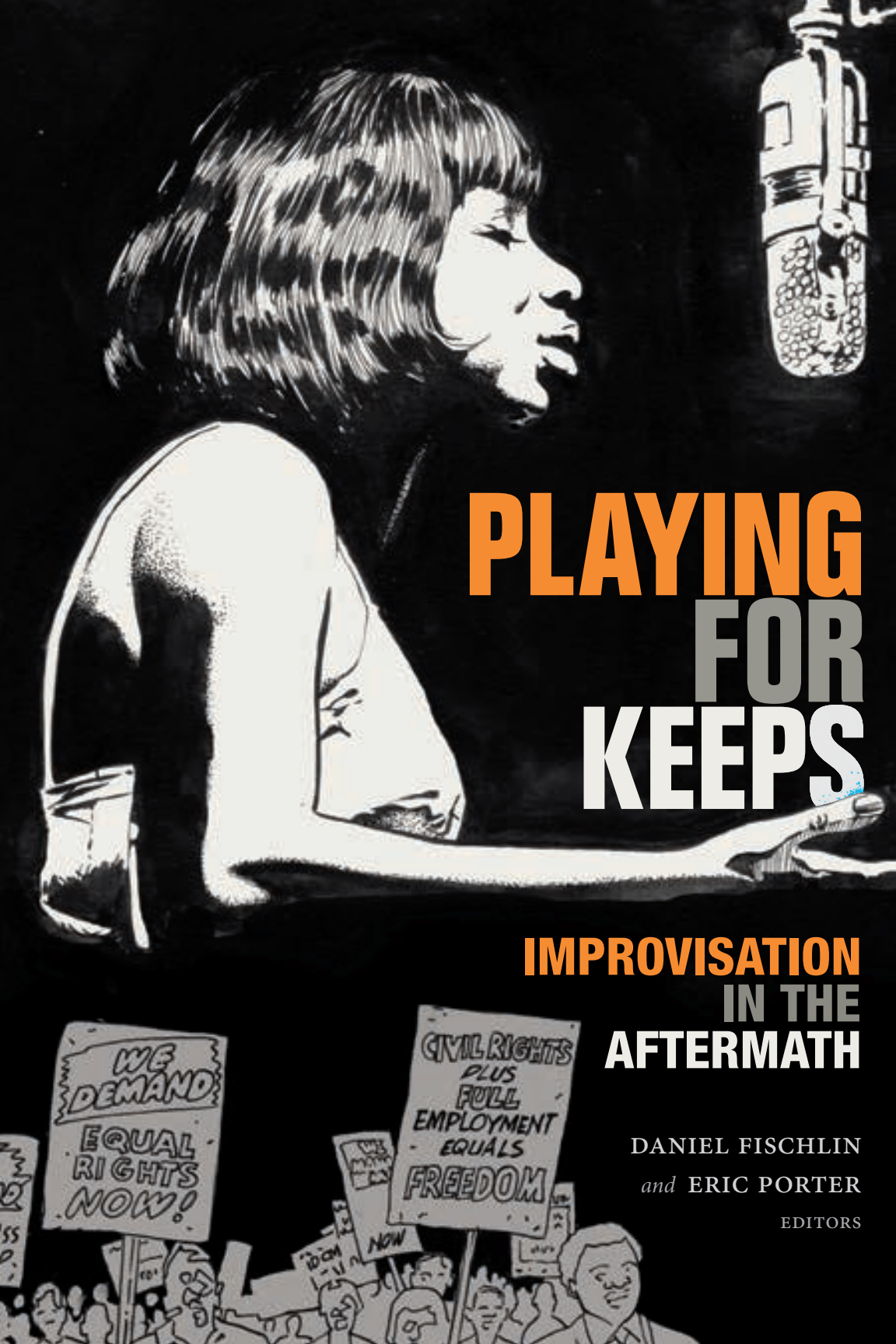

PLAYING FOR KEEPS

IMPROVISATION IN THE AFTERMATH

DANIEL FISCHLIN
and ERIC PORTER
EDITORS

PLAYING FOR KEEPS

IMPROVISATION, COMMUNITY, AND SOCIAL PRACTICE

A series edited by Daniel Fischlin

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Daniel Fischlin
and
Eric Porter,
EDITORS

PLAYING FOR KEEPS

Improvisation in the Aftermath

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for our beloved partners,
Martha Nandorfy and Catherine Ramírez

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This project began coming together during our first conversations with one another at a jazz studies conference, Lost in Diversity, at the Heidelberg Center for American Studies in November 2012. We thank Christian Broecking and the other conference organizers for making that connection. Subsequently, our rather broadly framed 2013 call for papers for a somewhat differently conceived version of this project elicited well over one hundred abstracts. Although we were able to include only a subset of those proposed projects in *Playing for Keeps* and two related volumes, the enthusiastic response to the call confirmed our impression that scholars—established and up-and-coming—were pushing critical improvisation studies in important transcultural and transnational directions. We therefore appreciate the efforts of all who responded to our call for helping us to understand the necessity of this project—the range of responses we received was a clear indication of the degree to which the field of critical studies in improvisation in general had begun to account for cultural difference as a largely understudied aspect of how improvisatory practices manifest globally.

We are especially indebted to the contributors to *Playing for Keeps* for their excellent scholarship as well as for their dedication to the project during a long and not always easy journey. Their timely and thorough responses to our editorial suggestions over several phases of the volume's development pushed us to sharpen its focus, and their patience and tenacity through a somewhat complicated review process kept our spirits from flagging. We were also encouraged by the ways many contributors bridged in some inspiring ways the gap between practitioners and scholars and scholar/practitioners—this volume gives voice to a wide array of case studies and experiences that hint at the enormous amount of inspiring work going on worldwide in this burgeoning area of inquiry.

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Last but not least, we are grateful to our families, friends, and colleagues for their support and for giving us the time to work. And we thank those who improvise, as always, for the inspiration. Our title, *Playing for Keeps: Improvisation in the Aftermath*, points to the global importance of ongoing improvisatory practices discussed in the book, and the need for these to continue to flourish, and develops the implications of Sun Ra's observation in *Space Is the Plac*e that "the earth cannot move without music. The earth moves in a certain rhythm, a certain sound, a certain note. When the music stops the earth will stop and everything upon it will die."[1]

NOTE

1 Sun Ra in John Coney, dir., *Space Is the Place* (USA: North American Star System, 1974).

Playing for Keeps

An Introduction

DANIEL FISCHLIN AND ERIC PORTER

Improvisation: Reverberations of the Possible

Celebrated author Thomas King's history from below, *The Inconvenient Indian: A Curious Account of Native People in America*, opens with a short tale of a traditional First Nations drum group to which he belonged: "Anishinaabe, Métis, Coastal Salish, Cree, Cherokee. We have nothing much in common. We're all Aboriginal and we have the drum. That's about it."[1] The drum is a gathering point that is more than symbolic since its sound is a form of embodied endurance. The musicians "play for keeps"; that is, they play for people engaged in multiple struggles for survival. The crisis in Canada and elsewhere with respect to indigenous populations that have suffered a sustained attack on their communities, cultural traditions, and very existence has produced a payload of intergenerational misery—but also a sustained set of creative responses that have reclaimed political agency in spite of a settler culture still keen to eradicate their traditions, languages, and history. The drum betokens an improvised community that gathers around it even as it heralds a future yet to be made in the sound of playing together. It is the sound of resilience and solidarity with an outcome yet unknown. Survival, if not political certainty, is audible in the pulse that mimics the diastole and systole of the beating hearts that make it resonate.

Playing for Keeps explores the emergence and development of musical improvisation in settler-colonial, postcolonial, postapartheid, and postwar societies, with particular attention to the uses of it, successfully and otherwise, in negotiating lingering violence and uncertainty, and in imagining alternative futures, addressing trauma, sustaining resilience, and modeling, if not inspiring, solidaric relationships. Ongoing forms of empire and related structures of inequality continue to propagate—with the *post* in the relevant descriptors

signifying not the end of but rather changing contours of terror and domination and a failure to address the pervasiveness of systems that rely on disproportionate wealth, modulated forms of enslavement, and technologies of alienation and disempowerment. In such circumstances, people are forced to improvise socially, politically, and culturally. Although musical improvisation's emergence in such contexts is never certain, and its politics often fraught, this book shows how groups and individuals use improvisatory practices in compelling ways to make the aftermath of trauma, crisis, revolution, colonization, and inequality a site of emergent potential. Improvisation offers not only a means for coping with and responding to impossible and unthinkable situations but also an embodied strategy for analyzing the very structures of destruction and dominance that produce sustained misery and subject aggrieved populations to the implacable logic of violence and exploitation.

The globalized realities of expansive, systemic socioeconomic and racial inequalities, unparalleled ecological rapacity, the mutation of colonial power into its present transnational corporate forms, and the default violence deployed by overmilitarized nation-states, police forces, political groups, and individuals all sustain the crisis of the moment in myriad locally specific ways. Esteemed musicians Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter in a cowritten open letter addressed to the next generation of artists take note of how "we find ourselves in turbulent and unpredictable times. From the horror at the Bataclan, to the upheaval in Syria and the senseless bloodshed in San Bernardino, we live in a time of great confusion and pain." In response, they articulate the functional role of tactics deeply associated with their improvisatory experience of music: "Whether through the exploration of new sounds, rhythms, and harmonies or unexpected collaborations, processes and experiences, we encourage you to dispel repetition in all of its negative forms and consequences. Strive to create new actions both musically and with the pathway of your life. Never conform."[2]

Hancock and Shorter advocate a willingness to engage the unknown, and the risks associated with taking such action, as a fundamental part of their artistic practice: "The unknown necessitates a moment-to-moment improvisation or creative process that is unparalleled in potential and fulfillment. There is no dress rehearsal for life because life, itself, is the real rehearsal. Every relationship, obstacle, interaction, etc. is a rehearsal for the next adventure in life. Everything is connected. Everything builds. Nothing is ever wasted. This type of thinking requires courage."[3] In other words, in the aftermath of chaos and trauma, improvisatory modes of being provide generative alternatives based on risk taking and nonconformity rooted in cocreative connections.

This book argues that sonic improvisation and the musical and social practices and discourses that coevolve with various forms of it provide a powerful, if marginalized, tool for finding the grounds to negotiate, survive, analyze, and sometimes oppose what First Nations author Leslie Marmon Silko describes as "destroyer" culture in her 1977 novel *Ceremony.* Musical improvisation responds to destroyer culture in multiple ways. These can include the development of shared artistic practices that necessarily hybridize musical languages to find a common ground, or that find ways to say new things within the limitations of a specific form or within the confines of limited access to resources, or that expand the event horizon of the possible through attacks on convention and radical experimentalism, to list only a few of its methods and outcomes. Musical improvisation allows for, even encourages, differential encounters—with sound, with other humans, with the spirit, with the cosmos—that gesture toward their aftermath. In its "purest form," as improviser and composer Wadada Leo Smith argues, improvisation is "an arrangement of silence and sound and rhythm that has never before been heard and will never again be heard."[4] But its resonance—in thought, memory, practice, and affect—continues to shape the world, necessarily engaging and potentially transforming the societies where it is made and those to which it travels. These are not vacuous theoretical shibboleths but lived experiential realities, current in contemporary discourses about improvisation arising from multiple sites and practitioners, that musicians share in real time as part of the interchange that improvisation unfolds. Indeed, the material outcomes of these sorts of generative musical interchanges, even in their least successful iterations, are part of an aspirational form of human agency in which choice, context, resourcefulness, dialogue, plurivocality, independence, and reciprocity can be played with (quite literally) in the face of the systemic underpinnings of crisis.

As part of the Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice (ICASP) book series, *Playing for Keeps* falls within a trajectory of critical improvisation studies that is committed to understanding the possibilities, and limitations, of musical improvisation as a model for political, cultural, and ethical dialogue and action—for imagining and creating alternative ways of knowing and being known in the world even as it interrogates the ways in which aesthetic practices impact other forms of social practice. It argues for the value of the creative risk taking imbued with a sense of movement and momentum that makes improvisation an inspiring, unpredictable, ubiquitous, challenging, and necessary endeavor.[5] But we also intend this book as an invitation to think about how we might push the conversation in critical

studies in improvisation in new directions. We recognize that "improvisation," as put into scholarly practice in North America and across much of Europe, has become a master trope that potentially erases elements of the multiple, differential, and sometimes radical practices to which it generally refers. Such monolithic discourses can obscure the culturally specific dynamics and meanings of improvisational practices across time and space. They can assume too neat a connection between liberation in performance and liberation in social practice. And they can also lose sight of the ways that the affective and political work that improvisation in the strictest sense—that is, unscripted, creative decision making in real time—accomplishes is often a product of its coproduction with other modes of musicking (composition, reproduction, repetition, and so on) and a wide array of culturally specific social activities.

Improvisatory human activity, as the chapters and case studies that follow make clear, has not developed simply in opposition to, or free from, these underpinnings of present-day crisis or the *longue durée* processes that constitute them. Improvisatory musical practices, the humans who create and listen to them, and the stories and critical discourses that make them intelligible beyond the scenes of their performative iterations are both the outcomes of and the alternatives to this tragic history. Improvising communities have long and often been riven by gendered, racial, ethnic, and class-based exclusions, conflicts, and symbolic (and occasionally real) violence. Further, the tropes that enable our understandings of the liberatory work improvisation can potentially do have deep roots in modernist, primitivist racial fantasies and their dispersals via critical discourse, literary performance, and the promotional practices of a global music industry whose economic practices help create the conditions, and often set the limits, for spontaneous musicking and its wider cultural dissemination. Yet it is precisely through improvisation's deep imbrication in overlapping, asymmetrical power relations that its efficacy as a practice for modeling alternatives to such relations may be explored.

As a social practice, improvisation is an important aspect of the public commons, "the assembly of people," as Thomas DeFrantz argues, "that aligns contingent interests and needs. The commons emerges to be different from sedimented concepts of community; the commons imagines itself to be contingent and ephemeral, momentary but stable. . . . The commons recognizes itself briefly and then moves away from itself, leaving traces of its achievement in Black Lives Matter, in the Occupy movement, in student uprisings against gun access and LGBTQ hate crimes."[6] To this list may be added multiple examples of the commons, through both social and musical

forms, responding in the aftermaths of the crises that activate aspects of our shared humanity.

A devastating 2017 earthquake in central Mexico, for instance, saw rapid-fire responses from the commons in which *colectivos* in rural locations reconstructed devastated homes with an eco-friendly technique using materials easily at hand: PET (polyethylene terephthalate) plastic bottles filled with garbage and trash to create load-bearing bricks for new homes.[7] Luis D'Artagnan, a volunteer aid worker during the crisis, notes how "lo que proliferó y se diversificó con gran plasticidad y rapidez fueron las brigadas de ayuda" (it was the help brigades that proliferated and diversified with great flexibility and speed). These help brigades improvised a range of responses to the disaster: a group called the Bikers, who were able to quickly access remote regions that government vehicles could not, distributed basic necessities and provided medical assistance; other brigades identified damaged structures posing a risk to neighbors; and arts collectives addressed issues of morale, childcare, and the like for victims.[8] Similar DIY responses to disaster relief occurred in Puerto Rico after the 2017 Hurricane Maria, which saw a state response characterized by mismanagement, corruption, and incompetence—whereas the DIY grassroots response across multiple communities led to concerted actions like the Proyecto de Apoyo Mutual (Project for Mutual Aid), which "began by feeding hundreds of people a day . . . [then] added a weekly health clinic. . . . A free meal delivery service for the elderly. Potable water. Even Wi-Fi."[9] Both examples point to the exceptional resilience of the commons to self-empower via improvised, DIY direct action in the face of disaster and state incompetence and neglect.

In music, improvisation is often a key component of direct engagements with forces that produce crisis. The freestyle cipher performed by Eminem as part of the 2017 Black Entertainment Television hip-hop awards fused aspects of community-based improvisatory practices with a scathing critique of the various crises brought on by the Trump presidency. Eminem's improvised rap occurs in the context of a circle of observers, the cipher—for whom he performs and with whom he is in improvised dialogue. These improvisatory forms are manifestly sites where a critical commons operates within and against a backdrop of hegemonic structures and institutional inertias that limit or foreclose on agency. The improvised spaces of the commons model contingency, respond to the ephemeral needs that require collective action and resilience, and underline the need to move away from inflexible, stagnant ways of expressing human community in all its wondrously specific manifestations.

Perseverance and resilience are critical to the survival of the commons in certain contexts, and these are closely tied to subtler ways of exercising agency and implicitly offering political critique. The case of Sara Akel, a young Palestinian pianist from the Gaza Strip and

> one of the Strip's greatest cultural assets, is typical of Gaza—exceptional talent overcoming obstacles that few of her peer group elsewhere could imagine. She had to wait seven years for a second-hand piano at home because of the shortage of the instruments in Gaza during the blockade. She first played on a toy keyboard, then mostly practised on a Yamaha "virtual piano." Before taking part in her first national Palestinian competition, she had to learn to use pedals at the conservatory. Moreover, she could only participate by video because she and her fellow competitors from Gaza had not been allowed out to the West Bank—an all too familiar enforcement of Israel's determined separation of Gaza from the West Bank.[10]

In Gaza, to express herself, Akel was forced to deploy all sorts of improvisatory practices to address the exceptional material challenges to her access to teachers, audiences, and even the very instrument on which she has displayed such exceptional talent. Similar acts of localized courage and persistence may be found in global northern contexts, where racialized violence takes other forms. Nisha Sajnani, director of the Drama Therapy and Community Health program at the Post Traumatic Stress Center in New Haven, Connecticut, points to "improvisation as a kind of 'disciplined empathy'" and places it at the core of her art-based research called Living Enquiry.[11] Living Enquiry is an outgrowth of "embodied non-scripted forms" that call on aspects of Keith Johnstone's developmental transformations, playback theater, and Augusto Boal's theater of the oppressed, and Sajnani has "drawn on Living Enquiry to enquire into the experiences of communities displaced by genocide and other human rights violations . . . and to explore and document the experience of oppression faced by racialized youths and adults."[12] Improvisation plays a key role in this form of inquiry. It blends testimony with embodied explorations of trauma and is predicated on principles closely tied to improvisatory practices: "opening to uncertainty," "attuning to difference," and "aesthetic intelligence," with Sajnani noting George Steiner's observation, "We do not have a word yet for this 'ordered enlistment of intuition.'"[13] Embodied theatrical play in which improvisatory unscripted performance both witnesses and addresses trauma and its aftermath presents a new vector for responding to crisis.

There is back of these examples a long history of decolonizing reverberations across the planet that were, in many ways, facilitated by the expansion

of empire and the economic, military, and racial knowledge projects associated with it. W. E. B. Du Bois embodied some of these contradictions in his early twentieth-century writings about music. His Eurocentrism, racial essentialism, masculinism, and cultural elitism shaped his approach to writing about music and its political potential, including his unwillingness to engage significantly with the dynamic improvisational practice called jazz. While limited in many respects, he was still hailed—albeit through the lens of his Arnoldian take on culture—by emergent, decolonizing aesthetic practices. In *The Negro* (1915), Du Bois unabashedly links the creative output of African Americans with progressive outcomes, stating, "Already in poetry, literature, music, and painting the work of Americans of Negro descent has gained notable recognition. . . . Self-realization is thus coming slowly but surely to another of the world's great races, and they are today girding themselves to fight in the van of progress, not simply for their own rights as men, but for the ideals of the greater world in which they live: the emancipation of women, universal peace, democratic government, the socialization of wealth, and human brotherhood."[14]

Du Bois eloquently reflected on African American "sorrow songs," "the Negro folk-song—the rhythmic cry of the slave" that "stands today . . . as the sole American music" and "remains as the singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the Negro people." The sorrow songs were "the music of an unhappy people, of the children of disappointment; they tell of death and suffering and unvoiced longing toward a truer world, of misty wanderings and hidden ways."[15] Du Bois precisely links the crises triggered by racism, colonization, slavery, exile, and historical erasure, among others, with the ways music addresses, if not arises from, these circumstances and is situated in their aftermath as an "unvoiced longing toward a truer world."[16]

Du Bois understood that the "market" for the spirituals, their growing popularity in the US and abroad, facilitated their potentially transformative power as a vehicle for Black recognition. What he subsequently missed, however, by not taking seriously jazz and its relations, were the decolonial imaginaries consolidated specifically through commodity capitalism and emergent technologies. Michael Denning, in his examination of the explosion of vernacular music from the late 1920s and early 1930s that emerged from an "archipelago of colonial ports," argues that such musical forms—on their own, as heard together, and when cross-fertilizing one another—remade the "musical ear" via their common articulations of noisy timbres, syncopated rhythms, "weird" vocal tonalities, and, with increasing emphasis, improvisation. Once committed to record, these sounds decolonized

the ear, calling into question established cultural hierarchies based on race, color, and civilization and "remaking . . . the very structure of feeling as new sensibilities and new aesthetics become new ways of living."[17] This process, Denning argues, helped set the stage for decolonization as a constellation of social, political, and cultural movements, for "these vernacular phonograph discs were, in their very sound, a 'working out of the social order to come,' an improvisation of a postcolonial world."[18]

The political project of this vernacular music was contradictory, not least because embedded within it were forms of embodiment (singing, dancing, marching, playing instruments, and so on) and technologies carried across the globe by various forms of colonialism.[19] Moreover, the music

> often prefigured the contradictions to come, the trials and tribulations of the decolonizing movements and states: the divide between a democracy of improvisation, and a cult of populist stars and bandleaders; the divide between male instrumentalists, inheriting the craft ideologies of artisan music-making, and a now open, and openly sexualized, ambivalence toward the woman singing star; the divide within new territories, as the musics of particular regions and peoples became emblems of the nation; and the political metaphysics of rhythm—the inversion of the disparagement of rhythm and "rhythmic" peoples into the celebration of a sometimes essentialized, naturalized somatic rhythm.[20]

This contradictory and anticipatory scene played out via multiple reverberations—albeit with some, like jazz, more prominent than others—of local expressions across the globe.

Denning's observations on improvisation in settler-colonial contexts are particularly acute:

> Improvisation in music has . . . long existed, but, in nineteenth-century Europe and the European settler societies of the Americas, it lost recognition and value as printed composition came to dominate both art music and popular song. . . . Moreover, as improvisation declined in prestige, it became increasingly associated with subaltern castes of musical performers: "Extemporisation or improvisation," the 1927 edition of the authoritative *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians* stated, is "the primitive act of music-making, existing from the moment the untutored individual obeys the impulse to relieve his feelings by bursting into song. Accordingly, therefore, amongst all primitive peoples musical composition consists of extemporization subsequently memorized."[21]

The *Grove's Dictionary*'s dismissive notion of improvisation as a form of primitivism is deeply racist and accounts, in part, for the way in which improvisation has been marginalized, ignored, or placed at the bottom of Western musical hierarchies of knowledge. And, as Denning observes, this movement is clearly coincident with colonization and Eurocentric values that were horrified by any threat to the aesthetic order that supported notions of restricted and exploitative political agency in relation to "subaltern castes." Yet the anxiety produced by jazz and other forms of improvised musical discourses in the face of Eurocentric, colonial values in the early twentieth century helped to consolidate their disruptive power. In short, the audio-politics of improvisation were radically at odds with hegemonic thinking but were also made audible by it, and this rupture helped set the stage for its deployment as a strategy for voicing various forms of resistance to the crises perpetuated by empire and its failures.[22]

The promise of vernacular music, improvised and otherwise, like the promises of the often-revolutionary freedom movements it anticipated and, at times, interfaced with, remains "unfulfilled" and "unfinished" given the persistence and mutability of "the racial orders of colonialism and settler colonialism."[23] Still, the reverberations of possibility as well as contradiction remain, on record and in live performance, and continue to be worked through via various modes of musicking. But it is improvisation, as a shared practice, that holds a particularly valuable potential for responding to the multiplicity of crises that have local and global historical roots. These crises continue to generate lived material consequences—from post-traumatic stress disorder and other forms of trauma through to the inability to access adequate resources; from intergenerational suffering brought on by war, disaster, or malicious forms of governance, among other causes, that produce life-and-death circumstances the world over.

"Playing for keeps" is, in such circumstances, a historically unfolding trope that articulates the stakes of responding to what Argentine-Mexican philosopher and social critic Enrique Dussel calls "transmodernity."[24] It is a response that will very possibly be determinative of what it means to be human in a future for which we are all struggling. Dussel's work, at the turn of the new millennium, aligns with that of other cultural theorists in advocating for pluriversality and linked forms of epistemic and biotic diversity, what Donna Haraway calls *sympoiesis*, or "making-with." "Nothing makes itself," Haraway argues. "Nothing is really autopoietic or self-organizing. . . . *Sympoiesis* is a word proper to complex, dynamic, responsive, situated historical systems. It is a word for worlding-with, in company. *Sympoiesis* enfolds autopoiesis and generatively unfurls and extends it."[25]

At odds with singularities and myths of autonomy, *sympoiesis* instead recognizes the cocreative, contingent aspects of multiple forms of connection that bind epistemic, historical, and material systems ineluctably together. It helps us understand how monocultural formations that threaten difference on a planetary scale need to be opposed by "imag[ining] multiple possible alternative worlds," as Ramon Grosfoguel puts it, in order to resist and subvert the crises brought about by a combination of postindustrial, hypertechnological, corporate self-interest and diminished rights environments that failed to address basic logics of sustainability and survivability.[26] Upholding reciprocal interests between larger biotic and human realities requires evolving creative forms of agency congruent with core human values. Playing for keeps entails thinking through where these forms of agency get modeled, reproduced, refigured, and tested. Our argument is that improvised performative, creative practices found in music, art, storytelling, and the like all have roles to play in shaping such interactions. We add the caution that such practices often sit at the margins of where the determinative practices of power and resources are located. A further caution recognizes that improvisatory interventions into practices of governance, whether intentional or not, may well be co-opted, assimilated, or subsumed into realpolitik practices deeply at odds with idealized notions of improvisatory liberation. Sometimes, such practices simply reproduce power and its constitutive elements. A struggle, in short, over the dominant epistemes associated with improvisation and the way they are shaped is ongoing.

Increasingly precipitate crises that accumulate over time, causing enormous material and psychic damage to millions of people globally, and the responses to those are now definitive of who we are in the process of becoming, how we are "making-with." Strategies of cultural transformation associated with improvisation need to be evaluated in relation to their capacity to effect material change in complex circumstances where crisis occurs. Critical studies in improvisation offers an opportunity for imagining how aesthetic models of cocreation may be linked to other forms of social practice, with full recognition that there are dangers in doing so, not least of which is that improvisatory practices are subject to repurposing in the name of the very hegemonic forces they ostensibly oppose. A further danger is the significant slippage that occurs when one discusses a musical performance in relation to the aftermath of an earthquake—is cocreative action for aesthetic purposes really thinkable in terms of life-and-death scenarios of the struggle to survive? While the initial sense of the Greek word *krisis* meant the "'turning point in a disease' (used as such by Hippocrates and Galen),"[27]

it also carried with it the sense of *krinein*, that is, to judge, to decide, to be capable of informed critical thought. Improvisation figures in this scenario because it is the scene of turning points, the place where possibility collides with reality, the agency of hope with the inertia of despair: both a way out of no way, as Daniel Fischlin, Ajay Heble, and George Lipsitz argue, *and* a site where real-time information sharing, critical thought, and epistemic variation and diversity arise.[28]

To live on we must move on. The diverse case studies found in this book suggest that generative cocreation, however problematic and difficult to achieve, is indeed possible and is happening in multiple sites where improvised music and social practice collide. Envisioning and enacting material, lived alternatives to systemic structures of colonial inequity, racism, economic exploitation, and the radical disregard for equality across gender, ethnicity, and class is no facile challenge. Producing new models of solidarity and resilience out of both collective dialogue and epistemic diversity—that is to say, out of difference made manifest—is at the heart of what occurs in improvisatory musical practices in which the principles of proportionality, solidarity, complementarity, reciprocity, and correspondence are at stake. We emphasize that these are not pure forms inoculated against use in support of hegemony, as the chaotic Trump presidency has shown in all its improvisatory destructive power. How then to evaluate critically collective undertakings and principles that imagine meaningful responses to the array of crises that put the collective meaning of humanity to the question? Some of these principles include notions of hospitality, contingency, synergistic codependency, and obligate mutualism, among others. Improvisation provides one important frame for exploring what these mean and how they operate as a potential model for reorienting structures of thought and behavior that have abandoned these principles, let alone definitive structures of interaction with the biotic realities of the environment out of which humanity arises and without which it will not survive.[29]

Improvisation involves the readiness to remake things out of a paucity of materials, limitations, the crisis of having to risk in the here and now the immediacy of a decision—the responsibility to act creatively and in concert with others to reclaim a public commons under attack. Improvisation is not the answer, then, but a tool to create flexible, site-specific strategies that connect the creative and the critical—that negotiate stricture and unrealized possibility. The regenerative potential in improvisation thrives in opportunity, turning dissolution and degeneration into the potential for refiguration. Improvisation can, like fire pines, reproduce out of crisis and destruction.

As improvisation reproduces itself, it reproduces us as well, for better or for worse. In musical terms, improvisation challenges conformity—it teaches humility and contingency, but it also allows for dissonance and unresolved tension. Improvisation voices contingency, embodies agency, offers a practice to find voice in relation to the otherness that is omnipresently a part of self-definition, but improvisation also always risks an outcome that no one predicted, and even more so an outcome that not everyone agrees on. We hope not to be separated: by walls, by state-imposed constraints, by violence, by daily humiliations that abject and dehumanize the oppressors more so than the victims. Dignity arises from the power of creation embedded in community. But underlying who defines community are discursive regimes frequently based on violence and oppression: Wafaa Hasan, invoking the work of Sara Ahmed, notes how these discursive regimes must be understood before the "we" of collective politics can be made real: "Ahmed's insistence that the 'we' of such a collective politics is what must be worked for is importantly paired with her insistence on the details of how race, gender and other oppressions work to differentiate some others from other-others in particular socio-political contexts. Indeed, the work of dismantling those discursive régimes might comprise the struggle in itself."[30] Dissonance and improvisation go hand in hand. Critique and alternative voicings lie in wait in the next measure of an improvisation.

What might it mean to be faced with our potential end as an improvisation, to improvise an ending, or to end improvising? What might it mean to live in improvised time, in the time of improvisations overtaking crisis? For we struggle as victims; we struggle as perpetrators of conformity and violence; we struggle to free ourselves from imitating failed models of encounter and silencing. We struggle to affirm our empathy and respect for each other, and to re-create these on a daily basis. Improvisation gives us some of the tools for finding ways into this shared language, inspires and potentially models deep human needs to live free of violence, to respect others, to struggle toward a justice that recognizes the ongoing work of being human, to learn from differences, to embrace creative play as a way, *the way*, forward. The challenge is determining how to use these tools—without damaging something, or at least without damaging the wrong thing. And the struggle, going forward, as the essayists in this book collectively examine, is how to understand improvisation as a contested site whose meanings and uses remain to be determined, remain part of an ongoing struggle, a crisis in what it means to be relationally contingent, biotically codependent.

Playing for Keeps is part of a multipart intervention that builds from a call for papers we issued in 2013. Our broader project now includes a special issue of the journal *Critical Studies in Improvisation/Études critiques en improvisation* (vol. 11, nos. 1–2, 2016), this book, and an additional book in progress. All of these volumes push beyond some of the initial cultural and political assumptions animating the ICASP series, as we ask whether some assumptions driving work in critical improvisations to date—and, more specifically, some of our own work—may obscure the complexity of dialogue and action that becomes increasingly evident when one examines improvisational musical practices across a range of geographic and cultural contexts. As such, in concluding remarks to the first publication we produced on the topic, we argued that "musical improvisation is no monoculture, nor is it meant to be a dominant discourse reduced to academic cant. It is predicated on sonic diversity, multiple practices of engaging with aurality, and unexpected convergences that are unpredictable and endlessly contingent. Its specificity arises from differential understandings of what it means in practice and in theory."[31]

In continuing to work on this topic, we asked ourselves, more specifically, whether field-defining interpretative paradigms—largely inspired by the liberatory sonic, intellectual, and political projects of African American improvised musicians and, to a somewhat lesser extent, by the broader terrain of European and US-based experimental music—assumed too narrow an understanding of the work that improvisation does or potentially does. If so, we asked, how might multiply sited investigations of improvisation call into question existing theoretical and political assumptions guiding its study? And how might the development of new theoretical and case-study analyses broaden critical improvisation studies, with its interdisciplinary reach and attention to political context, beyond North American and European sites delimited (largely) by specific forms like free jazz, spontaneous composition, and experimental music? The challenge to critical studies in improvisation generally is to avoid the familiar patterns of academic cant and rhetorical ossification, where universalist assumptions eradicate pertinent differences across diverse improvisatory musical and social practices.

Authors responded in various ways to the call for papers, with quite a few pushing back quite forcefully on ICASP's politically and ethically affirmative investments in improvisation as social practice—a chance for dialogue and learning we welcomed. This group of essays, however, along with a handful of artist-generated pieces we commissioned, is an extension of the ICASP

project that makes clear that the theoretical and pragmatic role of improvisation, both as a social practice and as a musical discourse in relation to the specific circumstances arising in settler-colonial, postcolonial, postapartheid, and postwar societies, has been underexplored, in spite of the fact that improvisation plays such a key role in how people respond to crisis and to asymmetrical structures of power and access to resources. Taken together, the chapters that follow, based on case studies that identify improvisatory practices across a range of global sites, demonstrate that improvisatory responses to such circumstances are indeed multifaceted, determined as they are by the specifics of time and place as well as the range of practices under consideration. People play for keeps individually and collectively by drawing on (and changing) local tradition and traveling forms, onstage and in the classroom, through the shaping of sound-making materials and in the rarefied discourse about them, through meanings generated solely among performers, and through those created by others. How people choose to voice the aftermath, as these case studies show, has a great deal to teach about the connections between improvised forms of musical cocreation and larger solidaric practices in the face of complex social and political challenges.

Opening the collection, then, is sound experimentalist, composer, and reed player Matana Roberts's poem "manifesto." Framed as an improvisation on the preamble of the US Constitution, the piece imagines a more humane nation, defined by an expansively conceived and applied set of principles through which "the ever growing collective mongrel race" might survive the "United States of Hysteric-a," at this moment witnessing the crisis of the Trump presidency and the unleashing of the social and ideological forces that made it possible. Writing as a member of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, whose members' aesthetic and critical practice has long performed and analyzed improvisatory response to crisis as a global and transhistorical project, Roberts sets the stage for a collective project of examining and responding to a variety of aftermaths across the planet. And, importantly, Roberts locates the crisis in America in a misreading of a Constitution that "sums up our values" but fails to recognize that "we are improvised."

Stephanie Vos's "*The Exhibition of Vandalizim*: Improvising Healing, Politics, and Film in South Africa" shows how improvisational practices from the United States (namely, African American free jazz) are often used and transformed in response to localized conditions of crisis. She analyzes a filmed, improvised performance by composer and improviser Zim Ngqawana and his group that responded to the burglary and ransacking of Ngqawana's

Zimology Institute, an educational center dedicated to free improvisation pedagogy. Vos shows how Ngqawana and fellow musicians responded to this invasive act and the broader social environment in South Africa by performing distorted sounds on the instruments that were damaged by a group of vandals. She further theorizes how distorted sounds and images may provide particularly meaningful representations of precarious social situations. She highlights, in light of Ngqawana's own ideas about the same, the ritualistic healing (pace Victor Turner) and political voice (pace Jacques Rancière) that collective improvisation may offer in the face of real or symbolic violence. The outcome may not necessarily be healing in any complete sense but can still provide a glimpse of an alternative social order in the aftermath of destruction.

Mark Lomanno's "The Rigors of Afro/Canarian Jazz: Sounding Peripheral Vision with Severed Tongues" continues the examination of the politics of contemporary improvised music in Africa, although here the denial of the "Africanness" of this music informs the hegemonic structure that improvising musicians work within and against. Lomanno examines recent efforts by musicians from the Canary Islands, an autonomous community of Spain located west of Morocco, to create Afro/Canarian jazz. Such efforts assert an Afro/Canarian identity, and an attendant cultural critique, in the face of a long history of Spanish suppression of Canarian indigenous culture. Along the way, Lomanno argues that interdisciplinary, performance research stances attentive to the multiplicities of musical and social improvisations provide a mechanism for critiquing the conventions of academic disciplinarity.

An interview with Vijay Iyer returns the project to the United States, albeit with attention to issues that play no small part in generating crises elsewhere. Focusing on the collaborative performance/composition *Holding It Down*, Iyer discusses how US veterans'—and, especially, black and brown US veterans'—participation in this project as artists and listeners has helped them work through the traumatic aftermath of their participation in the perpetual wars of the early twenty-first century. Iyer positions the project within a genealogy of improvising artists—some of them veterans—commenting on war. But Iyer also interrogates the term *improvisation*, calling into question "the use of the word *improvisation* to stand in for freedom or liberation," when practices of domination and oppression may also involve improvisatory aspects. Speaking about *Holding It Down*, Iyer notes that the project involved spontaneous improvisations at different levels but also what he calls an "*annealing* process," a congealing of "a lot of [musical

and lyrical] elements in motion" through contemplation and repetition over time. It is a process, he argues, that involves improvisation but also a kind of "*stripping away* [of] improvisation through coordinated collective actions."

Kate Galloway's "Experimental and Improvised Norths: The Sonic Geographies of Tanya Tagaq's Collaborations with Derek Charke and the Kronos Quartet" considers a geographic and cultural context, the Canadian North, that is relatively close to North American metropoles but, given histories of settler colonialism and extreme weather conditions, symbolically distant. Examining experimental Inuit throat singer Tanya Tagaq's collaborative works with Canadian composer Derek Charke and the US ensemble Kronos Quartet, Galloway emphasizes the potential of hybrid, cocreated improvised practices to promote cross-cultural understanding and indigenous survivance in the aftermath of sustained state violence against First Nations peoples. Galloway foregrounds the "performance ecology" of these collaborations as a means of both situating the work as a regionally specific articulation of indigenous modernity and accounting for the range of scripted and unscripted musical and extramusical activities on which the more visible, onstage and on-record improvisations are based. Galloway steers us toward questions of embodiment, which are crucial to her analysis; she draws attention to Tagaq's embodied knowledge of the Northern environment and the ways that her raced and gendered body as instrument "challenges the accepted norms of Indigenous female performance" while engaged in a cocreative process in physical proximity to differently raced and gendered bodies.

In "Nina Simone: CIVIL JAZZ!" illustrator Randy DuBurke offers eight drawings charting Simone's politicization during the early 1960s civil rights movement, culminating with the creation of her song "Mississippi Goddam" in the wake of the white nationalist terrorist bombing of a Birmingham, Alabama, church that killed four young girls and the murder of Medgar Evers, both in 1963. The stunning visual imagery evokes both direct acts of violence and the ever-present threat of violence—both state and vigilante—that haunted and inspired civil rights activists. Although Simone was particularly notable for her explicit political critique and her direct assistance to political organizations, she is but one of many improvising artists active in the 1960s who responded to the ongoing crisis of a society's refusal to extend full citizenship rights to a significant portion of its population. DuBurke, like Roberts, reminds us of this disgraceful element of US history that birthed an improvisatory movement that negotiated the present and imagined a better future.

Rana El Kadi's "Free Improvised Music in Postwar Beirut: Differential Sounds, Intersectarian Collaborations, and Critical Collective Memory"

takes the discussion to the contemporary Middle East and a range of issues related to recent (and lingering) postcolonial and postwar violence. She considers the recent development of the free improvisation scene in Beirut, Lebanon, arguing that it has provided a unique vehicle for people to negotiate sectarian differences in this city torn by ethnic and religious factionalism and civil war. With particular focus on the work of Mazen Kerbaj, Sharif Sehnaoui, and Raed Yassin, El Kadi shows how this putatively "culturally neutral musical practice" with roots in the United States and Europe takes on particular cultural and political resonances in Lebanon. El Kadi's case study examines both the localized power of deployments of free improvisational forms drawn from elsewhere and the specific work done when such styles are fused with local sonic expressions. One such project, which had musicians improvising alongside a "collage" made of recorded sounds—artillery, political speeches, news broadcasts, music, and so on—from the era of the Lebanese Civil War, interrogates the "collective amnesia" about the conflict, used by some to absolve themselves of responsibility for it. El Kadi's work shows how improvised music in postwar Beirut models a civil society in which the striving toward open dialogue allows for working through conflict cocreatively.

Darci Sprengel's "Street Concerts and Sexual Harassment in Post-Mubarak Egypt: *Ṭarab* as Affective Politics" similarly looks at improvisation's role in modeling alternative social relations but foregrounds the site-specific transformation of local musical practices rather than the rearticulation of those imported from elsewhere. Sprengel explores the Mini Mobile Concerts project that came together after the 2011 revolution in Egypt. These concerts brought into the street *ṭarab*, a musically induced ecstasy created through interactions among performers and audience, which has usually been restricted to art-music contexts. Participants in this project sought to create an alternative public culture outside of the control of state authority and pursued this goal through this hybrid, embodied, affective practice rather than the kinds of direct political interventions that were soon stymied in the postuprising period. Intervening in the street, however, required this group, with significant female membership, to reconfigure the context of popular music performance to enable women in the group to inhabit the public sphere, free of sexual harassment. By thus enacting a reconfiguration of ethical relationships among its citizens in the arena of gender relations, the Mini Mobile Concerts fulfilled some of the goals of the 2011 uprising in the face of its ostensible failure.

An interview with Reem Abdul Hadi and Odeh Turjman, along with an introductory essay by Daniel Fischlin, addresses how the West Bank–based

Al-Mada Association for Arts-Based Community Development responds to the crisis of potential erasure—of land, of language, of equal rights, of mobility, and so forth—that besets Palestinians in the Occupied Territories. This erasure is linked to what Saree Makdisi describes as "a broad complex of Israeli policies that has come to define the rhythm and tempo of life for Palestinians, not only in the occupied territories but inside Israel itself."[32] The arts-based community work of Al-Mada seeks to redefine the rhythm and tempo of life in the refugee camps to be found throughout the Occupied Territories, demonstrating how a range of improvised small acts—among professional musicians and nonmusicians, in interactions of organizers and bureaucratic officials, help people, especially young people, survive settler-colonial occupation and militarized violence and the deep, painful psychological traumas that result.

Moshe Morad's "*Silsulim* (Improvised 'Curls') in the Vocal Performance of Israeli Popular Music: Identity, Power, and Politics" focuses on how elements of musical improvisation provide a means of negotiating difference on the other side of the militarized border—that is, among Jewish citizens of Israel. Morad shows how popular *mizraḥit*/*yam-tichonit* music, especially through its partially improvised vocal elements, has been coded vis-à-vis a series of binaries—Arab/Israeli, black/white, Ashkenazi/Sephardi—as it has gained (partial) acceptance in Israeli society. While practitioners, critics, and fans debated its merits, the music became a touchstone for conversations about the place of Jews from the Muslim world in Israeli society as well as a vehicle for Sephardic peoples' struggles against Ashkenazi cultural and social hegemony. The terrain is complicated. Morad examines the ways that prejudices against *mizraḥit*/*yam-tichonit* music (and Sephardic people more generally) stem in part from anti-Arab sentiment, even as many Sephardim support right-wing politicians who espouse similar views. Yet, although it has not been realized, *silsulim*'s popularity among Palestinians in the Occupied Territories suggests that this music possesses some potential to play a bridge-building function in the Palestinian-Israeli political context.

Kevin Fellezs's "Three Moments in *Kī Hōʻalu* (Hawaiian Slack Key Guitar): Improvising as a *Kanaka Maoli* (Native Hawaiian) Adaptive Strategy" attends to improvised performances of indigeneity that are rooted in traditional musical practices (albeit always-already hybridized), shaped by a specific physical environment, and in response to settler colonialism in Hawaii. Yet Fellezs focuses less on improvisation in specific performances than on the improvisatory strategies indigenous musicians use when developing their practice offstage: that is, when appropriating the guitar, developing pedagogical prac-

tices, "(re)inventing" their indigenous tradition musically and discursively, and negotiating the music industry as both economic actors and culture bearers. Critical to this strategic practice, he suggests, has been a willingness to engage and accommodate "the unexpected." This orientation helps us see that familiar models of improvisational liberation are not so easily applied in some contexts and that those improvised practices that are indigenous to these contexts—"patient yet active listening," "the creative (re)use of materials," and so on—enable the music and the people who perform it to persevere.

Finally, Sara Ramshaw and Paul Stapleton's "From Prepeace to Postconflict: The Ethics of (Non)Listening and Cocreation in a Divided Society" emphasizes the interface of external influence and local conditions in the production of another island-bound improvisational scene. Drawing significantly on the analyses of local musician-theorists, they chart the development of the free improvisation scene in Northern Ireland over the past several decades. Like others in this volume, they foreground the question of how improvisation might model future sociability, by emphasizing a "hospitable (non)listening to others" that enables cocreation in the sphere of performance without erasing difference. Ultimately, they argue, this culturally specific form of cocreation might model social interactions that productively engage and work through lingering divisions and conflicts in Northern Ireland.

Coda: The Integrity of Difference

In a packed, dark room in a community art space called Silence in the city of Guelph, Ontario, Thomas King sings a round dance while beating a traditional drum. Behind him a group of improvisers sit ready to respond to his call. Every time he sings the song it is the same—yet different. On this night, he is singing it for the second time in the performance, and his voice carries into the darkness and uncertain future a powerful message of resilience and strength. The song is part of a performance entitled *When You Were Gone* that brings together traditional First Nations song and rhythm, King's unpublished poetry, and improvised and composed responses to both in a structure created by Canadian composer and instrumentalist Rebecca Hennessey. The improvisers listen intently and join voices with King's powerful invocation of renewal, adaptation, healing, cultural identity, and social connection—all key symbolic figurations of the round dance. At his invitation the improvisers play with the musical motifs he has unleashed, and a new sound arises, inviting new forms of correspondence and dialogue.

Nothing less than survival is at stake. The sound of a voice singing its own agency in the face of uncompromising histories of oppression and racism is a powerful reminder of what it means to play for keeps, to erase erasure. One of the composition-improvisations in the suite takes King's words from a short poem called "Treaty":

> Nothing passes for favour here,
> all talk is razor-toothed.
>
> Take nothing from the hand that offers
> friendship.
>
> In this place
> all promises are bruises
> in good suits.[33]

The lines resonate with an apocalyptic message from another portion of the suite, "We Will Destroy It All," that addresses betrayal by a culture predicated on destruction of aboriginal peoples and the land that is ineluctably tied to their being: "As for the garden, Adam after the fall, make no mistake he said, we will destroy it all."

In the contexts of the findings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2012) about the brutal aftermaths of the residential school system that caused such damage to multiple generations of aboriginal peoples, King identifies the crises of failed encounter, and its aftermath, as ongoing. Remember that in 1883 the public works minister of Canada, Hector Langevin, a key player along with Nicholas Flood Davin in the construction of the residential school system that played a brutally critical role in the attack on indigenous cultures in Canada—and incidentally someone whose name was attached (until 2017) to the Langevin Block, where the Privy Council and the executive branch of the Canadian government were until very recently located—stated, "In order to educate the [First Nations] children properly we must separate them from their families. Some people may say that this is hard but if we want to civilize them we must do that."[34] Truth and reconciliation may be in the air, but powerful symbols of the ongoing alignment between state power and systemic injustice remain—as they do in the Langevin Block.[35] The truth of this reconciliation is that it has a long way to go before the historical landscape is sufficiently refigured in ways that respect the realities of meaningful reconciliation. The sustained crises of Canada's aboriginal peoples have included, as Langevin's racist as-

sumptions reveal, a full-on attack on the most vulnerable members of their communities, which in turn produced incalculable multigenerational suffering and abuse.

When You Were Gone, a profound reflection on such erasures and disappearances, is also emblematic of resilience and new forms of political and aesthetic solidarity that arise when peoples provoked by utterly failed models of encounter with difference come together seeking new solutions, new ways to voice opposition to circumstances that produce systematized oppression, and alternative visions of what it means to find a grounded and shared humanity that improvises new iterations of solidarity and community.

Might such sites of improvisatory agency come to represent a response to the crises that arise from destroyer culture? Might they inspire us to renewed forms of generative agency in which reciprocity, contingency, hospitality, and respect for the integrity of difference thrive? As the essays in the volume tell us, the future is uncertain, but, at least for the moment, there is one in which improvisatory practices are alive with potential.

NOTES

1 King, *Inconvenient Indian*, x.
2 Hancock and Shorter, "Open Letter."
3 Hancock and Shorter, "Open Letter."
4 Smith, *Notes (8 Pieces)*, 4.
5 "Humming in the background of all life—and familiar and alien as breathing—is improvisation. Even the most regulated life has its perpetual micro-incidents of improvisation, periodically spiked by volcanic eruptions of haphazard behavior that release pressure. Settled situations are continually disrupted by crises both grave and petty; life, like improvised music, is a disturbing conflict between predictability and contingency." Toop, *Into the Maelstrom*, 1.
6 DeFrantz, "Identifying the Endgame," 13.
7 We are grateful to Luis D'Artagnan, a Mexican volunteer who assisted in the 2017 reconstruction efforts, for sharing this information.
8 Luis D'Artagnan, email message to author, October 20, 2017.
9 Crabapple, "Puerto Rico's DIY Disaster Relief."
10 Macintyre, "How Art Is Blooming."
11 Sajnani, "Improvisation and Art-Based Research," 83.
12 Sajnani, "Improvisation and Art-Based Research," 80.
13 Sajnani, "Improvisation and Art-Based Research," 83.
14 Du Bois, *Negro*, 138.
15 Du Bois, "Sorrow Songs," 536–38.
16 Du Bois, "Sorrow Songs," 538.

17 Denning, *Noise Uprising*, 137.
18 Denning, *Noise Uprising*, 167.
19 Denning, *Noise Uprising*, 141–42.
20 Denning, *Noise Uprising*, 167–68.
21 Denning, *Noise Uprising*, 206.
22 See, among others, Daniel Fischlin, Ajay Heble, and George Lipsitz's work on civil rights and improvisation in *The Fierce Urgency of Now: Improvisation, Rights, and the Ethics of Cocreation*, as well as Eric Porter's work on African American music and activism in *What Is This Thing Called Jazz? African American Musicians as Artists, Critics, and Activists*.
23 Denning, *Noise Uprising*, 233.
24 We have relied on three works by Dussel: *Ethics of Liberation in the Age of Globalization and Exclusion*; "¿Por qué la filosofía?"; and his preface to *Beyond Philosophy: Ethics, History, Marxism, and Liberation Theology*.
25 Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 58.
26 Grosfoguel, "Wallerstein's Utopistics," 129.
27 See the etymology of "crisis" in the *Online Etymology Dictionary*, http://www.etymonline.com/word/crisis.
28 Fischlin, Heble, and Lipsitz, *Fierce Urgency of Now*, 55.
29 For a discussion of the vexed notions of what "human being" means, see Fischlin and Nandorfy, *Eduardo Galeano*, 107–16. "The OED definition [of *human*] does little to address the actual etymology of the word 'human,' which derives from Old Latin '*hemo* (whence *nemo*, nobody),' meaning the '*earthy* one, the *earth*-born' from, L *humus*, earth (soil, ground). . . . In this etymology . . . a more forthright definition of human is explicit: *the earth-born nobody*" (113).
30 Hasan, "Orientalist Feminism," 50.
31 Fischlin and Porter, "Improvisation and Global Sites of Difference," n.p.
32 Makdisi, "Israel's Policy of Erasure."
33 This unpublished poem is used with the permission of the author.
34 Epigraph to *Canada, Aboriginal Peoples, and Residential Schools: They Came for the Children*, by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.
35 On June 21, 2017, National Aboriginal Day in Canada, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced that the Langevin Block would be renamed the Office of the Prime Minister and Privy Council. Coincident with the announcement was the decision to rename National Aboriginal Day as National Indigenous Peoples Day.

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