sad eyes" named Umar.⁴⁰

After bagging his head while checking him out of the prison late at night, we threw him roughly in the back of a pick-up truck. . . . We drove him around the base for about twenty minutes, [then] we dragged him out of the truck and forced him to stand in the middle of the container. His breathing was heavy after hearing the metal doors slam and the bolt fall into place. It was completely dark. We'd staged it perfectly. In his mind, we were getting ready to seriously mess him up.

As Umar knelt, we put the flashing light directly in front of his sandbagged face and the boom box, at full volume, just off to the side. The music . . . consisted of industrial-style guitars, beating drums, and lyrics delivered in a moan/shout style, the singer obviously trying to sound like the Prince of Darkness himself. It blasted out of the speakers and ricocheted around the container. . . .

And as Umar knelt, we took turns yelling our questions into his ears. His head twisted around as he tried to figure out where we were. After about a half hour, he started moaning. I imagined he was crying behind his sandbag. We pushed forward, getting harsher with our words. My throat was sore, my ears were ringing, and the lights were disorienting. I realized I wasn't going to be able to stand this much longer. The music and the lights were making me increasingly more aggressive. The prisoner, still not cooperating, was making me increasingly angry.⁴¹

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 115. Lagouranis's team commander at Mosul, Chief Warrant Officer S. Pitt, is identified on 73.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 50.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 85. Lagouranis was surprised to learn the same rules had been in force at his previous posts, the camps at al-Asad and Abu Ghraib. His memoir notes the slipperiness of the IROEs in force in each of these places.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

Lagouranis's book includes many such narratives, for interrogation in "the disco" became standard operating procedure at Mosul for the rest of his time there. He reports mainly playing heavy metal during interrogations, but also albums by James Taylor, and, once when he was "sick of death metal," the audio version of Ben Stiller and Janeane Garofalo's parody of self-help books, *Feel This Book*.⁴² Over and over, what he recounts most vividly is his own building rage as he, too, listened to the unrelenting music, his own unrelenting yelled questions, and his prisoners' equally unrelenting refusal or inability to give him the information he wanted. One night, at nearly one in the morning, he snapped.

I left [Khalid] in the container, in a stress position, and went outside. The base was quiet except for the voices of Ben and Janeane bouncing off the wall of the shipping container. It was cold and I was completely alone, except for this prisoner inside, who . . . wouldn't acknowledge the absolute power I had over him. It was just me and him. No one else was out here, no one was watching.

Khalid was right where I left him, calm and serene. When I looked at him, the anger surged, amplified by the flashing lights and the booming noise. A thought flashed through my head: *Chop his fucking fingers off*.⁴³

Stunned by the eruption of what he recognized as his own capacity for evil, Lagouranis left Khalid's hands intact that night. He mused that it was the confrontation with their interrogators' capacity for evil that really breaks prisoners.

We fear most not what evil will do to our bodies, but what it will do to our orderly, civilized worldview, our fragile psychology that's so dependent on predictability and a belief in the goodness of human souls.⁴⁴

Muhammad al-Qatani at Guantánamo: Music as an Assault on the Soul

In June 2005, reporters Adam Zagorin and Michael Duffy obtained the eighty-three-page log of Muhammad al-Qatani's interrogation at Guantánamo from 23 November 2002 to 11 January 2003.⁴⁵ The magazine story they based on this

⁴² Ibid., 125.

⁴³ Ibid., 127. The italics are Lagouranis's.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 128.

⁴⁵ Adam Zagorin and Michael Duffy, "Inside the Interrogation of Detainee 063," *Time*, 12 June 2005. The log can be accessed at <http://www.time.com/time/2006/log/log.pdf>. Al-Qatani had been denied entry to the United States in August 2001, when he landed in Orlando with no return ticket and \$2,800 in cash in his pocket. He was captured at Tora Bora in December 2001, sent to Guantánamo two months later, and identified as the Saudi deported from Orlando by fingerprint evidence in July 2002. Because he showed signs of having been trained to resist interrogation, and seemed likely to have important evidence about the September 11 plot, he was one of the prisoners for whom Secretary Rumsfeld approved a "special interrogation plan" in November 2002. Although in 2005 the Pentagon continued to claim he had given high-value intelligence about bin Laden's escape from Tora Bora, and about people and financial contacts of interest in several Arab countries, the website Globalsecurity.org now describes him as of "low importance" to national security. His name is easily confused with Muhammed Jafar Jamal al-Qatani, also a Saudi and a medium-level al-Qaeda operative, who was arrested in Iraq in 2005, escaped, and was recaptured.

log, published on 12 June 2005, created a stir in both mainstream media and the blogosphere partly because it revealed the then unlikely-seeming fact that the music of Latina pop star Christina Aguilera had been used to “torture” al-Qatani. What the *Time* story did not say is that Aguilera’s music was not an isolated, random act of al-Qatani’s interrogation, but intrinsic to a weeks-long interrogation strategy that the authors of the log called “the music theme.”⁴⁶ This theme, in turn, was one component of “the bad Muslim theme,” a set of attacks on al-Qatani’s ability to perform the embodied practices that define a good Muslim man.⁴⁷

Music is first mentioned in the log entry for 6:30 a.m., 26 November 2002. Al-Qatani had been awake since 4:00, and had, by then, irritated his interrogators by refusing to speak or to drink water. At 6:20, he had asked to pray. Told he would be allowed to pray if he drank, he replied that he was fasting.⁴⁸ He began to chant anyway. According to the log, “Sgt. R says ‘If you continue to chant, I’ll turn on the music.’ Detainee stopped chanting.”⁴⁹ Sgt. R’s threat to “turn on the music” seems not to have been realized until 3 December, when a new phase of al-Qatani’s interrogation began.

During the new phase, music was an intermittent and unpredictable component of days in which al-Qatani was interrogated twenty hours out of every twenty-four. Sometimes music was used to keep him awake, sometimes expressly to annoy or agitate him. Sometimes it was combined or alternated with an approach the log called “invasion of space by female,” with taunts accusing him of homosexuality because he refused to look closely at pictures of scantily dressed women, or with forced cross-dressing. Aguilera is the only artist whose music is mentioned; the other music is described variously as “loud,” “instrumental,” “relaxation/meditation,” or “songs in Arabic.” It was the latter kind of music, played at 11:15 on the first morning after Ramadan, on 7 December 2002, that prompted al-Qatani to complain “that it was a violation of Islam to listen to Arabic music.” His complaint opened a vulnerability that al-Qatani’s interrogators willingly exploited.

For the next ten days, al-Qatani’s interrogators challenged him to cite the passage in the Qur’an that forbade listening to music. He could not, because there is no such passage.⁵⁰ As al-Qatani would eventually assert to his interrogators, one long theological tradition, or *hadith*, disapproved strongly of all music used to pass the

⁴⁶ A “theme” is a conversational gambit through which military interrogators establish “the conditions of control and rapport to facilitate information collection.” The phrase is quoted from Department of the Army, FM2-22.3 (FM34–52). *Human Intelligence Collector Operations*, September 2006, section 8.1.8, <http://www.army.mil/institution/armypublicaffairs/pdf/fm2-22-3.pdf> (accessed 8 October 2007).

⁴⁷ The other component of the “bad Muslim theme,” most often flagged in the log by the term “invasion of space by female,” consisted of a concerted assault on his self-identification as a heterosexual man who nonetheless resisted interrogators’ efforts to make him objectify women.

⁴⁸ Al-Qatani was fasting during Ramadan, which lasted from 6 November to 6 December 2002.

⁴⁹ “Interrogation Log, Detainee 063,” 9, entry for 26 November 2002, 06:30.

⁵⁰ Some scholars of Islam interpret the Prophet as having expressly permitted the singing of two young girls he overheard performing for his wife ‘A’isha; other interpreters say he plugged his ears at the sound. See Amnon Shiloah, *Music in the World of Islam: A Socio-Cultural Study* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995), 32.

time, entertain, or provide merely sensual pleasure. According to this tradition, articulated in the writings of the ninth-century teacher Ibn abī'l-Dunya, "listening to music is forbidden because it takes one's mind off the devotional life and removed one's thoughts from God."⁵¹ Music was conceived as a powerful force, in some writings a force from the devil, that could provoke passions contradicting rational adherence to religious precepts. Listening to songs with frivolous or sensually provocative lyrics was especially dangerous to the soul. Yet, as al-Qatani's interrogators pointed out, another theological tradition, associated with the early twelfth-century teacher Majd al-Dīn al-Tūsī al-Ghazālī, advocates listening to music as a means by which a heart, properly prepared by faith, can achieve understanding of the divine, the ecstasy of an altered consciousness, and, finally, "the whirling motion that is dance."⁵² But even al-Ghazālī, forbade listening to music made by "a woman . . . as an object of the carnal appetite that is lust"; to instrumental music; or to satirical music. And he forbade listening to music when "carnal passion" was in one's heart, or when the music was merely an amusement, not a means to understanding.⁵³

The tension between these two strands of thought persists in the contemporary world, including in the internet-based world of religious instruction that sustains the multiple theological communities of the global Islamic revival.⁵⁴ Given that the Taliban had forbidden music in Afghanistan for religious reasons, it seems possible that al-Qatani genuinely believed that listening to music was *haram*, forbidden, and therefore sinful. Yet his inability to talk knowledgeably about Islam's theological traditions on music allowed "the music theme" to merge with the themes known as "the bad Muslim," "al Qaeda betrays Islam," "God intends to defeat al Qaeda," "arrogant Saudi," and "I control all" to produce the overall "approach" called "Pride/Ego Down." That is, al-Qatani was humiliated, and his Muslim identity attacked, by his obvious ignorance of his own tradition. Meanwhile, the "loud music" he may have experienced as sinful continued to keep him awake, to end his interrogation just before he was allowed to sleep, to awaken him, to prevent him from speaking in answer to interrogators' questions, and to fill up longer and longer parts of interrogation days that were also filled with the argument over music's alleged sinfulness, which constituted "the music theme." At 4:30 in the afternoon on 14 December, when his interrogators confronted him with a Qur'anic passage declaring it a sin to add prohibitions not mentioned in the Qur'an (as he seemed to be doing), al-Qatani "broke down crying and asking God for forgiveness

⁵¹ Ibid., 34.

⁵² Al-Ghazzali, *On Listening to Music*, trans. Muhammad Nur Abdus Salam, with an introduction by Laleh Bakhtiar, Great Books of the Islamic World, series ed, Seyyed Hossein Nasr (n.p.: Kazi Publications, 2003), 20–26.

⁵³ Ibid., 13–20.

⁵⁴ See, for example, the contradictory recommendations available at such websites as <http://www.submission.org/music.html>, http://www.inter-islam.org/Prohibitions/Mansy_music.htm, http://www.irfi.org/articles/articles_151_200/music_and_islam.htm, http://www.irfi.org/articles/articles_351_400/is_music_prohibited_in_islam.htm, <http://www.geocities.com/Heartland/Flats/1716/music.html> (all accessed on 28 September 2007).

and . . . stated that he could do nothing about the music that was played in the [interrogation] booth.”⁵⁵ His interrogators had taken full advantage of music’s peculiar properties as a sensory experience, a site of cultural belief, and a medium of cultural practice to force al-Qatani into a conscious state of sin he was powerless to avoid.⁵⁶

Standard Operating Procedure

Understandably, both the various Interrogation Rules of Engagement that have circulated since the “global war on terror” began and most logs of individual interrogations remain classified. But at least one unclassified document corroborates the perception that the practices at Bagram, Camp Nama, Forward Operating Base Tiger, Mosul Air Force Base, Guantánamo, and the “dark prisons” are components of a standard operating procedure. Indeed, this document explains with great precision how certain now notorious interrogation techniques—including the use of “loud music”—are meant to be understood in relation to the apparently conversational “emotional approaches” still taught in the *Army Field Manual for Human Intelligence Collector Operations, FM 2-22.3 (34-52)*.⁵⁷

In December 2004, a Freedom of Information Act request revealed that the FBI had begun an internal review of its own agents’ complaints about interrogation practices they had witnessed at Guantánamo. In response to the complaints’ public release, General Bantz J. Craddock, Commander of the United States Southern Command, ordered an investigation of these claims and others, including the widely publicized sexual humiliations of Muslim men and the use of “loud music,” strobe lights, sleep deprivation, and extremes of temperature.⁵⁸ On 1 April 2005, the investigators’ report absolved military personnel of all but one charge of “degrading

⁵⁵ “Interrogation Log,” 37, entry for 14 December 2002, 16:30.

⁵⁶ Al-Qatani was not the only Muslim prisoner whose religious beliefs and practices are known to have been the target of military interrogators. In his book *American Torture*, Michael Otterman reports that during his court martial for the asphyxiation death of Major General Abed Hamed Mowhoush at Forward Operating Base Tiger in 2003, Warrant Officer (and former SERE instructor) Lewis Welshofer freely admitted to denying his prisoner the right to call on God. In response to the prosecutor’s question “You took away his God?” Welshofer replied, “I took away one of his comfort items.” See Otterman, *American Torture from the Cold War to Abu Ghraib and Beyond* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2007), 177–80.

⁵⁷ At the time of the interrogations discussed above, the rules for interrogation were in Department of the Army, *FM 34-52, Intelligence Interrogation*, 1992, available from the Library of Congress, http://www.loc.gov/rr/frd/Military_Law/pdf/intel_interrogation_sept-1992.pdf [*sic* “interrogation”] (accessed 8 October 2007). Interrogation approaches, some considered “emotional” and some not, are the subject of chap. 3, 50–82. They are: incentive, emotional (love), emotional (hate), fear-up, fear-down, pride and ego, futility, “we know all,” “file and dossier,” “establish your identity,” repetition, rapid-fire, silent, and change of scene. Lightly revised, these are all subsumed under “emotional approaches” in Department of the Army, *FM 2-22.3 (34-52). Human Intelligence Collector Operations*, September 2006, available at <http://www.army.mil/institution/armypublicaffairs/pdf/fm2-22-3.pdf> (accessed 8 October 2007), where they are the subject of chap. 8, 139–62.

⁵⁸ For one of the first exposés of Guantánamo interrogation practices, see Erik Saar and Viveca Novak, *Inside the Wire: A Military Intelligence Soldier’s Eyewitness Account of Life at Guantánamo* (New York: Penguin, 2005). A less critical view is Chris Macky and Greg Miller, *The Interrogators: Inside the Secret War Against Al Qaeda* (New York: Little, Brown, 2004).

and abusive treatment.”⁵⁹ It was revised on 9 June 2005, perhaps in anticipation of *Time*’s imminent publication of the leaked interrogation log.⁶⁰

The report began with a review of the specific, dated commands from Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld that had established the norms for interrogating “detainees who had received interrogation resistance training,” the norms by which interrogators were to receive permission for certain “aggressive techniques,” and the “special interrogation plan” that was used with al-Qatani.⁶¹ After thus reviewing the relevant command history, the report addressed and dismissed each specific charge of abuse. The documented instances in which women interrogators rubbed their perfume on male detainees, took off their shirts while interrogating male detainees, ran their fingers through male detainees’ hair, rubbed a red substance they claimed was menstrual blood on male detainees, took up a position over male detainees’ supine bodies that investigators called a “lap dance,” or forced male detainees to stand naked before them were all justified as permissible examples of the interrogation technique called, in the field manual, “futility.”⁶² The investigators recommended “that the approval authority for the use of gender coercion as a futility technique be withheld to the JTF GTMO-CG”; that is, “gender coercion” required the approval of Guantánamo’s commanding officer. “Futility” was also the justification for the use of loud music, although the investigators recommended that commanders “develop specific guidance on the length of time that a detainee may be subjected to futility music.”⁶³ The allegation and its resolution are so specific about the ways music could be used as to merit quotation in full.

Allegation: That DoD interrogators improperly played loud music and yelled loudly at detainees.

Finding #4: On numerous occasions between July 2002 and October 2004, detainees were yelled at or subjected to loud music during interrogation. **Technique: Authorized:** FM 34–52 technique—Incentive and Futility—acts used as reward for cooperating or to create futility if not cooperating.

Discussion: Almost every interviewee stated that yelling and the use of loud music were used for interrogations at GTMO. On a few occasions, detainees were left alone in the interrogation booth for an indefinite period of time while loud music played and strobe lights flashed. The vast majority of yelling and music was accomplished with interrogators in the room. The volume of the music was never loud enough to cause any physical injury. Interrogators stated that cultural music would be played as an incentive [to give interrogators

⁵⁹ Department of the Army, *Army Regulation 15–6: Final Report. Investigation Into FBI Allegations of Detainee Abuse at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba Detention Facility*, 1 April 2005 (amended 9 June 2005), available at <http://www.defenselink.mil/news/Jul2005/d20050714report.pdf> (accessed 8 October 2007).

⁶⁰ Zagorin and Duffy, “Inside the Interrogation of Detainee 063.”

⁶¹ A vast trove of such memos and commands, including the documents this report cited, are available in *The Torture Papers: The Road to Abu Ghraib*, ed. Karen J. Greenberg and Joshua L. Dratel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁶² Department of the Army, *AR 15–6, Final Report*, 8. *FM 2–22.3 (34–52)*, 151, section 8.49–8.51 defines this approach thus: “In [this approach] the . . . collector convinces the source that resistance to questioning is futile. This engenders a feeling of hopelessness and helplessness on the part of the source. . . . When employing this techniques, the [collector] must not only have factual information but also be aware of and exploit the source’s psychological, moral and sociological weaknesses.” The manual advises that “futility” is best combined with “incentive” and “fear-up” (356).

⁶³ *AR 15–6, Final Report*, 9.

the information they wanted]. Futility technique included the playing of Metallica, Britney Spears, and Rap music. . . .

Recommendation #4: . . . Recommend JTF-GTMO develop specific guidance on the length of time that a detainee may be subjected to futility music. Placement of a detainee in the interrogation booth and subjecting him to loud music and strobe lights should be limited and conducted within clearly prescribed limits.⁶⁴

It is important to note that this recommendation neither condemns nor dismisses the use of music in interrogation as the ridiculous, unhelpful horseplay of rogue soldiers. Instead, it confirms that such use of music is subject to guidance from high levels in the chain of command.

To someone who has read a great deal of the literature on sensory manipulations in relation to “torture” or “interrogation,” the army’s 2005 characterization of these techniques seems strikingly different from what the CIA-sponsored experiments and the CIA interrogation manuals would lead one to expect. These techniques are not currently understood as destroying the subjectivity of their targets so much as they are aimed at breaking their wills, thus breaking their ability to resist interrogation and creating a dynamic in which detainees feel dependent on some of their interrogators as their only hope for relief. Although the KUBARK manual (and, indeed, its exegetes) might call the relationship of dependence that results psychological regression, neither the interrogators nor their commanders seem to be thinking in such sophisticated terms. Rather, they are thinking in terms of low-level manipulative behaviors that have obvious correlates in everyday human life.

Moreover, it is important to acknowledge that when these CIA techniques are interpreted as falling under the rubric of one or more of the standard interrogation “approaches” expressly sanctioned by the military, they remain part of a standard operating procedure that need never be mentioned in the army’s official documents. Their relationship to these documents is very much like the relationship of performance practice norms to that of a published score. Thus, when we read that “futility,” “incentive,” and “fear up” remain acceptable interrogation “approaches” in the *Army Field Manual 2-22.3 (FM 34–52)*, we should know that “loud music,” “gender coercion,” strobe lights, stress positions, and all the rest also remain acceptable—and, as they demonstrably were during the first years of the “global war on terror,” are used on the orders and with the guidance of officers and remain subject to high levels in the chain of command.⁶⁵ Almost certainly, these forms of interrogation are going on now, as you read, in the detention camps operated by US personnel.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Similarly, it seems likely—although not currently demonstrable—that these techniques are among those authorized for use on detainees of the CIA under the terms of *Executive Order: Interpretation of the Geneva Conventions Common Article 3 as Applied to a Program of Detention and Interrogation Operated by the Central Intelligence Agency*, signed by President George W. Bush on 20 July 2007. The full text of this order is available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2007/07/20070720-4.html> (accessed 28 September 2007). See also Scott Shane, David Johnston, and James Risen, “Secret U.S. Endorsement of Severe Interrogation,” *New York Times*, 4 October 2007. The article outlines attorney general Alberto Gonzales’s reauthorization of harsh interrogation practices for the CIA in February 2005 and the subsequent classified memos that ensured all such practices would be considered legal, and not included under the rubric “cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment.”

Is There Something Special about Music Being Used in These Interrogations?

I have been asked more than once whether I think there is something special about music being used in these interrogations. My interlocutors often argue that it is the detainees' utter powerlessness, reinforced by the congeries of nakedness, humiliation, fatigue, and the self-inflicted pain of stress positions that causes unwanted music to move from annoying to torturous. The moral and political argument to be addressed is about torture, not about music. Up to a point, I agree. Yet I think there are two ways that thinking about the music can help one understand the relationship of US citizens to the work that interrogators do far from our shores, but in our collective name.

The first way comes to me from considering the army investigators' characterization of both music and "gender coercion" as instances of the approach called "futility." At first thought, the link between music and gender seems like nothing more than the long-sedimented residue of a link that has been part of Western culture since at least the time of Plato.⁶⁶ But what, really, do music and gender relations have in common? Both are sites of sensory experience (sound and sex) as these are constructed by cultural beliefs, and both are, therefore, media of cultural practice by which those beliefs are made real as ethics. In Western society, they are among the principal ways we relate to one another as beings who are both sensate and enculturated. Thus music and "gender coercion" can act on human beings in more complicated ways than the stress positions, sleep deprivation, and extremes of heat or cold that are such prominent features of the interrogation experience. Whereas stress positions and the like are intended to make the vulnerabilities of a human being's own body betray him and cause him pain, both "futility music" and "gender coercion" target the practices by which a human being's cultural beliefs are embodied, performed, and made real as ethical practices. "Futility music" and "gender coercion" can force human beings like Muhammad al-Qatani to cause themselves psychic rather than physical pain. Deriving directly from who they are or have chosen to be as enculturated human beings—that is, as persons, not only as sensate biological organisms—this psychic pain attacks its target and causes self-betrayal in the intrasubjective space that many religious traditions call the soul. It is when soul and body together collapse in the catastrophe of self-betrayal that resistance is not just futile but impossible. It is then that the psychic break described in the KUBARK manual, the exploding of one's inner world and sense of oneself in it, can lead to the sudden outpouring of what military field commanders call actionable intelligence—information on imminent battlefield attacks that could then be deflected.

But whether or not one thinks "futility music" or "gender coercion" produces sufficient pain to merit the description "torture," the possible positive outcomes of their use to produce a psychic break are always inextricably caught in the structural conundrum that characterizes the dynamic of torture. The punishment is delivered

⁶⁶ See, for example, Plato, *Republic* 398c–400c, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato Including the Letters*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1961).

before there is evidence of a crime, because the punishment—that is, the inflicting of pain—is a necessary condition to producing that evidence.⁶⁷ If it is not produced, or if it proves to be false, the interrogator will have caused an innocent person to betray himself, body and soul. Interrogators always risk, then, committing acts of unnecessary evil. When an army's commanders or a nation's citizens order them to do so, the commanders order them to do something they believe to be morally wrong; thus commanders force them to enter a condition of sin very like the one forced on Muhammad al-Qatani—the betrayal of one's own soul. In a soldier's terms, this is more likely his civil soul as a citizen than his soul as various religions might define it. There is no way out of this conundrum. Resistance to it, once the dynamic is engaged, is futile for interrogators, detainees, commanders, and citizens alike. This is what Tony Lagouranis understood the night he almost chopped off Khalid's fingers.

If music's capacity to focus destructive energies at the very souls of detainees is one way that its use might illuminate the extent of all citizens' involvement in the conundrum of the interrogation booth, its very nature as acoustical energy illuminates all citizens' complicity in another.⁶⁸ For, like the twenty-four-hour lights and the constant air-conditioning, the "loud music" that helps to make US detention camps truly places "out of the world" depends directly on the US forces' access to electrical power—access that, curiously, we are unable to share reliably with the Afghan or Iraqi populations. Our troops' access, in turn, depends on their access to the energy captured in complex hydrocarbon molecules—that is, on the oil used to power our camps' generators. Every amplified sound in these camps, and therefore every bit of music, is the United States' transformation of the energy in Middle Eastern oil into violent, violating sonic energy aimed directly at the people whose land yielded that oil—people who are as powerless to resist our thirst for their lands' resources as they are to resist the use of those transformed resources against them. It seems likely that this particularly cruel squandering of their natural resources is not lost on Iraqi detainees; indeed, it seems possible that they may think of "the music program" as quite literally echoing one power relation to which the United States' invasion of Iraq is attributed—the self-arrogated right to use the resources of other nations as weapons to enforce power over those very nations. Sadly, it seems possible that the sheer wastefulness of "the music program" might remind us all of the self-arrogated right we "innocent" people in the United States feel ourselves to have, to use the energy resources of other nations as the fuel for a way of life we cannot ourselves sustain.

⁶⁷ This conundrum lay at the heart of Cesare Beccaria's foundational critique of torture, *Dei delitti e delle pene* (Livorno: Coltellini, 1764). See Beccaria, *On Crimes and Punishments, and Other Writings*, ed. Richard Bellamy, trans. Richard Davies with Virginia Cox and Richard Bellamy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

⁶⁸ Ben Piekut has reminded me that "being powerless and fearful of the consequences of dissent is not the same as tacit support." I do not mean to imply that citizens unable to find effective means to end these practices are willing accomplices. We are not. Rather, I mean to suggest that we, like al-Qatani forced to listen to *haram* music, have been trapped in both the conundrum of torture and the dynamic of consumption, whence it is almost impossible to resist betraying our own convictions. We, too, suffer the effects of "the futility approach."

Is It Torture?

According to the “declarations and reservations” that the United States asserted in 1994, when President Bill Clinton signed the “United Nations Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment,” none of the interrogation techniques described in this essay amount to torture.⁶⁹ Reflecting the Senate’s “advice and consent,” the United States’s reservations specifically limited the definition of prohibited mental pain to mental pain resulting from physical pain, the administration of “mind-altering substances or other procedures calculated to disrupt profoundly the senses or the personality,” death threats, or threats to kill or cause physical pain to someone else. A legal brief by Lt. Col. Diane E. Beaver, dated 11 October 2002, makes clear that hooding, sleep deprivation, removal of comfort and religious items, forced grooming, removal of clothing, exploitation of a prisoner’s phobias, exposure to cold weather or water, the deprivation of light, auditory stimuli, and twenty-hour interrogations are not to be construed legally as “calculated to disrupt . . . the senses or the personality.” They are, instead, “counter-resistance strategies.”⁷⁰

But to ask if a practice meets the current legal definition of torture may be to ask the wrong question. Elaine Scarry’s landmark monograph *The Body in Pain* may offer a more helpful way of thinking about the problem. “Torture,” she wrote, “is a process which not only converts but announces the conversion of every conceivable aspect of the event and the environment into an agent of pain,” adding, a few pages later, “the torturers compel the prisoner to reveal and to objectify the fact that intense pain is world-destroying.”⁷¹ By that standard, the aim of the psychological techniques that survive from the 1960s KUBARK manual is, indeed, to torture.

A better question, however, might be the one television journalist Tim Russert posed to Admiral Michael McConnell, Director of National Intelligence, on 22 July 2007: “[W]ould we find it acceptable if a U.S. citizen experienced the same kind of enhanced interrogation?”⁷² Better still would be consideration of whether we who are US citizens really want to take the moral responsibility for what the state asks its field interrogators to do to any human beings, in our name.

“I couldn’t wrap my mind around why they were doing this to any human being”⁷³

On 15 April 2006, twenty-eight-year-old US Navy veteran Donald Vance feared for his life.⁷⁴ A supervisor of security and logistics operations for the Iraqi-owned

⁶⁹ The full text of the Convention is available at <http://www.hrweb.org/legal/cat.html>.

⁷⁰ Lt. Col. Diane E. Beaver, “Legal Brief on Proposed Counter-Resistance Strategies,” 11 October 2002, section 3.a.(6), in Greenberg and Dratel, *The Torture Papers*, 230–31.

⁷¹ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 27–29.

⁷² Admiral Michael McConnell, interview by Tim Russert, *Meet the Press*, NBC, 22 July 2007. A transcript is available at <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/19850951>.

⁷³ Donald Vance, telephone interview with the author, 28 January 2007.

⁷⁴ This account of Vance’s arrest and detention is based largely on his generous response to a questionnaire I sent by e-mail on 29 December 2006, and on three follow-up telephone interviews

Shield Group Security Company, Vance had for six months been working quietly with an FBI agent based in his native Chicago, gathering evidence of his employers' involvement in illegal weapons traffic that included the recycling of "Coalition Forces" weapons to insurgent groups. When his Iraqi employers confiscated the identification card that granted him access to Green Zone facilities, Vance assumed that his investigation had been discovered. He called the embassy for help; he and fellow whistle-blower Nathan Ertels were told to barricade themselves in their office, lest they be kidnapped. When US forces arrived to rescue them, Vance and Ertels led the soldiers to an enormous cache of rifles, ammunition, and explosives. The pair were brought to the embassy for debriefing, and then offered lodging for the night in a trailer nearby. They thought they were safe.

But in the middle of the night they were awakened, hooded, fitted with earmuffs to suppress sound and goggles covered with tape over their hoods to suppress sight, shackled, and taken in a Humvee to an unregistered prison somewhere in the Green Zone. There they were stripped, searched, fingerprinted, given retinal scans, a DNA test, and orange coveralls, and held in a place with no natural light where only prayers and response to official questions broke the silence. Two days later they were moved to Camp Cropper, the "high-value" detention center at Baghdad International Airport, where Vance would be held—and interrogated—until 21 July 2006.⁷⁵

Like all detainees released from US custody, Vance has signed a non-disclosure agreement. Like Moazzam Begg, he has chosen to violate that agreement systematically, hoping that he will be protected from the threat of future detention by the highly public nature of his disobedient speech to the press, to scholars and activists, and to the attorneys, courts, and judges involved in his pending lawsuit against former defense secretary Donald Rumsfeld for unlawful detention. Vance's richly detailed account of conditions at Camp Cropper, about the ways he had been taught to resist what he calls "the music program," and about the effects the music nonetheless had on him may be easier for some US readers to hear than the accented accounts of Anglo-Pakistanis, Anglo-Ethiopians, and Algerians.⁷⁶ His story invites us to consider how we can condone treating any human being this way.

In Camp Cropper's Special Housing Unit, Building Five, where Vance was held, detainees lived in cells made of block and concrete, nine feet square with twelve-foot ceilings and hollow-core steel doors "framed out with square steel tubing, skinned

he granted, on 28 January, 25 July, and 31 July 2007. For slightly different narratives, see Michael Moss, "American Recalls Torment as a U.S. Detainee in Iraq," *New York Times*, 18 December 2006; Moss, interview by Lisa Myers, MSNBC, 17 June 2007. A transcript is available at <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/19226700>; David Phinney, "Ridenhour Prize for Truth-Telling: 'My Name Used to Be 200343,'" Inter Press Service, 5 April 2007, archived at <http://www.commondreams.org/archive/2007/04/05/337>; and Deborah Hastings, "Steep Price Paid by Those Who Blew Whistle on Iraq Fraud," Associated Press, 25 August 2007, archived at <http://www.commondreams.org/archive/2007/08/25/3410>. All online sources were last accessed on 29 September 2007. Shield Group Security Company has since renamed itself National Shield Security.

⁷⁵ A letter Vance's Detainee Status Board sent to him on 26 April 2006 that outlines the charge against him is posted at <http://msnbc.msn.com/id/19280236> (accessed 29 September 2007).

⁷⁶ On residents' abilities to hear disquietingly different narratives of violence in the post-9/11 epoch, see Judith Butler, "Explanation and Exoneration, or What We Can Hear," chap. 1 of *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), 1–18.

with sheet metal, painted red.” A passage in the door called a wicket allowed food or water to be passed through, often on an apparently random schedule that detainees believed to be related to their compliance in interrogation. About a foot above the wicket, a ten-inch plexiglass window covered on the outside with a piece of fabric allowed guards to check detainees visually about every fifteen minutes, to ensure they were awake, alert, and not damaging themselves in any way. Each cell had a toilet, but detainees had to knock on the door and ask guards to flush it. Guards could control the temperature and light in each cell individually. Vance recalls that “the lights were kept on within my cell, for obvious reason of disrupting my sleep, and the numbing sounds of fluorescent lighting”; he estimates that his cell was kept between fifty-five and sixty degrees Fahrenheit, “definitely below room temperature (65 [degrees F]).”⁷⁷

Vance describes himself as arriving at Camp Cropper “frightened out of my mind.”⁷⁸ Like Moazzam Begg at Bagram, he depended on sound as a way to know his world, and he was easily unnerved by obvious manipulations of his soundscape.

I could hear voices. I could determine when it was time to eat because the cart on which our meals were brought to us squeaked. . . . [T]he actual interrogation rooms that I was brought into . . . were completely silent. The walls and ceiling had thick carpeting on them. My first sight of those carpeted walls instantly triggered a fight or flight response, which of course, you can do neither. Questions begin firing within me. “Are they keeping sounds out of the room? Do they not want sounds to escape? Why is the room so small and carpeted?”

Within my cell, there was NOTHING. I relied completely upon sounds to keep my mind occupied. I would spend hours on my knees, to press my ears to the seams of the door to my cell to capture “outside” sounds. Voices, sometimes conversations. . . .⁷⁹

Mainly, what Vance heard was music, “goddamn blaring music seems like twenty-four hours a day,” that he heard along with everyone else in his building.⁸⁰

I actually can’t remember a single day in which I wasn’t subjected to music. . . . Large speakers [were] placed within the entryways to passages to either side of the structure. This is done so both sides of the building are hearing the same songs. . . . From my cell to the nearest speakers was approximately 20 yards. . . . I do remember some songs, like Nine Inch Nails’ “Mr. Self Destruct” and “March of the Pigs.” I can’t remember how many times I heard Queen’s “We Are the Champions.” . . . Songs would “jump,” I would hear a hard rock song then I would have to hear a Country song then a hard rock song, then maybe a Hip-Hop song. . . . The music was very loud.⁸¹

Indeed, it was so loud that the guards stationed at each end of the corridor could not hear each other without yelling or walking toward each other to talk. Vance found the music annoying at first, but soon came to think of it as “a war of

⁷⁷ Vance, response to e-mail questionnaire from author, 29 December 2006.

⁷⁸ Vance, telephone interview with the author, 28 January 2007.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.* In our telephone interview on 25 July 2007, Vance clarified that it was not completely silent in the interrogation booth; he could still hear the music being pumped along the corridor, but it was not so loud as to block out the voices of his interrogators.

⁸⁰ Vance, telephone interview with the author, 25 July 2007. In his response to the e-mail questionnaire, Vance estimated that “on average, I probably listened to at least 12 hours of music or more” each day.

⁸¹ Vance, response to e-mail questionnaire from author.

wills, a personal attack against me.”⁸² Nonetheless, sometimes he couldn’t help responding to familiar music, singing along when “they played an artist I enjoyed. But, that just . . . began destroying me. Listening to songs that I would play at home . . . within that place, drove me into tears.”⁸³ Compared to his struggle with the constantly blaring music, Vance found the sounds of human voices directed at him in his daily interrogations in the carpeted rooms almost welcome.

Although in his mind Vance “put up no resistance at all,” he was handcuffed, goggled, earmuffed, covered with a towel, and rolled in a wheelchair to one of the interrogation booths at either end of the corridor almost every day of his detention.⁸⁴ Between one and three white men would question him, while another videotaped everything.

These people [the interrogators] aren’t wearing any names, some wear civilian clothing. Some quite frankly look homeless, long beards, dirty, very unkempt looking. Every sentence that comes out of their mouth is an accusation, or a question that’s been asked thirty times over, and the mind game goes “You were interrogated the day before . . .” and you say “I answered that yesterday,” and they ask who you talked to . . . to mess with you, to mess with your head. And they’d say “there’s nothing on your log saying you were questioned yesterday.” Your mind starts to create things. . . .

You start thinking, “I should have played ball, I should have kept my mouth shut, none of this would have happened. . . .” You start reading the paperwork they supply you with, saying you’re a threat to the Iraqi government, to the Coalition forces . . . and you say, “Yeah, I am, what’s in my computer is a threat.” I remember telling them to just delete it all, I won’t say anything ever. They just kinda smirked. . . .

You’re like, “What do these guys think I’ve done, there are guys here who’ve murdered people, such guys go home, but me, they won’t let me touch US soil.” You’re thinking about all these things, how billions of dollars have gone missing, contractor fraud and pricing, some instances where companies have received money but did zero work, murder, soldiers raping Iraqi women. First thing they did was put ’em on a plane. So when you’re in my situation, I never hurt anyone . . . [but] they put *me* in a detention facility and interrogated me for ninety-seven days. . . . [You’re] losing your mind, crying, goddamn blaring music seems like twenty-four hours a day, terrible food. . . . You’re losing your mind.⁸⁵

Indeed, Vance believed that one of the other Americans detained at Camp Cropper, Joseph Tremper, did lose his mind, “hallucinating, having conversations with people who didn’t exist.”⁸⁶ Vance attributes his own psychological survival to prayer: “I was raised Catholic. I fell back on my faith.”⁸⁷

Faith. Exactly the target at which “the music theme” and “gender coercion” had been aimed in the Guantánamo interrogation of Mohammad al-Qatani. Yet listening to music is not a morally dubious practice for Catholics in the United States. Indeed, Vance was never forced to do anything that would cause him to act

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Vance described his lack of resistance in our telephone interview of 28 January 2007, and the circumstances of his interrogations in our interview of 25 July 2007.

⁸⁵ Vance, telephone interview with author, 25 July 2007.

⁸⁶ Vance, telephone interview with author, 28 January 2007.

⁸⁷ Vance made this point twice to me, describing Tremper’s psychotic symptoms in our telephone interview of 28 January, and alluding to them again when we spoke on 25 July.

in betrayal of his own religious beliefs. Moreover, Vance knew how to resist the music that blared at him all day. As a result, perhaps, he emerged from detention a damaged but not a broken man.⁸⁸

Like the Mosul interrogator Tony Lagouranis, Donald Vance knew about the way music was used in detention from listening to military veterans talk. He had undergone DynCorp's Crucible training course for security contractors working in Iraq, taught by former Special Forces officers who sometimes talked after hours about their own training, including the music. Knowing that the music was intended, in part, to "mask" detainees' thoughts—that is, to prevent them from having their own thoughts—Vance knew as well exactly what to do to resist. He told me in our first interview:

The counteracting thing was to try to talk to yourself out loud, animatedly; I'd talk with my hands. Telling stories about me to me, telling myself jokes even though I knew the punchline. I understood that I needed to do something with my mind. But as I said, you're tired, you're hungry, your mind wanders, you start thinking about home, those slight couple of seconds when you're not focusing on countering, boom, it hits you.⁸⁹

"What is it like, when 'boom, it hits you?'" I asked. At first only his silence answered. Then:

It's devastating.

I was losing my faith, reading stories about Peter in prison, there's an earthquake that causes the walls of the prison to fall down and he's released, and then I'd lose faith in that.⁹⁰ Miracles don't happen, things aren't like that.

And then I'd say to myself "What are you doing?" You realize you're falling into that hole they made for you, and you gotta get out.

I don't even know the words to use to describe it.⁹¹

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⁸⁸ According to his attorneys, Muhammad al-Qatani has so lost touch with reality that he is mentally unfit to participate in his own defense. Since his release Vance has suffered from sound-induced anxiety, chronic insomnia, eating disorders, paranoia, agoraphobia, and other manifestations of post-traumatic stress disorder; but he is not mad.

⁸⁹ Vance, telephone interview with author, 28 January 2007. It is worth noting that Vance's resistance technique must have looked and sounded like the actions that marked his colleague Joseph Tremper as mad. But the technique also allowed him to resist the camps' regime for controlling all speech that did not directly respond to the interrogators' needs. Vance's defiant retention of his right to speak his own reality in his cell echoes in his current defiance of the non-disclosure agreement he signed.

⁹⁰ The story of Simon Peter's arrest, imprisonment and miraculous liberation is told in the Bible, Acts 12, 1–10.

⁹¹ Vance, telephone interview with author, 28 January 2007.

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