IPOD CULTURE: THE TOXIC PLEASURES OF AUDIOTOPIA

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INTRODUCTION

I have never cherished anything I bought as much as this little device. When I was a child, I used to watch a kids [*sic*] show called "the music machine" and I always dreamed of having something like that. A device that plays any song there is. The iPod comes pretty close to the fulfillment of this childhood fantasy. (iPod user)

It has dramatically changed the way I listen to music. I use my iPod every day, generally for four to six hours a day. I listen to it at work, at home, in my car, on the subway etc. Whilst I frequently carried a personal CD player before, the iPod has become a necessity. When I leave the house, I now check my pockets for four things: My wallet, my keys, my mobile phone, and my iPod. I never go out without all four on my person. (iPod user)

In July of 2007 the *Guardian* newspaper in the UK reported the case of a Muslim woman juror who had been discharged from a murder trial after she was caught listening to her iPod, concealed under her hijab, during important prosecution evidence. The judge had heard traces of "tinny music" throughout the trial but thought that it must have been either his imagination or a defect of his own hearing. The woman juror was subsequently charged with contempt of court. Perhaps the

female juror was picturing herself in a fictionalized courtroom, imagining the iden-
tities of those around her, or perhaps she was merely lost in the soundtrack of her
day—chosen from the multiple playlists of her iPod. Given that the judge had heard
her "tinny music" on several occasions it is unlikely that the juror had heard any of
the court proceedings at all. The case reminds me of my own iPod research, in
which a respondent who was a professor at an American university had stated that
he had listened to his iPod while sitting on stage during his university's graduation
ceremony, passing the time in pleasurable auditory reverie.[1]

Both of these examples are very twenty-first-century examples of the privatized
nature of much music listening—the iPod is a miniature device that fits discreetly
into one's pocket, and, once operational, it needs no further attention, unlike its
predecessor, the Sony Walkman, where the user had to clumsily replace cassette
tapes, CDs, or minidisks. The seamless and relatively invisible nature of use—the
earpieces are designed to be discreet enables iPod users to create lengthy periods of
potentially uninterrupted use during a wide variety of everyday activities. These
examples involve risk—the woman juror was caught and prosecuted, and the
professor would have been embarrassed and maybe disciplined if caught. They
also demonstrate the pull between the desire for individual auditory pleasure,
which technologies such as the Apple iPod provide, and certain public prohibitions
against that use. Both of the people mentioned are using the quintessentially mobile
technology of the Apple iPod while sitting stationary in places they don't particu-
larly want to be in. These examples demonstrate that today any space whatsoever
can potentially be transformed into a private auditory space of listening, thus
empowering the users as they transcend the geography of the space inhabited,
endowing it with their own auditory significance. It is precisely this ability to soni-
cally transform increasing amounts of everyday experience that poses new ques-
tions in relation to users' underlying dispositions toward managing their daily
experience.

The study of iPod use can cast new light on users' attitudes toward public
places, others, and their own cognitive management of experience, thereby redefin-
ing the power dynamic between the user and others and their own cognitive pro-
cesses. MP3 technology has transformed music reception and users' ability to pursue
their pleasurable and privatized auditory interests. This capacity to sonically priva-
tize space is possessed by the majority of those living in the industrialized world
through the use of dedicated MP3 players like the Apple iPod or through mobile
phones, which possess MP3 capability. Use occurs in any area of everyday life, from
the domestic environment of the home, to the impersonality of the street, to the
working spaces of the office, to those engaged in sports, and to the exceptional
spaces of the theaters of war in Iraq and Afghanistan (Pieslak 2009).

The untrammeled pleasure of taking your own soundworld with you resonates
through urban and cultural theory. It poses a set of theoretical problems relating to
the nature of public and private existence and to how urban dwellers experience
urban space. On the one hand, the continuous use of these technologies might be

interpreted as an act of liberation—giving users increased control over their environments and themselves (de Certeau 1988). Alternatively, as in the Marcusian analysis, use is interpreted as an act of colonization, whereby users become increasingly dependent upon the use of these technologies in order to satisfactorily survive and manage their daily routines. In the following pages I investigate iPod use through the lens of forms of toxic audiotopias. The epistemological starting point is the observation that the history of cities is in some sense a history of how we come to share social space. If this is the case, we are entitled to ask, What type of culture is the audiotopia of iPod use, and what does it tell us about the contemporary nature of mediated public and private urban space?

The privatizing and colonizing impulse, which I associate with iPod use, has a long prehistory. We have throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries increasingly moved to music both through the provision of Fordist technologies, such as those created by the now defunct Muzac Corporation, which created sonic environments of uniformity for consumers to move through, or by the Hyper-Post-Fordist technologies of MP3 players such as the Apple iPod, through which, with the aid of a pair of headphones, users create individualized and mobile soundscapes.

The multiple provision and use of these technologies in the age of mechanical reproduction has produced an age of sonic saturation and colonization in which urban spaces—both private and public—are transformed, resulting in the continual redefinition of and contestation of the meanings attached to the way in which individuals inhabit space and place. Early users of the gramophone and radio frequently sequestered social space collectively by listening on public beaches or during family picnics. From the 1950s on, the mass use of portable radios redefined the meaning of public space (Douglas 1999). More recently, ghetto blasters and automobile sound systems have privatized public space (Gilroy 2003). In its fluidity, sound has seeped into the spaces of everyday life like no other sense.[2] This "colonization" extends to the cognition and desire of users themselves. Importantly, this is frequently a "desired," "active," and pleasurable colonization, whereby users reclaim experience, time, and place (Bull 2007). It is precisely in this area of the intoxicating immersion of the sonic that the twin concepts of "audiotopia" and "toxicity" are situated in the following pages. The chapter focuses primarily upon the use of Apple iPods as the most common, dedicated MP3 player and because my primary research is located in their use. However, the following analysis is equally relevant for other MP3 players and users.

AUDIOTOPIA, TOXICITY, AND PLEASURE

"Audiotopia" refers to both the intense pleasure described by iPod users as they listen to music on their iPods and to their desire for continuous, uninterrupted use.

Audiotopia comprises the desire for immersive auditory experience whereby the users' chosen soundworld eradicates the preexisting soundworld that users inhabit. Frances Dyson comments upon the intimate relationship between sound technologies and immersion: "Sound is the immersive medium par excellence. Three dimensional, interactive, and synesthetic, perceived in the here and now of an embodied space, sound returns to the listener the very same qualities that media mediates: that feeling of being here now, of experiencing oneself as engulfed, enveloped, enmeshed, in short, immersed in an environment. Sound surrounds" (Dyson 2009, 4) (see also Grimshaw, this volume). The mediated re-creation of the users' sense of the "here and now" is central to the following analysis of toxic audiotopia. Instrumental in creating this immersive state is the use of headphones, which transforms the users' relationship to the environment and creates sonic privacy. The science fiction writer William Gibson captures the power of sonic privatization in his description of using his Walkman, the iPods' precursor: "The Sony Walkman has done more to change human perception than any virtual reality gadget. I can't remember any technological experience since that was quite so wonderful as being able to take music and move it through landscapes and architecture" (Gibson 1993).

Intrinsic to auditory privatization is headphone use. The habitual use of headphones began with radio reception in the 1920s. Siegfried Kracauer commented as early as 1924 on the transformative and seductive power of radio listening through headphones:

> [W]ho would want to resist the invitation of those dainty headphones? They gleam in living rooms and entwine themselves around heads all by themselves . . . Silent and lifeless, people sit side by side as if their souls were wandering about far away. But these souls are not wandering according to their own preference; they are badgered by the news hounds, and soon no one can tell anymore who is the hunter and who is the hunted. (Kracauer 1995, 333)

Contemporary iPod users, in contrast to Kracauer's radio listeners, claim to be masters of their sonic world as a result of the personalized choice of music embedded in their iPods. The impulse to construct a privatized auditory environment is itself located in Western cultural values. Jonathan Sterne notes that:

> as a bourgeois form of listening, audile technique was rooted in a practice of individuation: listeners could own their own acoustic spaces through owning the material component of a technique of producing that auditory space—the "medium" that stands in for a whole set of framed practices. The space of the auditory field became a form of private property, a space for the individual to inhabit alone. (Sterne 2003, 160)

Headphones reempower the ear against the contingency of sound in the world, bolstering the individualizing practices of sound reception. The transformative nature of using headphones is illustrated by the following iPod user:

> Although being alone listening to music through conventional speakers can make listening pleasurable, having pod headphones in can make that sensation

infinitely more pleasurable. The feeling of blocking out other sounds and by
implication other sources of interference only heightens the pleasure. You may
also be made aware of subtle sounds that you can only hear when wearing
headphones. This "new discovery" enhances it still further. You may have heard a
track dozens of times via speakers and never heard a particular piece of music
before just because you were wearing earphones. (Hillary)

Embodied in these practices is the desire to control the sonic environment. Many
iPod users claim to prefer to live in a totally mediated, privatized auditory world
with their music collection at their fingertips. They are not merely enjoying their
own privatized auditory reveries but are also taking pleasure in being able to soni-
cally control the very nature of their everyday life. It is here that the sonic
pleasure of audiotopia resonates socially. Music reception for iPod users is no
longer the straightforward "mutual tuning relationship" that Ernst Bloch com-
mented upon. He distinguished music from the visual by arguing that "a note of
music comes with us and is 'we' unlike the visual, which is primarily an 'I' divorced
from the other" (Bloch 1986, 287). The relational aspect of iPod use differs inso-
much as experience becomes primarily an audiovisual one in which states of medi-
ated "we-ness" eclipse direct forms of experience by technologically mediated forms
of experience (Adorno 1976; Dant 2008). The mutuality of music reception becomes
increasingly asymmetrical in its privatizing, yet mediated nature because users are
immersed in the chosen sounds of the culture industry contained in their iPod.
Sounds fed directly into the users' ears through headphones often placed directly
into the ears—directly into the experiencing subject—act so as to reduce the out-
side world to silence. In its immersive qualities, mediated sonic experience often
appears to be more "immediate" to users of iPods than nonmediated experience.[3]

The mediated immediacy of iPod use may lead to a form of social toxicity. The
term *toxicity* should, however, be handled with caution. Western consumer
relationships to a whole host of consumer practices and technologies from shop-
ping, gambling, and watching television to playing video games has frequently been
described as compulsive—yet compulsive behavior need not be equated with any
detrimental social attribute or harmful effect. The inability to stop reading a thriller
novel, for example, because one is engrossed in it might be considered in positive
terms. In the main, however, "toxicity" appears largely as a dystopian state whereby
users' engagement with pervasive new technologies potentially decreases their
capacity to disconnect from their use of these technologies (Rheingold and
Kluitenberg 2006, 29). Toxicity refers primarily to the negative moment embodied
in mediated technological connectivity. This has a long cultural and theoretical
history stretching from Heidegger to Marcuse. Marcuse commented as early as the
1960s that "solitude, the very condition which sustained the individual against and
beyond society, has become technically impossible" (Marcuse 1964, 68). For Marcuse
this referred to both the social construction of mediated subjective desire and the
nature of social spaces that were a consequence of such a disposition. The introjec-
tion of a range of social dispositions to consume was to be understood through the
notion of "objective alienation," whereby users had fully normalized alienated forms

of experience. In this image of "toxicity," consumers become victims of the market-ing strategies of companies and the design and form of their technologies. Implied in Rheingold and Kluitenberg's understanding of "toxicity" is the users' inability to experience forms of nonmediated experience they sometimes desire. Chatfield points to the desire for "toxic" immersion among video-game users:

> People are perilously drawn by temptation to withdraw from real life's complexities into a solipsistic, simpler world. In the case of video games, in particular, it's hard to deny this kind of escape isn't a large part of their appeal. Escape, simplification and control play their part in all games and in electronic games has reached a remarkable pitch of sophistication." (Chatfield 2010, 73)

In the following pages I problematize, develop, and reevaluate the notion of "toxicity" in relation to the specifically auditory dynamic of iPod use. Before doing so I wish to clarify the position taken in the following pages. I do not claim that all iPod use is toxic in nature but merely that it is one, albeit common, possibility of use. Neither do I claim that users who embody potentially "toxic" modes of usage are fundamentally different from users who do not. Toxicity is merely a structural possibility of use that becomes socially significant with mass usage as described earlier. If "toxic pleasures" relate to a continuous withdrawal from the physical immediacy of experience and its re-creation engendered through the continuous creation of privatized sonic environments, then we require a nuanced analysis of both the pleasures and the consequences of such practices and a normative understanding of users' rationale, which underpins such practices.

Toxicity is divided into three categories in the following analysis: In the first instance toxicity refers to users' inability to disconnect from use despite their poten-tial realization of the problematic nature of use. Central to this form of toxicity is the seductive nature of an empowering, anesthetizing potential embodied in iPod use. Second, it refers to modes of habitual use whereby users do not experience this "tethering" as at all negative but merely pleasurable. "Toxicity" in this case refers to the negative appraisal of the shared nature of social space, which is to be replaced with the audiotopia embodied in iPod use. Third, "toxicity" refers to the actual physical nature of damage that can occur through loud, continuous use of the iPod and need not require any cognitive recognition by the user of this possibility. If there is recognition of this potential, then toxicity might refer to "state one," where users find it difficult to change their use.

TOXIC PLEASURES 1: SEDUCTIVE AUDIOTOPIA

Digitalization has enabled iPod users to stream music for every conceivable situation through the creation of playlists, which can be created and changed while

on the move. Users possess unparalleled control over their daily sonic life both externally, via the aestheticization of their experience, and cognitively, through their ability to regulate their moods and volition through the micromanagement of their music listening. Perpetual sonic connectivity becomes a seductive audiotopia in the daily lives of many iPod users, transforming their relationship to the environment they inhabit and move through. Embodied in iPod use is a range of sonic rituals that structure users' daily life, and as such the iPod might be understood as an urban "Sherpa," enabling users to successfully maneuver their way through daily urban life. However, recognition of this pleasurable, hermetically sealed activity sometimes produces an ambivalent response:

> I walked around with a Sony Walkman attached to me whilst walking or roller-skating my way around many major cities in the world during the 1980s. In retrospect I wish I had not been so stuck in my own head, so disconnected from the natural symphony of place. My community members feel so alien to me now. They stand in line in front of me, dancing ever so slightly to their tune, often oblivious to what's happening around them and completely closed off from the niceties of the neighbourly "hello." (Alison, hppt://www.radioopensource/the-age-of-shuffle/)

Alison, an ex-Walkman user reminds us of both the historical nature of auditory privatization and the desire for a shared public space in the city. The writer Gabriel Sherman describes his own ubiquitous iPod use in the following terms:

> Almost anywhere I went, I plugged in and tuned out. Need cash from the ATM? The Shins' melodic New Slang would accompany me. Picking up my laundry at the Wash and Fold? How about Rachael Yamagata's sultry swooning? My music even joined me in the bathroom each morning before work. With more than 1,000 songs at my thumb tip, I could satisfy any desire, any time. My iPod was like a drug. I live in my own self-imagined movie, instantly tailoring the sound-track to fit, or inspire, my emotions . . . I even acquired the telltale signs of an addict. Just before leaving places, I fidgeted nervously while contemplating what song I would queue up. (Sherman)

Sherman describes the ambiguous pleasures of living in a pleasurable audiotopia; his use highlights both the utopian and dystopian elements of iPod use. This dystopian moment of use I refer to as the toxic pleasures of use. "With my earphones in, I became deaf to the urban orchestra playing around me. Even worse, my iPod had sapped the energy that makes New York more exhilarating than the places we all escaped from. I had traded one kind of suburban isolation for another." Sherman, like many other users of a range of mobile technologies from the mobile phone to the iPod, finds himself increasingly dependent upon these technologies to maintain his daily life, of being "tethered" to a wide range of communication technologies, of being available 24/7 (Ito, Okabe, and Matsuda 2005). Sherman struggles with the ambiguous nature of his iPod use, realizing that he is caught between the pleasures of a privatized aesthetization of the city and his compulsive use pattern. His description highlights the multifaceted pleasures associated with continual or habitual use. The transcendence of the "here and now" is embedded in

the seductive pleasures of sonic toxicity, and this transcendence is frequently aesthetic in nature.

The aesthetic colonization of urban space described by many iPod users is in part a technological tale whereby urban experience becomes synonymous with technological experience. This technological experience is both pervasive and increasingly taken for granted in wide areas of daily life. It is simultaneously empowering and dependent.

IPod use seamlessly joins together disparate experience by unifying the complex, contradictory, and contingent nature of the world beyond the user. The success of these strategies depends upon the creation of an all-enveloping wall of sound through which the user looks. Users report that iPod experience is at its most satisfying when no external sound seeps into their world to distract them from their dominant and dominating vision.

IPod users invariably aim to create a privatized sound world that is in harmony with their mood, orientation, and surroundings, enabling them to respatialize urban experience through a process of solipsistic aestheticization. IPod users aim to habitually create an aesthetically pleasing urban world for themselves as a constituent part of their everyday life. In doing so, they create an illusion of omnipotence through mediated proximity and "connectedness" engendered by their iPod use.

For many iPod users the street is orchestrated to the sounds of their favorite playlists:

> The world looks friendlier, happier, and sunnier when I walk down the street with my iPod on. It feels as if I'm in a movie at times. Like my life has a soundtrack now. It also takes away some of the noise of the streets, so that everything around me becomes calmer somewhat. It detaches me from my environment, like I'm an invisible, floating observer. (Berklee)

Susan, a manager from Toronto, describes the iPod's transformative power over her urban environment:

> I find when listening to some music choices I feel like I'm not really there. Like I'm watching everything around me happening in a movie. I start to feel the environment in the sense of the mood of the song and can find that I can start to love a street that I usually hate or feel scared for no reason. (Susan)
>
> I see people like I do when I watch a movie . . . there is a soundtrack to my encounters . . . music to accompany my thoughts about others. It dramatizes things a bit. It fills the silent void. (June)

Streets perceived as silent are in reality a complex of sounds—June's observation that her iPod fills the "silent void" is indicative of users' experiencing the world solely as a function of mediated sound. Mundane, yet nevertheless unmanageable urban life is transformed through iPod use, which creates movement and energy in the user where there was none before. The use of the iPod provides a "buffer" between the user and the recognized reality of the city street.

Users often describe the world experienced through iPod use as a movie script in which they play the central role. The selection of "sad" music, for example, is

used to match the users' mood, transposing those feelings to the streets passed through. The world and the users' experience within it gain significance precisely through the creation of an enveloping and privatized soundworld. In the users' world of aesthetic euphoria, experience is simplified, clarified—the aesthetic impulse provides an unambiguous sense of purpose and meaning for users, who are creating a "space" within which to unwind and unravel their emotions. When attended to, the street becomes a function of their mood and imagination mediated through their iPod.

IPods are both interactive and noninteractive in the sense that users construct fantasies and maintain feelings of security precisely by not interacting with others or their environment. Through the power of a privatized soundworld the world becomes intimate, known, and possessed. Imagination is mediated by the sounds of the iPod, which become an essential component in the users' ability to imagine at all. Users are often unable to aestheticize experience without the existence of their own individual soundtrack acting as a spur to the imagination.

In this ordering of cognition the user surpasses the disjunction that exists between their own soundtrack, the movement of others, and the environment they pass through. Without the iPod, they experience the world out of sync. The polyrhythmic nature of the city relativizes their own place within the world and makes them just one more piece of an anonymous urban world.

Toxicity and aestheticization can be interpreted as having utopian implications for users—to aestheticize is to transcend the mundane world as it is experienced—aestheticization remains an active mode of appropriating the urban, transforming that which exists, and making it the user's own (Marcuse 1964). In this instance iPod use reempowers the subject in relation to urban space. The French anthropologist Marc Augé has described cities in terms of "non-spaces": spaces semiotically void of interest such as shopping centers and parking lots. Now, users can re-create meaning for themselves. Through the privatized experience of music, they subjectively endow all space with meaning. The use of Apple iPods permits urban theorists to increasingly understand the city as a privatized audiovisual creation of the user and to reprioritize the unique role that sound plays in the construction of daily life (Bull 2000, 2007). Now any site of use can be refashioned to mimic the auditory desire of the user—in essence all spaces are "nonspaces" to be refashioned by iPod users.

In addition, iPod users transform the world into conformity with their predispositions—the world becomes part of a mimetic fantasy in which the "other-ness" of the world in its various guises is negated. This is an important strategy for iPod users who subjectivize space—consume it as if it were a commodity. In the process, immediate experience is fetishized. Technologized experience can be understood as fetishized experience—experience becomes real or hyper-real precisely through its technologization—through technological appropriation. The utopian impulse to transform the world occurs only in the imaginary—in its technologized instrumentality, the world remains untouched. The use of the iPod provides a buffer between the user and the recognized reality of the city street,

invoking Kracauer's observation that "the world's ugliness goes unnoticed" (1995). Users prefer to live in this technological space whereby experience is brought under control—aesthetically managed and embodied—while the contingent nature of urban space and the "other" is denied.

Yet, in this denial of contingency lies a liberating moment understood as a form of reenchantment. I suggest that in this positive moment iPod practices can be understood as the coming together of a reenchantment of the city, understood through Walter Benjamin's concept of "aura" and Michel de Certeau's notion of street "tactics." IPod users are, in effect, individualizing each journey while simultaneously making urban space their own. In their auditory empowerment they create their own, unrepeatable, individual journey. In doing so they create, contra Walter Benjamin, their own auratic experience of the city—nonreducible to any other as it is framed—indeed, made through the mediated sounds emanating from their iPod.

TOXIC PLEASURES 2: THE SPATIAL SECESSION OF iPOD CULTURE

Just as Sherman becomes aware of the "secessionist" potential of the iPod, so for other users it is precisely this secessionism that is attractive. The negative moment of the auditory pleasures of privatized listening lies precisely in the fictionalization or negation of the "other," whereby forms of urban reciprocity and of urban recognition are denied. In enacting these strategies, the empowerment of the subject within iPod use problematizes the very way in which users might "recognize" others (Honneth 1995).

In the following pages I appropriate Henderson's notion of "spatial secession" in order to view this "negative" moment of iPod use. Henderson, who was primarily concerned with the division of space through automobile use, argued that automobility was often embraced as a tool of "spatial secession" rather than as a pleasure in itself: "[M]obility is not just movement but also an extension of ideologies and normative values about how the city should be configured and by whom" (Henderson 2006, 295). Secessionist automobility refers to the use of a car "as a means of physically separating oneself from spatial configurations like higher urban density, public space, or from the city altogether" (Henderson 2006, 294). Secessionist values equally play a central role in the world of the iPod user, from the street to the automobile—users enact isolationist strategies with their headphones on or encased within the shell of the automobile, with the iPod docked into its sound system.

IPod use embodies forms of urban retreat, which has become a dominant metaphor in the dystopian image of urban life, whereby urban citizens attempt to maintain their sense of "self" through a range of distancing mechanisms from

the "other." The iPod is the latest technological addition to the urban citizen's ability to neutralize urban space.

Benjamin understood the city as reducing the subject's capacity for thought due to the need for constant response to the contingency and plenitude of urban life. Urban "technology [had itself] subjected the human sensorium to a complex kind of training" (Benjamin 1973, 171). This training has enabled the subject to retreat from urban space by neutralizing it. Technologies of separation such as the iPod have progressively empowered urban citizens precisely by removing them from the physicality of urban relations. Urban experience undergoes a "ghettoization" through these secessionist strategies, furthering the technological intervention of subjects intent on urban retreat, transforming the polyrhythmic nature of urban space into the interiorized, monorhythmic sounds of users: "It's as though I can part the seas like Moses. It gives me and what's around me a literal rhythm, I feel literally in my own world, as an observer. It helps to regulate my space so I can feel how I want to feel, without external causes changing that" (Susanna).

IPod users invariably never willingly interact with others while engaged in solitary listening; interruption destroys the seamless reverie of use. It also indirectly relates to the silencing of experience in the city, which predates iPod use (Sennett 1994). The iPod in this instance acts as both a "gating" and a "tethering" technology. Indeed, gating assumes a metaphysical stance in iPod use: The drawing of circumscribed circles around the subject is both physical and metaphorical. This is one of the historical legacies of the values of individualism and the concurrent demand for privacy—an overriding desire to be left alone while in urban culture. IPod use increasingly becomes a habitual "mode of being in the world" (Geurts 2002, 235), in which users choose to live in an increasingly privatized and "perpetual sound matrix" through which they "inhabit different sensory worlds" (Howes 2004, 14) while sharing the same social space.

The public placing of and consumer use of a range of technologies enables the urban citizen to carry out most traditionally public tasks with little or no interpersonal contact, which furthers the architecture of isolation; exchanges are increasingly taking place between subjects and machines in urban culture, making interpersonal exchange obsolete. Cognitively, consumers increasingly expect, feel comfortable with, and desire no communication while out in public:

> Tracy expects to have wordless interactions with store attendants. When given a choice, Tracy will also use the "You-Check" line recently available in her neighbourhood's Fred Mayer, which allows her to scan her own purchases and credit card: "I love it," she says. In everyday life, she wants to "get in and out." (Jain 2002, 394)

The normative foundation of the "nonplaces" of urban culture becomes etched into consumers' social expectations as they partake of "public culture."

Physical and cognitive zoning becomes second nature in urban culture: "[T]he basic idea of zoning is that every activity demands a separate zone of its own" (Kunster 1998, 120). Urban infrastructures increasingly complement a range of

technologies from the automobile to the iPod. These technologies emphasize connectivity within circumscribed circles and spaces while simultaneously alienating subjects from the copresence of one another in public space, as the following iPod users describe:

> I rarely even speak—I just hand them my credit card and say thank-you. (Mark)
> I tend not to notice people when I'm plugged in. I'm usually too
> preoccupied with myself to look at others. (Elizabeth.)
> It removes an external layer. I see people and things as inanimate or
> not-fully-connected. It seems that I have an external connection they lack.
> It's quite odd, actually . . . Yes. With the iPod and news talk radio files, I am
> having an interactive session with the anchor. When I look at the people around
> me, they appear to be two-dimensional and without significance. (Jonathan)

Progressive withdrawal from the cosmopolitan city both motivates iPod use and furthers it:

> I then started wearing it [the iPod] while shopping. I did it to control my
> environment and desensitize myself to everything around me. What I found
> interesting was that the more I wear my iPod, the less I want to interact with
> strangers. I've gotten to the point where I don't make eye contact. I feel almost
> encased in a bubble . . . I view people more like choices when I'm wearing my
> iPod. Instead of being forced to interact with them, I get to decide. It's almost
> liberating to realize you don't have to be polite or do anything. I get to move
> through time and space at my speed. (Zuni)

To be separated from others is simultaneously a mark of distinction (Bourdieu 1986) and a mark of alienation. City spaces become enacted spaces that are enjoyed and modified (de Certeau 1988; Lefebvre 1991) and also structural spaces that contextualize all behavior.

IPod users frequently glide through the urban street silently, and silence is imposed upon others as they passivize the looks and remarks of others. The silencing of the "other" is a strategy of control that represents a refusal to communicate with others in public. The users' privatized sonic landscape permits them to control the terms and condition of whatever interaction might take place, producing a web of asymmetrical urban relations in which users are invariably in control:

> A person with headphones on gives off an appearance of not wanting to be
> disturbed. There are times, mostly at work or walking to and from work, when I
> just want to be left alone. Wearing the iPod insulates me from other people in my
> surroundings. (Amy)

Users are aware of the symbolic meaning of the white wires of the iPod dangling from their ears: a combination of distinction and power. Empowerment is a product of withdrawal, and withdrawal creates an empowering sense of anonymity: "I use my iPod in public as a 'privacy bubble' against other people. It allows me to stay in my own head" (John).

IPod use permits users to redraw or redefine "personal space." Goffman considered personal spaces to be "the space surrounding an individual anywhere within

which an entering causes the individual to feel encroached upon" (Goffman 1969, 54). Goffman's own definition represented an unrecognized historical moment of bourgeois urban sensibility—the entitlement to personal space. IPod use enhances this sensibility toward the ownership of space whereby the encroachment of others loses its physicality as users fail to notice or respond to the physical touch of others (Pinch 2010).

Forced interruption is invariably experienced negatively: "Sometimes I feel violated if I have to turn it off for an unplanned reason." The breaking of the auditory bubble represents recognition of the fragility or contingency of auditory empowerment. An involuntary and sudden return to the world, as others experience it, is invariably experienced as unpleasant. Maintenance of control frequently implies a denial of difference:

> In America, people are often loud and rude and it's sometimes hard to
> concentrate effectively. In Phoenix, we have a lot of Mexican immigrants. They
> don't learn English and they have no control over their children. I believe in
> mutual respect when in public places. It was becoming increasingly difficult for
> me to shop without encountering a bombardment of Spanish or screaming kids.
> The iPod lets me filter them all out. I'm much calmer now when I shop. The
> iPod lets me overlook the lack of courtesy. Using the iPod helps control my
> concentration. Since I'm familiar with the music, I can let it float to the back
> of my consciousness. (Tracy)

Tracy achieves a state of equilibrium precisely by withdrawing into herself. Sennett has described this form of behavior as representing "an early sign of the duality of modern culture: flight from others for the sake of self-mastery" (Sennett 1990, 44). The secessionist practices of iPod users embedded in this second form of toxic audiotopia reflects a negative moment of urban experience in which the urban subject uses a range of communication technologies to partition and remake experience. In doing so the very nature of collective urban space is thrown into question.

TOXIC AUDIOTOPIA 3: DAMAGING SILENCE?

Toxic audiotopia also has potential physical consequences for users. The primary aim of many, as we have seen in this chapter, is to immerse themselves in the sonic environment created by the iPod. To achieve this, the sounds of the outside world are canceled out. This results in high volumes of listening:

> I usually turn it on as loud as it will go or until it sounds crappy. I don't like
> background noise when I am listening to my iPod. (Mary)
> 	Always loud—I can never hear anything around me. (Andy)

The seductive nature of the iPod—the proximity of loud music is also potentially toxic to the users' own sense of hearing. This third form of toxicity deals with the

actual physical damage to users' hearing that results from loud and continuous
usage. In addition to listening at loud volumes, users increase their music listening
on average twofold with the purchase of an iPod. Music also does not appear to
suffer from the routinization effect of other mobile technologies such as the mobile
phone. After two years in follow-up interviews, respondents claimed to have
maintained their level of use over the previous two years.

A recent study of sonic impairment published in the United States found that
16 percent of American adults have some degree of hearing loss. It was estimated
that iPod users who turn up the volume to about 90 percent for on average two
hours a day, five days a week will develop significant hearing loss. One author of the
report stated that "one patient I had used his headphones instead of earplugs when
he was on his construction job. He thought as long as he could hear his music over
the sound of his saws, he was protecting his ears—because he liked the sound of his
music but didn't like the sound of the construction noise. He has a good 50 dB to 55
dB of noise-induced hearing loss at 28" (Portnuff 2009).

IPod users vary the volume in accordance with their surroundings—the more
the background noise, the greater the volume. For example, the use of an iPod on
the underground system, where the ambient sound is high, encourages users to
listen at near maximum volume; also, the volume used steadily increases without
the users' conscious awareness as they continually attempt to compensate for the
potential intrusion of ambient noise.

Portnuff (2009) found that teenaged iPod users not only played their
music louder than older users but also were also unaware of how loud they
were playing it. The playing of music at maximum volume for a mere five minutes
a day could impair hearing permanently. The European Union's Scientific
Committee on Emerging and Newly Identified Health Risks (SCENIHR) published
its research findings in 2008 and found that that the numbers of young people
with dangerous levels of noise exposure has tripled in the last twenty years while
occupational noise levels had decreased in the same period. Although SCENIHR
found that the majority of MP3 users were not at risk, it also found that 5–10
percent of users were at high risk due to their patterns and duration of use; these
users listened to music for more than one hour a day at a high-volume control
setting. The report concluded that the numbers of EU nationals subject to
both temporary and permanent hearing loss was on the order of anything up to ten
million.

Rawool and Colligon-Wayne (2008) found that general patterns of music
reception among American youth tended to favor an intense auditory experience—
that part of the pleasure was precisely the physicality of sonic intoxication. They
found that "behavioural patterns consistent with a subjective sense of being addicted
to loud music existed in 9% of their participants" (Rawool and Collington-Wayne
2008, 5). The intoxicating sound of music pumped directly into the ears constitutes
a central element of pleasure for many users. The toxic damage to the ears is
often not recognized or is traded in terms of immediate pleasures verses long-term
potential damage that for many users remains an abstract possibility.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have analyzed the nature of the pleasures of auditory toxicity, which goes beyond the proprioceptive into the nature of our social world and the communication technologies that citizens habitually use. In doing so I recognize that iPod use should not be divorced from a range of other media and communication technologies habitually made use of. For example, automobile use, with its combination of secessionist cocooning and pleasures of mobility, are incorporated and developed through iPod use, which in turn is embedded in historical modes of portable radio reception. The nature of use is also embedded in how urban theory has understood and explained what living in the city consists of. Ever since Simmel argued that individualism in the city was premised upon the neutralization of the other through the construction of a "blazé" attitude, in which the "other" was effectively neutralized, the trope of urban retreat has featured heavily in urban literature (Sennett 1990, 1994). In contrast to this, writers from de Certeau onward have offered a more positive evaluation of an open sensory sensibility to urban experience that equates that experience with an openness to a wide array of experience that focuses upon the recognition of "difference," upon which self-realization is to be understood. Yet, following Walter Benjamin's assertion that technology has trained the human sensorium, the chapter has asked what type of training the use of technologies like the iPod signifies. The answer appears to be a complex mix of secessionism, creativity, and toxicity. The intense sonic immersion embodied in iPod use itself contains elements of both toxicity and creativity. This duality of use produces its own paradoxes as evidenced in the following iPod user's comment: "I didn't realize how much I yearn for control and probably peace and quiet. Strange, since I'm blasting music in my ears. I think I'm really tired of living on someone else's schedule. The iPod has given me some control back" (Janet).

Janet's audiotopia is based upon a defensive understanding of the lack of power embodied in nonmediated experience. The noise of uncontrolled culture is managed through the immersive sounds of her iPod, producing a sense of cognitive ease and silence. Thus lies the paradox of toxic audiotopias: Sound produces silence, connectivity produces separation, and mediated toxicity produces control. IPods are one element of the changing sound matrix of contemporary culture. The paradoxical use of Janet and other users needs to be put into a wider social context of urban separation and control in which the technology of the iPod is merely one more timely technology.

NOTES

1 The following empirical examples derive from primary research undertaken in 2005 and 2006. More than a thousand iPod users filled out a thirty-four-question questionnaire over the Internet. The respondents answered requests posted in the *New York Times*,

BBC News Online, *Guardian Online*, *Wired News*, and *MacWorld*. These requests were then syndicated and replicated in a wide a variety of newspapers and magazines worldwide. Respondents came mainly from the United States, the UK, Canada, Australia, and Switzerland but also included fewer responses from France, Italy, Spain, Denmark, Finland, and Norway. Twenty percent of respondents were then asked follow-up questions in response to their initial answers. In addition to the Internet sample, a few UK users have also been interviewed face to face. Selected follow-up interviews were conducted in 2007.

2 Teenaged users of mobile phones with MP3 capacity sometimes use their phones as mini–ghetto blasters while riding on trains and buses, holding the phone out toward others, thus claiming public space in alternative, if not particularly convivial, ways. The use of mobile phones in this way is called "sodcasting" in the UK and has produced a fervent debate in the pages of the *Guardian* newspaper concerning the "antisocial" nature of sequestering public space with such "treble-heavy" sound (*Guardian*, Aug. 13, 2010, P3).

3 I take a critical theory perspective on the way in which new technologies such as the Apple iPod integrate the user in new ways into what I refer to as "commodity culture." Dant (2008) takes a "circuit of culture" approach to reach similar conclusions as to the structurally integrating nature of use. From this point of view, "individualism" is merely a structured ideological response embodied in the cognitive practices of users. Dant also points to the power of the Apple brand in integrating the user into a form of "soft capitalism." For more on this see Bull (2008).

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