

Editorial

Improvisation and the Unnameable: On Being Instrumental

Daniel Fischlin

I.

He was born in a gypsy caravan and spent his early years on the road in Belgium, playing the banjo for a dancing bear and a goat. He was eighteen when his wagon caught fire and he was left for dead. He lost a leg, a hand. Goodbye road, goodbye music. But as they were about to amputate, he regained the use of his leg. And from his lost hand he managed to save two fingers and become one of the best jazz guitarists in history. There was a secret pact between Django Reinhardt and his guitar. If he would play her, she would lend him the fingers he lacked.

Eduardo Galeano ("Resurrection of Django" 265)

Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano's parable of the gypsy who surmounts impossible difficulty to become a great jazz musician encapsulates a number of the strands I want to explore in this editorial. First, Django's ethnicity as a manouche (gypsy) marks his nomadism: he travels in a caravan and plays the banjo for a dancing bear and goat. The image is suggestive. Improvisation invokes and perhaps demands nomadism. Music travels and transposes across all forms of experience. This interspecies performance shows how the music travels in other ways, other dimensions. What, after all, did the goat and bear make of the sounds coming from Django's banjo?

The nomadic nature of improvised discourses, their ability to travel, to be transposed in and across cultures as they travel, is a key to their authenticity, their ability to retain what makes them both distinct and able to mutate in new contexts. The miraculous recovery of Django, the resurrection narrative that Galeano sees in Django's preternatural ability to play with only two fingers, marks the restorative powers of music, the transcendent symbolic powers associated with those called to speak in its name.

Resurrection hearkens back to Orphic discourses that function as allegories of the interconnectedness of music with all things, human or otherwise. When Orpheus plays his lyre, trees dance, rocks give way, and the air is set afire, bringing human inspiration to the level of the divine. For all we know Orpheus may have been a Yoruban animist, an emblem of the energetic spirit life to be found in all things animate and inanimate. If music, as Galeano suggests, is a "language where all languages meet" ("Origin of Music" 40), then the Orphic allegory in the story of Django suggests a culturally specific form arising from Django's distinct milieu, one that comes to have a place in musical history in telling ways. Django's remarkable instrumentality gestures toward the multiple contexts that made his improvisations possible. And Galeano, in telling the parable, does not fail to note how the "secret pact" between the player and the instrument played, the very thing that remains unnameable and hidden away, is somehow at the core of the interchange that produces Django's distinctive improvisations.

Something similar occurs in a wonderful moment in Phil Hopkins's 2009 film *Amplified Gesture*. The film features extended interviews with members of the AMM (all of whom play on *Manafon*, the David Sylvian project that the film accompanies). Saxophonist Evan Parker articulates the almost mystical relationship between a player and the instrument, stating that,

You couple yourself to that instrument and it teaches you as much you tell it what to do. So you're sensitive to . . . how it's responding to your efforts to control it. By hearing it, the way it's feeding back to you, you learn to control it better, so it's a very dynamic and very sensitive process . . . [But] the instrument at the same time seems to be giving you additional information so that there are things you have under your control, but every so often something will go wrong. You'll lose control. [And] in that moment you are given an opportunity to learn something else that the instrument can do . . . the nature of the instrument and its will in relation to *its* destiny . . . [its] set of intentions in its relationship with you, and you start to find it difficult to distinguish yourself and your intentions from the instrument's intentions. (my transcription)

Parker has no illusions about mastery and control over his instrument. And he clearly frames improvisation in relation to how aleatoric events coincide to produce unexpected results that afford new opportunities that can teach one anew. And by attributing intentionality to the instrument, however carefully hedged his comments are, Parker gets at the ways in which agency in improvised circumstances is a function of an otherness that cannot be named, an

instrumentality that has its own intentions, its own yet to be discovered agencies. What is the name for an instrument that has its own intentions, its own agency? Improvisation stages the scene of encounter that produces these differential, random (yet intermingled) agencies, and Parker's comments get at the kind of deep listening and openness to changed circumstance that are at the core of improvisational aesthetics.

In a similar vein, the soon-to-be-released (late January 2010) Pat Metheny Orchestration Project plays with notions of how improvisation and instrumentality can be reconfigured. As Metheny says,

This project represents a conceptual direction that merges an idea from the late 19th and early 20th centuries with the technologies of today to create a new, open-ended platform for musical composition, improvisation and performance. "Orchestrionics" is the term that I am using to describe a method of developing ensemble-oriented music using acoustic and acoustoelectric musical instruments that are mechanically controlled in a variety of ways, using solenoids and pneumatics. With a guitar, pen or keyboard I am able to create a detailed compositional environment or a spontaneously developed improvisation . . . On top of these layers of acoustic sound, I add my conventional electric guitar playing as an improvised component.

Orchestrions, essentially mechanized instruments that imitate band or orchestral sounds, were closely associated with the emergence in the 20s of jazz. German manufacturers of orchestrions like Weber, Hupfeld, and Philipps modified these mechanized instruments to produce the sounds associated with jazz: "The Popper Roland jazz orchestrion [for instance] featured an animated slide whistle prominently displayed on the front of the cabinet. The pneumatic mechanism for the slide whistle would follow or 'slide along with' the highest perforated note on the roll when turned on by a perforation in the roll" (Trager). The Orchestration Project, with its goal of developing an "open-ended platform for musical composition, improvisation and performance" speaks to new instrumentalities that fuse human experience with other evolving forms of agency in an improvising context.

In all the examples cited above the relationship between the instrumentality of the player, whether mechanical or human, or a combination of both, is reconfigured. In exploring these new configurations as a way of expanding the musical palette available to the improviser (much like samplers, turntablists, and various forms of digital musical prostheses have done), is there not also a rather remarkable rethinking of human instrumentality in general going on? Where *is* that sound in fact coming from?

The mysterious, unnameable Orphic powers, allied with the improvisatory nature of "jazz," embody a secret pact made between the instrument of music and the instrumentalist. Whose agency predominates? The instrument will respond only if played. But, as in Galeano's parable, the physically challenged player will play only if the instrument permits. Co-dependent synergies produce miraculous, distinctive sounds. The instrument teaches. The canny instrumentalist listens to the instrument and is moved in unpredictable directions. At a certain point the player and the instrument cannot be distinguished. And out of this fusion remarkable iterations are made possible.

The examples discussed above get at the unspeakable component that so many scholarly studies of improvisation avoid: Where does improvisation really come from? What does improvisation signify, especially as a shared cultural practice deeply embedded in all human histories? How does improvisation embody and enact agency? How does agency come about as a function of improvisation? And, how does improvisation approximate unspeakable and inexpressible, yet fundamental and defining, conditions of being human as a function of *being* instrumental in the world?

Galeano's Django parable hints at some of these mysteries, especially in ending with the generative lack filled by the instrument that demands to be played. The secret pact grounding improvisatory practices is rooted in this transaction whose content cannot be named, whose mystery cannot be revealed. At the heart of the parable is this unnameable content that demands to be played and uttered, *in spite* of all obstacles. At a certain point, as Parker implies, the player recognizes another presence insisting on its own intentions. Metheny's experiments with new forms of improvised musicking, new instrumentalities, reflects his sense that,

One of the inspiring hallmarks of the jazz tradition through the decades has been the way that the form has willfully ushered in fresh musical contexts, resulting in new performance environments for players and composers. This pursuit of change, and the way that various restless souls along the way have bridged the roots of the form with the new possibilities of their own time, has been a major defining element for me in the music's evolution at every key point along the way.

If this “pursuit of change” is an allegory of what improvisation, as the deep source of all music and musicking, references, then improvisatory agency has an especially pressing, unexamined, and under-explored reality that demands our attention.

Jazz singer (and former theology student), Kurt Elling, has argued, like many others, that, “The very act of learning to play an instrument and to improvise at a deep level brings to mind the spiritual habits of meditation and prayer. The mastery of an instrument is an existential exercise. The performance of Jazz improvisation requires that the artist be fully present in his or her consciousness.” Elling cites any number of jazz musicians—from Coltrane, both of whose grandfathers were ministers, to Mingus, who asserted that “My music is evidence of my soul’s will to expand” (ibid.), Ellington’s sacred concerts, Brubeck’s sacred compositions and the like—all of whom link musical expression with spiritual expression. Whether such a linkage is a convenient trope based on delusional thinking, or a lived, deeply felt experience of a surpassing reality inherent in improvised musicking, the fact remains that one of the conditions of improvisatory discourse (beyond mere technique or having “something” to say) is its transcendental content—the things it says that cannot be said in any other way, that no word will suffice to describe or articulate, that no other form of expression can get at. Improvisation’s voicings, in their most compelling iterations, are unique—one-offs. They are also potentially transformative in how they approximate or enable altered states of consciousness, self-awareness, awareness of the othernesses always encroaching on any delusions of singularity “we” may have.

Improvisation also entails public acts of narrative and story telling that emerge from the community and the performer(s). In a video of a Derek Bailey performance at the Downtown Music Gallery (DMG) in New York in December 2001, Bailey breaks off the performance to tell a story about his experiences teaching guitar as a much younger man working in a guitar/record shop in London. As he tells the story to the audience he continues to play in his utterly inimitable and distinctive style. The moment encapsulates the continuity of multiple narratives as a fundamental aspect of improvising. Does the story overtake the playing? Or is it that the voice is merely explaining what the music has already told us? Is the random directionality of the playing imitating the contingencies that bring Bailey to tell the audience the story?

The iconoclastic improviser seems compelled to introduce his own personal history as a spoken text to the musical articulations, as if the two are conjoined inevitably and are commenting, the one on the other, even if that commentary is disjunctive and enigmatic. Improvisation no doubt, and as Bailey’s performance makes dramatically clear, requires distinctive voicings, is in a sense predicated on their articulation, and all too frequently that voice is seen as self-authorizing, self-enabling. But what if the sounds produced by improvisers emerge from the story itself, the story always anteceding the presence of the players who tell it? In such a view, the player who merely shapes and adapts the sonic content to the present moment mediates the narrative content of improvisation. Skilled improvisers continue to shape their improvisations in ways that are true to the intersection of context with sonic content, anticipating new directions in which the narration is to be taken.

The “secret pact” here references the player’s own instrumentality to sonic, narrative, and contextual forces that determine what s/he plays. Spontaneity occurs, but only in a context that delimits what emerges, what is thinkable in that particular improvisatory context. Freedom occurs but only in a context that acknowledges precedent and the historicity of what is played. Community expression is achieved but only in the context of the degree to which the player is shaped by the listening that informs the improvisation. Independence of voice is achieved but only in the context of how that independence is a function of multiple contexts, communities, and social practices that shape it. Creative liberty is achieved but only in the context of the deep histories of formation and development that lead to the improvisatory moment.

Affect is achieved, but only as a function of the co-creative interdependence of performer and audience. Virtuosity and technique are revealed but not necessarily as the prime component of the improvisation. Content is revealed as a function of the musical narrative conceived in the moment as a relational discourse, one that involves speaking to oneself, to one’s audience, and to one’s fellow musicians. Resistance to normative conventions is enacted but only by virtue of perhaps establishing new norms or of remaining in the margins of those norms. Information is conveyed by improvisatory utterances as a function of the multiple components that make it up: sonic, theatrical, gestural, lyric, spoken word, site of performance, historical context, and so forth.

All of which is to say that improvisatory utterances cannot be reduced to the standard tropes of spontaneity, freedom, and virtuosity (technical freedom). If anything these tropes have for far too long limited how we think of improvisation as a cultural practice, vested in tired notions that are largely male-centered, technique-centered, and dominated by the supposed primacy of the individual (as the centre-point of all institutional, philosophical, and cultural values)—all largely driven by the questionable ideologies that lie behind such assumptions. If the tenor of discourses about improvisation has been appropriated by such skewed assumptions while improvisation itself (especially in its non-

canonical and marginal enactments) is profoundly at odds with such reductive notions, then a problem emerges. To what extent do discourses about improvisation, then, betray the very improvisatory utterances they seek to understand?

The question is important because it lays bare a logic, found in other sites of resistance, to thinking creatively about what it means to be human. In essence, that is what improvisation, in its ubiquity across cultures and histories, points to: it is a necessary, primal cultural practice of encounter, a profoundly creative aspect of being human in a community. As such, its repression or marginalization from discourses that shape how we collectively rethink our humanity is a profound failure of the imagination, a betrayal of the very residual traces that define what it means to be in the world.

If improvisation is a key way in which humans collectively adapt, communicate, and respond (both consonantly and dissonantly) with their environment; *if* it is a ubiquitous trans-cultural practice that points to an underlying quality of what it means to be human; *if* improvised discourses articulate ideas only to be found therein, testing the limits of our capacity to think new thoughts, to see beyond the constraints of current notions of freedom of expression; *then* there is a profound relationship to be recognized between improvised musical discourses and other more expansive discourses in which other forms of human agency are at stake. I say this thinking of civil rights discourses in particular. These are predicated on a basic tenet that requires the negotiation of difference, inequity, and injustice from a fundamental position of respect for all life. Meaningful agency in rights contexts depends on encounters predicated on enacting this respect, making its intangibility as theory present as a lived practice. When Martin Luther King Jr. famously pronounced that, “Almost always the creative, dedicated minority has made the world better” (King 61), can a better example of this be found than in the ways in which African American diasporic cultures produced new forms of music and public discourse to combat centuries of oppression and systematized racism?

What if improvisation embodies, in very real and tangible ways, the unnameable component of being human that rights discourses seek to preserve, quantify, and delimit usually via crude (and unobserved) legal instruments? What if improvisation, as a mode of articulating potential and expressive freedom, tells the story of beings whose status cannot be reduced to commerce, to politics, to deformed versions of history, and to oppressive institutional and state-determined civic identities? What if improvisation, in its most achieved forms, augured and provided a practice of civic engagement and identity outside the limiting, normative notions we’re told apply to these terms?

In asking these questions as part of this editorial I’m working out of a sense that for perhaps too long the signifying potential of specific musical practices has been left largely unthought, except as an extra-verbal aesthetic that only has meaning within that extra-verbal context. I’d argue that this is an illusion for very simple reasons: music is, and always has been, a social practice that emerges out of material histories. And those material histories have all sorts of contingencies that influence them. Improvisatory musical communities—and there are many, ranging from the Sun Ra Arkestra/commune through to the AACM; the Afro-Cuban cabildos of Matanzas where the religious enactments of Santería are always accompanied by music in which improvisation figures; the remarkably rich *musique actuelle* scene in Montréal and Québec; the Woodchoppers Association in Toronto with its consistent involvement over many years in local community projects; and the AMM in London, with its genre-defying aesthetics—are important sites where historical contingencies are at work, and where ongoing interchanges between individuals and the community-at-large are re-imagined, contested, subverted, and reconfigured.

The notion of the individual in such improvisatory circumstances needs radical revision, too—especially as one aspect in a complex overlay of contingencies that contribute to an improvised iteration. Yes, the individual can perform as a solo voice both alone and in ensembles. But what is the origin of that voice? I’d argue that improvisation places considerable pressure, in spite of the overused trope of the “solo” as a mode for conveying distinctive musical content, on reductive notions of the individual. If anything, improvisation shows how contingent any sense of individuality is on group dynamics and contexts that always far exceed the individual. The individual in this sense does not really exist, except as a function of the community out of which s/he emerges, to which s/he responds, and into which her additions (consonant or dissonant) are added as a function of her participation in the community. Moreover, the individual exists not so much as a marker of domination and elevated status in musical improvisation but as a generator of new ideas in concert with others. So the musical form, generally and in its specific iterations, gives rise to other ideas, other ways of thinking about social practices that are interconnected.

Charles Hartman, in *Jazz Text: Voice and Improvisation in Poetry, Jazz, and Song*, makes an argument that pushes us to think harder about the relationship between musical signifying and more expansive social practices. He avers,

The cutting session view of the jazz player—the champion, the one who lasts longest—may contribute something to the idea of the jazz hero, and that would make cultural interchange appear as a loss of

personal importance. I take that as an excrescence of jazz, not its essence. The heroism of a Charles Mingus (or John Coltrane or Miles Davis) lies not in his dominating other musicians, but in his refusal to be satisfied for long by given solutions . . . The dialogic nature of jazz places it at the American center. It does not solve the problems of cultural imperialism or endemic racism, but it overarches them. (149)

Here, too, we see musical signifying taking on other contested cultural meanings. Mingus's heroic status is not connected to his individual domination of other musicians so much as by his discomfort with staying in the same place for too long, his dissension with the "given." So, in Hartman's view, the cultural meaning of jazz is to be found in its dialogism, the fact that it emerged out of historical circumstances (slavery and the response of aggrieved populations to oppression) that made dialogism, dissidence, and uneasy hybridity inevitable. Again, historical contingency relates to musical form. Not in any simplistic one-to-one correspondence but in a rich, multi-layered, heterophonic dynamic that no reductive iteration can possibly convey.

Again the unnameable makes its presence felt.

The Franco-Algerian philosopher Jacques Derrida, in an unpublished interview that is part of the documentary film *Derrida*, stated in 1982:

It's not easy to improvise. It's the most difficult thing to do. Even when one improvises in front of a camera or microphone, one ventriloquizes or leaves another to speak in one's place the schemas and languages that are already there. There are already a great number of prescriptions . . . prescribed in our memory and in our culture. All the names are already preprogrammed. It's already the names that inhibit our ability to ever really improvise. One can't say whatever one wants, one is obliged, more or less, to reproduce the stereotypical discourse. And so I believe in improvisation and I fight for improvisation but always with the belief that it's impossible. And there where there is improvisation I am not able to see myself. I am blind to myself. And it's what I will see, no, I won't see it. It's for others to see. The one who is improvised here, no I won't ever see him. (my transcription)

Derrida's comments trace out a few key tropes associated with improvisation: how it is always circumscribed by the already said, by the prescribed, by preprogramming, by stereotypes. How hard it is to truly speak for oneself. How ventriloquy, the inability to escape previous "schemas and languages," over-determines identity and agency. In the last few sentences of his insight, Derrida's language (characteristically) breaks down into *aporia*. When improvisation occurs one cannot be present to witness to it because it engages a radical, unrecognizable alterity that is not ventriloquized and is therefore wholly unfamiliar. Improvisation, when it truly, impossibly occurs, cannot be recognized because prescribed languages and stereotypes, prescribed identities and agencies, dissolve in its presence. There is no way to recognize the unrecognizable. Derrida's mystical, ambiguous language points to improvisation as the site where the obligations of stereotypical discourse are challenged, where the familiar stereotype gives way to a presence that is unnameable and unrecognizable.

The comment frames the problem of improvisation as both an embodied social practice (towards which we strive) and an unthinkable event-horizon of the possible. If this observation approximates a truth about improvisation, we may well ask how musical improvisation, in the forms it has taken in the last century, aligns itself with other social practices where similarly high stakes are in evidence. I say this again thinking about emergent rights discourses (especially in the latter half of the twentieth century) and knowing that these discourses coincide historically with the arrival of radical forms of free improvisation (think Coltrane, Coleman, and Ayler as a start). Are there ways of thinking about the aesthetics of improvisation that overlap with re-invigorated notions of civic engagement—that move us closer to meaningful forms of social justice and progressive change? Can musical improvisation in its most effective forms lead to enacting other forms of human potential?

II.

None of the essays gathered in this fifth volume of *Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études critiques en improvisation* addresses this question directly. Nonetheless the volume does bring together a range of reflections that expand our vocabulary for theorizing improvisation as a cultural practice that refuses easy definition. All of the essays in the volume point to improvisation as a practice with wider implications (than just musico-aesthetic) that tell us a great deal about other forms of being instrumental in the world.

Christian Béthune's essay examines improvisation as a form of individuation that entails the deliberate transformation of reality. Tackling the problem of the improviser as "auteur," Béthune argues that improvisers are "relays" that take

on the problem of how to speak to (and share) traditions within a mimetic community. His analysis gets at how improvisation makes possible imperceptible and even inaudible aspects of experience. The scene of improvisation is a tactile experience that requires gesture, positioning, proprioception, and a total in-the-body sensibility that exceeds hearing. As such, improvisation is “un acte constitutif d’individuation” (an act constituting individuation) that also assumes the diffusion of the improviser/auteur in the mimetic community that improvisation establishes (“l’improvisation assume la dilution de l’auteur dans la communauté mimétique qu’elle instaure”). The inter-being of improvisation as an interstitial space somewhere between the individual and the community has important implications for how each of these terms gets re-thought. Co-dependent, co-generative creation of this sort destabilizes familiar tropes of the improviser as heroic individualist. It asks that we think more carefully about the elements in improvised exchanges that are made possible by the music but that point to meanings that the music alone cannot contain. Where do improvisations lead, if not to dimensions of shared human experience that make thinkable the unnameable and the intangible?

Mark Laver’s essay, by contrast, takes on the “greatest jazz concert ever,” the infamous 1953 event at Toronto’s Massey Hall that featured the ultimate bebop band: Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, pianist Bud Powell, bassist Charles Mingus, and drummer Max Roach. In studying the critical reception and spin associated with the concert, Laver takes on the ways in which bebop, a sophisticated form of improvised musicking, adopted Europeanized aesthetic models as part of its self-valorizing strategies. For Laver,

Bebop musicians—for the most part, a group of African-Americans . . . living and working in New York during the 1940s and 50s—were not the first to explicitly identify themselves as highbrow artists in the European mold, rather than entertainers; however, as Scott Deveaux (*The Birth*), Bernard Gendron, and numerous other scholars have suggested, bebop marked the first historical moment when significant numbers of jazz musicians adopted this aesthetic stance, and made it a fundamental element of their music.

Laver’s essay goes on to explore the remarkably contested contexts in which both critics and musicians “worked with *and* against each other to transform jazz from a popular music into a high art.” Of particular note in the discussion is the degree to which the political valences associated with the valorization of jazz (and improvisational) aesthetics has a complex history of relating to European aesthetics, a dynamic that entailed negotiating racial, class, historical, and cultural divides as much as it meant negotiating musical divides. Laver’s essay gets at the degree to which jazz as a site of improvised musicking is permanently implicated in larger political and historical contexts that have affected and commented on its aesthetics. The essay leaves hanging the question of why aesthetic legitimation matters, and how improvisation as a social practice of dissidence and exploration challenges us to re-think legitimation models of aesthetic theory and of wider cultural practices.

François Mouillot’s essay on the popularity of a form of Basque improvised sung poetry known as *bertsolaritza*, provides a revealing account of improvisational practices’ social pertinence. For Mouillot, “the role of *bertsolaritza* is two-fold. On the one hand, it consolidates the ideals of a Basque national identity based primarily on the Basque language (Euskara), and its popularity has reached hegemonic proportions. On the other hand, to the outside world, Basque oral improvised poetry represents Basque singularity by positing an ambiguous, yet undeniable, discourse of resistance to other, transnational forms of political, economic, and cultural hegemonies.” The role of improvisation in relation to articulating national identity, especially when enactment of the improvised form is coincident with the capacity to perform the very thing that gives one identity (i.e. one’s language) is given particular prominence in Mouillot’s argument. No doubt, it is worth thinking of the larger implications implicit in Mouillot’s argument.

Do improvised discourses institute the formal, communicative, and performative aspects that codify aspects of particular histories and one’s relation to those histories, one’s capacity to insert oneself into history? Improvisation here plays a role in constructing and affirming an idealized community, national identity, and the capacity of the Basque nationalist community to resist attempts at assimilation by larger state entities like Spain or France. As Mouillot argues, improvisation provides a creative means for articulating and sustaining social networks at the same time that it allows for elaborated expressions of cultural difference. Its importance lies in how it aligns with the intangible cultural assets that define identity as they are given improvised form.

By contrast, Tamas Dobozy’s essay on jazz-influenced American author Stuart Dybek’s use of musical tropes, his literary improvisations *with* music, gets at the rich metonymic power of musical improvisation as a strategy for reconceptualizing social relations and spaces. As Dobozy argues, “Improvising *with* music [for Dybek] becomes one way of enacting possibility.” In his richly theorized account of improvisation as a literary trope, Dobozy gets at a number of insights: music articulates an unspecified form of yearning (for community, for expression, for a way of getting at dimensions of experience for which words are insufficient); in Dybek’s characterizations, “subjectivity as or *of* improvisation” is continually emergent “from or in excess of categorical determinants (whether they be civic

citizenship, ethnicity, social class”); and “improvisation begins in the near infinite possibilities made available by a fusion of the old and new.” These insights drive Dobozy to think of Dybek’s use of music as a way to explore otherness and the silence that exists beyond official, institutionalized representations of that otherness. In one of his most astute observations about Dybek’s use of music, Dobozy states, “disruption of the real by this jumping ‘current’ that permits a sounding of the ‘silence’ of impossibilities is established by a writing that cannot be music, but which, in reaching for it, refuses to settle into what is, into the power of writing itself to appropriate, to speak for, to consolidate what can and is permitted to be done.” As a trope, then, for a yearning toward the other, and as a politics that unveils the barrenness of official culture, improvisation makes possible aesthetic, politicized, and historicized relations that exceed reductive categorization. Improvisation, in its literary use by Dybek, becomes a means of reassembling reality in ways that respect the excessive signifying potential always already inherent in community, in history, and in the specific sites in which these are enacted. As a form of *bricolage*, improvisation brings together the raw materials that surround us with the potential to speak to an excessive otherness that remains to be fulfilled.

The panel discussion from the 2008 Guelph Jazz Festival Colloquium, bringing together Paul Miller (DJ Spooky) and Vijay Iyer, begins with Iyer’s astute caveats about attributing any inherently positivist value to improvisation because it is such a fundamental aspect of *all* experience, good and bad. Iyer cites Muhal Richard Abrams’s definition of improvisation as a “human response to necessity” and, from there, the dialogue moves forward into how improvisatory *bricolage* has been productive of new musical forms associated with the digital age. Miller argues for improvisation as “the bridge between radically different compositional strategies” with Iyer agreeing that improvisation “dehierarchizes the idea of composition. If you think about the root words of composition, it’s just about placing things with other things.” So turntablism, using found objects as the basis for composition, sampling, and other techniques show the rich possibilities of invention made possible by digital technologies, at the same time that they challenge users not to let dependence on the technology substitute for substantive creative expression.

The issue closes with two reviews of books about transgressive improvisers John Zorn and Fred Ho: John Brackett’s *John Zorn: Tradition and Transgression* and Diane C. Fujino’s edited volume *Wicked Theory, Naked Practice: A Fred Ho Reader*. Both Zorn and Ho improvise from distinct cultural spaces but with expansive notions of how those spaces interact with the world around them. Zorn’s Masada project associates radical musical improvisations with a critical politics (anti-fascist, of resistance to empire generally, and of sonic dissidence), thus placing him in a “transgression of tradition” but also in a “tradition of transgression.” Ho, whose activist writings and recordings have made a point of calling into question un-thought categories (like jazz) established by minority (White) culture in defining global (and majoritarian, non-White) cultural traditions that exceed reductive stereotyping. Ho’s own compositional method makes use of hybridized musical traditions (African-American and Asian, tempered and un-tempered instrumentations) to undercut facile notions of aesthetic purity, which he associates with conservative and inherently anti-creative politics. Canadian poet George Elliott Clarke’s review stresses how Ho’s musico-political consciousness is indebted to Malcolm X’s analysis of racism in America—which begs the question that Ho’s lifework has partially answered of how to link improvised music with political critique.

Interestingly Ho’s music and his extensive activist writings suggest that improvised musicking, especially of the kind that has come out of diasporic African-American culture, is always already inherently political. The hybridized cultural forms that gave rise to it, including African cultural syncretism (especially associated with Yoruban animism), colonialism, racism, and sustained oppression, have marked this form of improvisation’s resistant and trenchantly oppositional musical gestures. Those hybridities are profoundly linked—aesthetically, ideologically, performatively—with the struggle to achieve rights and justice in ways that virtually no other musical genres, national styles, or forms can match.

Improvisation’s status as a tangible intangible, a cultural form based on unpredictability, potential, and uncertainty—but also on enactment, presence, and embodiment—makes it a remarkable strategy for encounter. It brings together diachronous and synchronous histories, individual and community in generative co-creation, and allows for simultaneous consonance and dissonance, unexpected hybridities, provocative and productive cacophonies. In this light, might we ask how being musically instrumental in improvisatory encounters also carries the potential to assert the very rights—to expressive freedom, to dialogue, to community, to dissidence—that make us fully, impossibly human?

Where *is* that sound coming from?

Works Cited

- Bailey, Derek. *Playing for Friends on 5th Street*. DVD. Straw2Gold Pictures, 2004.
- Dick, Kirby and Amy Ziering Kofman. *Derrida*. DVD. Zeitgeist Films, 2004.
- Elling, Kurt. "Spirituality, Poetry & Jazz: Some Thoughts Driving the Jazz Singer." University of Missouri, Columbia, MO, 8 Nov. 2004. Web. 16 Jan. 2010.
- Galeano, Eduardo. "Origin of Music" and "Resurrection of Django." *Mirrors: Stories of Almost Everyone*. Trans. Mark Fried. New York: Nation Books, 2009. 40, 265.
- Hartman, Charles O. *Jazz Text: Voice and Improvisation in Poetry, Jazz, and Song*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991.
- Hopkins, Phil. *Amplified Gesture: An Introduction to Free Improvisation: Practitioners and Their Philosophy*. DVD. Samadhi Sound, 2009.
- King (Jr.), Martin Luther. *Strength to Love*. Cleveland: Fortress, 1981.
- Metheny, Pat. "About Orchestration." *Pat Metheny.Com*. Web. 16 Jan. 2010.
- Trager, Tim. "Orchestrations With Animated Musical Novelties." *Mechanical Music Digest*. Web. 16 Jan. 2010.