

Voicing the Unforeseeable: Improvisation, Social Practice, Collaborative Research

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There's a resonant moment in Michael Ondaatje's In The Skin of a Lion where the central character, Patrick Lewis, finds the crucial information in a library that allows him to connect the various stories that he has been tracing up to that point in the novel. Moments later, Ondaatje has Patrick walk by a jazz band, witnessing precisely the point at which the soloists rejoin with one another for the chorus:

Leaving the library, Patrick ... was walking slowly, approaching a street-band, and the click of his footsteps unconsciously adapted themselves to the music that began to surround him. The cornet and saxophone and drum chased each other across solos and then suddenly, as Patrick drew alongside them, fell together and rose within a chorus.

...

The street-band had depicted perfect company, with an ending full of embraces after the solos had made everyone stronger, more delineated. His own life was no longer a single story but part of a mural, which was a falling together of accomplices. (144-5)

What's of particular interest to us is how jazz music here functions as the catalyst that joins the visual information that Patrick's eyes have received from print and paper with the oral stores that he has heard. Together with the image of the mural, Ondaatje uses this musical reference as a

structural homology and a mise en abyme for the architecture of the novel. The scene, after all, orchestrates the coming together of different stories, as well as the different voicings of these stories. We'd like to suggest that this passage evokes a number of key issues that this volume is concerned with, and which we will be addressing here, such as the relationship between the ear and the eye, formal categories including point of view, multiple voicings, but also the larger question of intersemiotic practices, and, in particular, the involvement of jazz, improvisation, and interactivity.

We offer this textual moment as a kind of epigraph for our paper, especially since it comes from such a canonical Canadian text. It's also, of course, a telling example of the intermedial conversation between literature and music. However, rather than focussing on literature and music per se, what we want to do here is discuss the relation between musical improvisation and other social and artistic practices in the creation of new knowledges--knowledges that have the potential to overcome previous disciplinary protocols, blindspots, and constraints. In order to make such claims, we'll be drawing on and addressing some core issues arising out of the Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice (ICASP) project, funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada's MCRI program. After a brief description of this new collaborative research initiative, our paper will draw attention to the many ways in which improvisation and jazz have often played important roles in such intersemiotic practices as the use of musical patterns, for instance, in novels and other modes of writing. Such practices, we want to suggest, make use of the often-surprising effects that result from the unforeseeable juxtaposition and collision of different art forms. Similar encounters, we will then argue, ensue in musical improvisatory practices themselves, which bring different forms of meaning-making

into creative and collaborative collision. If musical improvisation enables people coming from different cultural traditions and contexts to engage in shared, collaborative social practice, then it is important to note that such forms of social collaborative practice often bear significant elements of unforeseeability (one of the etymological meanings of improvisation) that are not contained in given protocols of knowledge production.

Our paper will also consider some of the methodological challenges associated with our collaborative project, and we'll conclude by voicing some examples of the unforeseen, as we discuss the reception of the project thus far, and speculate about the opportunities, but also the risks, involved in our collaborative work.

1. Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice

As a context for our discussion, we're drawing on a new multi-year, multi-institutional research initiative called Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice (ICASP), funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada's MCRI program. The ICASP project argues that musical improvisation is a crucial model for political, cultural, and ethical dialogue and action. Taking as a point of departure performance practices that cannot readily be scripted, predicted, or compelled into orthodoxy, it looks at how the innovative working models of improvisation developed by creative practitioners have helped to promote a dynamic exchange of cultural forms, and to encourage new, socially responsive forms of community building across national, cultural, and artistic boundaries. Involving an international research team of 33 scholars from 18 different institutions, the project seeks to make interventions in our

understanding of how research is done and how its results are implemented and disseminated, both within and beyond the academy.

As a form of musical practice, improvisation embodies real-time creative decision-making, risk-taking, and collaboration. Many scholars (Bailey: 1980, Small: 1987, Berliner: 1994, Fischlin and Heble: 2004) have noted that improvisation, though the most ubiquitous practice in the history of music-making, has been undertheorized and subject to institutional disparagement. Derek Bailey, for instance, argues that "improvisation enjoys the curious distinction of being both the most widely practiced of all musical activities and the least acknowledged and understood." The paucity of theoretical work on improvisation tends to be tellingly accompanied by the erasure of subaltern perspectives from the history of performance. However, important work in a range of overlapping fields of inquiry such as postcolonial studies (Lipsitz: 1997), cultural theory (Attali: 1985, Lewis: 1996, Hebdige: 2001, Fischlin and Heble: 2004), literary studies (Mackey: 1993, Nielson: 1997, Panish: 1997), African American studies (Floyd: 1995), black performance (hooks: 1995, Gilroy: 1995), history (Kelley: 2002), psychology (Pressing: 1997, MacDonald et al. 2002), theatre studies (Johnstone: 1979), and gender studies (McClary: 1991, Tucker: 2000, Smith: 2004) demonstrates the need to consider improvisation not simply as a musical form, but, perhaps more urgently, as a complex social phenomenon that mediates transcultural inter-artistic exchanges that produce new conceptions of identity, community, history, and the body.

Drawing on the groundbreaking work of our co-investigator George Lewis (1996), we conceive of improvisation as "a social location inhabited by a considerable number of present-day

musicians, coming from diverse cultural backgrounds and musical practices, who have chosen to make improvisation a central part of their musical discourse. Individual improvisers are now able to reference an intercultural establishment of techniques, styles, aesthetic attitudes, antecedents, and networks of cultural and social practice.” This project contends that musical practices in which improvisation figures prominently are social practices. Particularly for music-makers whose explorations question settled habits of response and judgement, improvisation becomes an important locus of resistance to orthodoxies of the imagination (knowing), of relations with others (community), and of relations to the materials of the world around us (instruments). Improvised music has the potential for reshaping possible relations among these materials of existence--knowing, community, instruments--in ways that can fundamentally inform and transform contemporary cultural debate

2. Thinking About Intersemiotic Practices

Although the ICASP project uses music as its point of departure, it also considers the improvisatory principles involved across a wider spectrum of related contexts. For the purposes of discussing the issues under consideration in this volume, we'd like to pick up on the call for papers of the preceding Voice and Vision conference, and also to think briefly about some of the ways in which artists and writers draw on improvisational techniques in their creation of voice and vision, and in ways that sometimes open them to other media. After all, the history of writing has been marked by the use of improvisatory practices. If one thinks about how, in the context of the history of the novel, voice and vision are being governed by techniques of point of view, one

can recognize how omniscient perspectives get complicated by the use of dialogue, and by more and more localized points of view that mediate the encounter of different perspectives. Some examples of these localized points of view would, of course, include first person, limited third person, stream of consciousness, or free indirect discourse, which is already in itself a focalization overdetermined by two perspectives. Or think, as one example, about Ondaatje's In The Skin of a Lion, and the passage with which we began our discussion. There, the multiple voices and stories that make up Ondaatje's novel get orchestrated through the character of Patrick Lewis. Although the novel is told from a third person point of view, we come to understand that Patrick's story is, in fact, made up of many other stories, and his voice of many other voices. In the scene we described at the outset, Ondaatje tellingly uses the metaphor of jazz as a mise en abyme for the Bakhtinian dialogic principles of multi-accented voice and interdiscursivity.

As far as the literary tradition is concerned, the genius of the novel is that it is the genre par excellence that, as Bakhtin reminds us, orchestrates, mixes, and brings into collision different voices and discourses. This interdiscursive dimension not surprisingly opens the novel to intersemiotic practices such as the inclusion of painting, film, photography, dance, the internet, and, of course, music. Among the different ways in which music, for instance, gets used in the novel, consider 1) what seem to be to passing references to, or simple evocations of, music in the text, 2) intertextual references to music, and 3) music as a controlling structural model or metaphor. It seems to us that these categories turn out to be more fluid than they might first appear to be. Indeed, actual examples often lead us to collapse these categories entirely. In Rohinton Mistry's short story, "Condolence Visit," for example, what appears to be a passing reference to Beethoven's "Für Elise" functions, in fact, as a structural parallel to the process of a

widow's mourning that the story describes. Listening to Beethoven's piece is one of the shared experiences the widow treasures among the memories of her life with her husband. The modulation from minor to major keys in that piece, as the story points out, parallels the very process of moving from sadness to new-found hope experienced by the story's central character:

The music passed through her mind now, in the silent flat, by the light of the oil lamp: the beginning in A minor, full of sadness and nostalgia and an unbearable yearning for times gone by; then the modulation into C major, with its offer of hope and strength and understanding. This music, felt Daulat, was like a person remembering--if you could hear the sound of the working of remembrance, the mechanism of memory, Für Elise was what it would sound like. (Mistry 515)

Similarly, in the passage from In The Skin of a Lion which began our discussion, Ondaatje intertextually invokes not a specific piece of music, but rather a formal feature of traditional jazz—in this case, the transition from an improvised solo to a scripted chorus—in ways that mirror the novel's theme of the relationship between impermanence and history, as well as between the oral and the written. And, as we've already noted, this use of music in Ondaatje—again, what might appear to be a passing reference—serves as a structural homology in that it embodies the novel's focus on multiple ways of telling a story.

What does a novel, or another literary text, gain by using such techniques, by breaking up centralized points of view and by even opening out into inter-semiotic points of contact? And how might we understand such claims within the context of the arguments we're making, via the

ICASP project, about improvisation as a form of social practice?

The force of experimental practices, including those we're discussing here, resides in their ability to break out of habitualized and recurrent solution-patterns that were (or may have been) effective responses to earlier problems and situations. This kind of opening up, and breaking out, involves risk-taking (that can result in failure), but it also involves the chance to discover new pathways that lend works of art particular force and impact. Often that force and impact are only registered later, as the reception histories of innovative but erstwhile rejected works of art demonstrate. On this basis, the unpredictability that comes with the use of these practices and techniques provides not only for surprise (in itself an aesthetic value), but also for the possibility of innovation and invention.

3. Literary Texts, Musical Improvisation, and the Practice of Everyday Life

In his earlier work Coming Through Slaughter (1976), Ondaatje emphasizes this idea even more directly with respect to jazz as a metaphorical equivalent of writing. His protagonist Buddy Bolden is “governed by fears of certainty” in both his life and his music. Ondaatje stresses the fact that Bolden’s performance offers listeners almost random entry points and open horizons of expectation. It is true that “Bolden played nearly everything in B flat”; but while the musician maintains some common ground necessary for group play, he also hates “the sure lanes of the probable” (15-16). Ondaatje’s own text is woven in counter-point with the structural metaphors (such as the tension between rules and ruptures) imagined through the idiom of jazz, as he toys

with and transgresses the predetermined paths laid out by genre, story, rhythm and metre, those “sure lanes of the probable” that allow writer and reader to travel easily along predictable lines.

A more recent example of the striking use of musical improvisation as textual model is the “lit hop” of Wayde Compton’s 49th Parallel Psalm. Compton uses the DJ’s improvisation over the fixed tracks of the disks to model a performing subject’s agency with respect to historiography, remixing the tracks and the elements of time, history, choice, and chance. If the needle picks up the story from the disk’s immutable tracks and feeds it to the speakers’ prophetic voice and hence to the audience, for Compton, the idea of mixing and scratching becomes a musical metaphor for the improvising subject’s counter-discursive agency at the crossings, in this case between black British Columbia history, voodoo mythologies, and the options of contemporary Canadian, TISH-sponsored poetry. Perhaps the most striking shorthand for this conjunction, in the medium of concrete poetry, is Compton’s juxtaposition of two circles which, together, represent the DJ’s two turntables (172-73). But here one circle offers the numbers of the roulette wheel and the other those of the clock. Chance and time, and choice and history, are here the media activated by the DJ who intervenes by spinning the disks, playing them sometimes counter-clock(wise), and using the cross-fader to intervene in their dialogue.

Michel de Certeau tells us that similar strategies of choice-making and active appropriation also govern what he calls, in his book with that title, The Practice of Everyday Life, and in particular that *other* mode of production otherwise known as “consumption.” Consumption, de Certeau says,

is devious, it is dispersed, but it insinuates itself everywhere, silently and almost invisibly, because it does not manifest itself through its own products, but rather through its ways of using the products imposed by the dominant economic order. (xii-xiii)

Musical improvisation also constitutes a kind of consumption-production that uses available materials, be they provided by musical tradition, other soundscapes, or other media. The results here are also often devious and dispersed, as de Certeau says of everyday consumption, although they are rarely “silent.” And they differ from everyday-life consumption in that they may have a different relationship to the habitual: while both musical improvisers and everyday-life consumers have habits, musical improvisations are one-time-only events that are never precisely re-iterated or repeated: the emphasis is on ever-changing uses of available materials.

Interestingly, one of the examples of “devious use” that de Certeau cites in The Practice of Everyday Life names the counter-colonial choices of the indigenous populations faced with Spanish colonization; this is the very same theatre Mary Louise Pratt used for her later elaboration of the concept of the “contact zone.” As De Certeau points out,

the Indians ... often made of the rituals, representations, and laws imposed on them something quite different from what their conquerors had in mind. (xiii)

The improvisatory performance in the contact zone produces here transcultural outcomes that use given structures and rules in new contexts; in other instances, such improvisation alters given structures altogether. This is the case in social revolutions, and in many strands of improvised

music. De Certeau sees this kind of “use” or consumption that improvises over available contexts and conditions as subversive appropriations of the given.

In his 1974 work La Culture au pluriel (Culture in the Plural) de Certeau indeed went so far as to draw a parallel between the resistance of cultures, and of culture generally, to dominating social technocracies and anti-colonial performance, suggesting that culture “is the colonized of the twentieth century. Contemporary technocracies install whole empires on it in the same way that European nations occupied disarmed continents in the nineteenth century” (1997: 134).

But mass-produced consumer culture is appropriated in many ways by consumer-producers who use it—and improvise over it—in their very own “contact zones.” De Certeau sought to understand this appropriation through the linguistic distinctions between énonciation and énoncé, and between performance and competence, comparing the acts of everyday life with

the construction of individual sentences with an established vocabulary and syntax. In linguistics, “performance” and “competence” are different: the act of speaking (with all the enunciative strategies that implies) is not reducible to a knowledge of the language.

(1984: xiii)

From the point of view of enunciation,

speaking operates within the field of a linguistic system; it affects an appropriation, or reappropriation, of language by its speakers; it establishes a present relative to the time

and place and it posits a contract with the other (the interlocutor) in a network of places and relations. These four characteristics of the speech act can be found in many other practices (walking, cooking, etc.) (1984: xiii)

So, too, we would claim, can they be found in the act of improvisation, where the necessity of Saying Something (as the title of Ingrid Monson's study of jazz improvisation has it) depends on the use of available musical vocabulary in the here and now of performance.

And this commonality with other social practices, it seems to us, is why the study of musical improvisation can say something to and about other modes of improvisation and meaning-making, and can in turn learn something from other modes of improvisation and the scholarship about them: hence the interdisciplinary possibilities of the study of improvisation.

4. Saying Something: Improvising Over the Archive, Improvising in Real Time

If de Certeau's observations about contexts of use and strategies of choice-making offer a valuable way of theorizing improvisation as a form of social practice, then there is also, of course, a long and illustrious history of improvising musicians from aggrieved communities who have excelled at adapting to new (and changing) circumstances, who have purposefully troubled the very assumptions of fixity, who, in short, have used materials at hand to create powerful and enduring resources for hope. Indeed, an ability to cultivate resources for hope out of seemingly hopeless situations, to find "a way out of no way," resounds in the history of African American creative practice. Drummer Max Roach, in an interview with Frank Owen, put it this way:

“Every new generation of black folks comes up with a new innovation because we’re not satisfied with the way the system is economically, politically and sociologically” (qtd. in Owen 60). Roach continues: “Every new generation of black people is going to come up with something new until things are equitable for black people in society” (qtd. in Owen 60). Roach's comments encourage us to make explicit the link between musical innovation and social invention, and to recognize the extent to which struggles for social change often take as one of their most salient manifestations an allegiance to forms of artistic expression, such as musical improvisation, that cannot readily be accommodated within received frameworks of assumption.

In this context, improvisation has offered a powerful model for aggrieved peoples to sound off against the systems and structures that constrain and oppress them. Consider just a few examples where musicians have improvised over a familiar or scripted archive. Think of the improvisatory flights of Charlie “Bird” Parker, who famously reworked familiar pieces from the American songbook as part of an effort to subvert dominant white culture by mastering its harmonic vocabulary and presenting it in a way that was deliberately bewildering to uninitiated white listeners. Think also of singer Billie Holiday's remarkable ability to transform popular love songs produced by a white-dominated Tin Pan Alley cultural industry. And think of Paul Robeson's landmark Peace Arch Concert which culminated in a defiant rendition of “Ol’ Man River,” where the singer and activist changed the scripted lyrics, “Git a little drunk an’ you’ll land in jail,” to “You show a little grit and you land in jail,” thus countering centuries of misrepresentations of African-American people by changing the “crime” from drinking to resistance. And if we recall that Robeson performed that 1952 concert one foot from the Canadian border on a makeshift stage at the back of a flat-bed truck because he was prevented by

the United States government from crossing the US border due to his active participation in worldwide struggles for human rights, then his ability to make do with the materials at hand, like his ability to improvise upon the scripted lyrics of “Ol’ Man River” becomes particularly resonant: a seemingly dead-end and hopeless situation, and a song that might otherwise have fostered stereotypical portrayals of African American people, are now known to have given rise to one of the most powerful examples of resistant creative practice in the history of music making.

In addition to such examples where individual musicians have improvised over fixed scripts and archives, there’s another, and equally resilient, set of examples that are particularly germane to the research we’re facilitating through the Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice project. We’re thinking here of improvisation as an embodied, face-to-face interaction among musicians in real-time. Much of the music that Ajay Heble programs as the artistic director of The Guelph Jazz Festival involves precisely these sorts of real-time interactions. Think about what happens in such a context: a group of people who may never have met, who, in many cases, know very little, if anything, about one another, who may not even speak the same language, can create inspired and compelling music. And they can do this on the spot with no explicit prearranged musical direction. What makes it work? And what does this tell us? How might such musical examples enable us to think about what it means to negotiate differences within a community, what it means to be living in a multicultural society? Some critics have suggested that the immediacy of face-to-face interaction in improvised music making is key to its force. Paul Gilroy, for one, notes that in real-time performance, “immediacy and proximity” function as “ethically charged features of social interaction” (24). And Daniel Belgrad, too, in his book The

Culture of Spontaneity, speaks of the “importance, to a democratic society, of face-to-face contact” (12). Now, more than ever it seems to us, we need respect for diversity and difference. And central to the development of such respect is a lesson taught by all good improvising musicians: the need, indeed the responsibility, to learn how to listen.

The music we have in mind here tends to be startlingly and determinedly experimental. It demands that we cultivate purposeful resources for listening by placing the onus of responsibility on us, as listeners, to create our own pathways through the music. This is, in short, music that unsettles comfortable preconceptions, that casts doubt on fixed and static ways of seeing, and hearing, the world. Unforseeability, in the context of such improvisatory musical practices (and in the context, too, of the intersemiotic practices and multiple perspectives we’ve touched on earlier in this paper) involves an opening up of possibilities hitherto not visible (or audible), possibilities that have been occluded by orthodox habits of seeing and hearing, as well as by established knowledges, accepted practices, and, as de Certeau reminds us, of dominant systems of power. We’d like to suggest that such possibilities, such resistances to what Ondaatje calls the “sure lanes of the probable,” need to be understood, more broadly, as drivers of social invention: of new ways of relating to, and doing things with, one another, as new models of social cooperation. Improvising percussionist and cultural theorist Eddie Prévost puts it this way in an interview with Nic Jones in All About Jazz: “people who look for models for different and possibly more fulfilling ways of living . . . seek cultural manifestations of this desire. Some improvised musics,” Prévost continues, “offer possible artistic manifestations which mirror these desires” (Jones).

In making such a claim, however, we know all too well about some of the methodological challenges that we will face in our extended collaborative research project on improvisation. We hope that our collaborative research practices themselves will help to explore, benefit from, and perhaps even model some of the potential creative advantages of improvisatory social practice and methodological intermediality. While dominant methodological paradigms in the arts have typically been characterized by a separation between theory and practice, our project recognizes the extent to which improvised music-making offers a resonant model for a marriage of the two, and for addressing broad critical, social, cultural, and intellectual issues from a diverse range of perspectives. The task, as we see it, is to foster genuinely interdisciplinary research, and to discover best methods drawn from the creative and collaborative collision of those perspectives employed, while avoiding mere anthology-like scholarship. Only then might new methodological paradigms emerge. Our challenge is to draw upon the broad and diverse methodological and disciplinary expertise of our research team to enable researchers to see beyond the assumptions and perspectives associated with their home disciplines.

Another challenge has to do with some of the unforeseeable ways in which our research might get taken up by others, and it's with this set of concerns that we'd like to conclude our discussion here. Since our project was launched in September 2007, and after a series of high profile articles and interviews ([The Globe and Mail](#), CBC, Radio Canada, [Macleans](#), etc.) we've been flooded with responses: everything from musicians wanting a gig to researchers who'd like to plug into our collaborative network. It's heartening, to be sure, to hear about such interest, to learn that researchers from around the world are keen to be part of our team. After all, we're certainly committed to broadening our disciplinary reach and our methodological horizons. From

surgeons and lawyers to scholars working in conflict resolution, from organizational development consultants to researchers working on issues of mental health and addiction, there has been a great deal of interest in our project. And there is, of course, tremendous opportunity here, especially since we've known from the get-go that our project would evolve in ways that we would not be able to predict. But the range of responses to our work has, we must confess, also given us pause. What happens, for example, when the vital social implications and civic virtues of trust, dialogue, and collaboration that we've been associating with a particular set of improvised musical practices get used to market big business, when industry leaders are taught by theorists of management to use improvisation as a way of building team spirit in order to boost profits? What happens when improvisation gets reduced to a method and framed as part of the logic and priorities of corporate accumulation, rather than as a musical practice with historical links to concepts of alternative community formation, human rights, social activism, the rehistoricization of minoritized cultures, and critical modes of resistance and dialogue? These are issues that will certainly need exploration in the course of the development of our project.

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