PRELUDE

"THE FIERCE URGENCY OF NOW"

Improvisation, Rights, and the Ethics of Cocreation

A book linking improvisation with rights of any kind—civil, human, environmental—may seem like an improbable endeavor, no more plausible than a book exploring the connections between, say, strawberries and electromagnetic plating. Improvisation and rights seem to belong to completely incommensurable areas of human endeavor. The term *improvisation* connotes artistic activities and practices that are spontaneous, personal, local, immediate, expressive, ephemeral, and even accidental. *Rights*, by contrast, refers to formal standards of acceptable human conduct, rules that are permanent, impersonal, universal, abstract, inflexible, and monumental. Yet in this book, we follow the lead of the artists and activists we study to move strategically across these seemingly impermeable categorical divides. We believe not only that improvisation and rights can be connected but also that they must be connected, that improvisation is at its heart a democratic, humane, and emancipatory practice, and that securing rights of all sorts requires people to hone their capacities to act in the world, capacities that flow from improvisation.

Both rights and improvisation call into being what we call an ethics of cocreation, an understanding that all things are interconnected cocreatively. The permutations of interconnection that bind people together enable a multitude of potential practices that can give rise to new lived, embodied, material realties. Those cocreated realities, insofar as they may be said to possess, invoke, or embody an ethic, emerge from the "relational contingencies" that arise out of being.[1] Improvisation is an important social, musical, and ethical practice for understanding and generating the potential forms of cocreation—deeply relational, profoundly

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/596635/9780822378358-xi.pdf by guest on 18 September 2024

contingent—without which our collective relation to each other and to all things would be unthinkable.

Through our shared work as researchers and coinvestigators with the international Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice (ICASP) initiative headquartered at the University of Guelph, we have come to conceive of musical improvisation as a generative yet largely unexamined model for political, cultural, and ethical dialogue and action. Improvisation for us is more than an artistic conceit, more than the spontaneous creation of notes by musicians or words and gestures by actors. In its most fully realized forms, improvisation is the creation and development of new, unexpected, and productive cocreative relations among people. It teaches us to make "a way" out of "no way" by cultivating the capacity to discern hidden elements of possibility, hope, and promise in even the most discouraging circumstances. Improvisers work with the tools they have in the arenas that are open to them, in order to imbue the world with the possibility of making right things happen. Without a written score or script, improvisers envision and enact something new together, and enrich their experience in the world by acting upon it and changing it, in the process creating things that would not have otherwise come into existence.

Our collaborative writing process for this book might itself be seen as part of an effort to model our own ethics of cocreation, to use a cowriting-as-inquiry approach to illuminate unexpected themes and exciting new areas of inquiry. Driven by a set of principles that are akin to those we associate with much of the music we discuss in this book—an openness to unexpected outcomes, to developing themes or ideas that might not have been predicted on the basis of any one participant's starting point, a willingness to surrender our (in this case, written) contributions to one another as we engage in the process—we've used collaborative authorship not only to see beyond the assumptions and perspectives associated with our own home disciplines, but, in the process, and via a consultative and consensual approach taken in an environment of mutual respect and trust, to allow new methodological paradigms to emerge as well, in short, to create something that would not have otherwise been possible.

In a world filled with paths we can or must take, improvisation compels us to think about the paths we can make. It requires an open attitude toward other people as well as a creative disposition toward art. Improvisation is a manner of speaking that requires listening, a collective con-

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/596635/9780822378358-xi.pdf by guest on 18 September 2024

versation that turns great risks into splendid rewards. By definition, it invokes collective interchange that is potentially transformative. Improvisation turns opposites into dialectical syntheses. It balances competing claims and interests. Improvisers need to counterpoise imagination with discipline, ego with empathy, and self-assertion with self-effacement. Improvisation references enduring continuities from the past while calling new collectivities into being in the present. It situates itself at the crossroads of historical specificity and sonic experimentation. It calls into being an experimental, alternative community in which individualism does not have to degenerate into selfishness and where collectivity does not have to dissolve into conformity. Indeed, improvising jazz artists "have discursively transcoded the hard facts of slavery, migration, industrialization, and urbanization in U.S. history into aesthetically rich and complex creations. Their harmonious balance between individual solos and collective improvisation provides a metaphorical solution to one of the recurrent dilemmas of social life in the United States: how to encourage individuality without selfishness and how to encourage collective consciousness without totalitarianism" (Lipsitz, *Footsteps* 91). In the context of the arguments in this book, this is more than a metaphorical solution: it is an embodiment of the very lived agency that improvisation engenders in its most achieved forms, especially in terms of the ethics of cocreation.

The qualities that improvisation cultivates have never been needed more than they are now. In selecting *The Fierce Urgency of Now* as the title of this book, we emphasize that the "now" in which we live is no ordinary time. We write this book in the midst of a global rights emergency, at a time where calculated cruelty and brutality seem to have the upper hand everywhere. We live in a world that seems to be falling apart. The people who control corporations and governments cannot fix the things they have broken. They cannot repair the terrible damage that their policies have inflicted on people and the planet. The cumulative consequences of neoliberalism entail the organized abandonment of entire populations. They have generated seemingly endless cycles of war, worsening economic inequalities, and interrelated environmental catastrophes. The evisceration of the social wage, practices of mass incarceration, and the transformation of public institutions and spaces into sites for private investment and speculation spread misery everywhere. In the educational institutions where we work, relentless pressures toward vocationalization, virtualization, and fiscalization corrupt the learning environment,

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/596635/9780822378358-xi.pdf by guest on 18 September 2024

undermine the quality of teaching and research, and imperil the development of the kinds of critical, creative, and contemplative thinking on which democracy depends (Quinn, *Learning* 17).

Yet as Naomi Klein and others have demonstrated, for neoliberal elites, nothing succeeds like failure. Each catastrophic failure becomes further justification for the implementation of even more draconian measures. A succession of moral panics about terrorism, immigration, and the alleged nonnormative behaviors of aggrieved groups become justifications for the systematic violations of rights that sacrifice core rights principles and create deep-seated, pathological structures of response to difference, structures based on fear. Leaders of advanced industrialized nations have abandoned centuries' old principles of habeas corpus and due process. They have given official approval to waterboarding and other forms of torture for criminal suspects. Armed combatants, soldiers, paramilitaries, and hired mercenaries around the world target civilian populations for destruction. The media pay more attention to the ravings of celebrities than to the scandalous, morally bankrupt behavior of stockbrokers and market-makers. Multinational corporations and international agencies promote starvation by privatizing the agricultural commons. Masculinist power around the globe denies reproductive rights to women and compels women and children to remain in abusive, disempowered relationships.

No one will solve these problems for us. We have to learn to solve them ourselves. The terrible lack of engaged democracy in our society pressures us constantly to think of ourselves in passive terms, as spectators rather than actors, as consumers rather than producers. The reigning structures of feeling of our time encourage us to long for rescue, to believe that our problems can be solved for us by some charismatic politician or some new technology or some underlying demographic or social transformation.

But, in truth, no one can do for us what we must do for ourselves. As the U.S. civil-rights and labor-rights activist A. Philip Randolph used to say, too many of us are relying on a "wishbone" when what we really need is some backbone. Things will not get better unless we make them better. We believe that cultivating the capacity for action, a capacity inculcated by improvisation, and channeling it toward meaningful, embodied rights outcomes is one of the ways we can make things better.

Improvisation provides important training for life. In a world where our cultural practices are often more democratic than our political institutions, improvisation can serve as a key crucible for human rights

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/596635/9780822378358-xi.pdf by guest on 18 September 2024

activism. Improvisation promotes personal confidence and makes people accustomed to taking action, to activating their agency publicly and in relation to others. Improvisers have to be aware of the needs of others. They must recognize problems rapidly and invent solutions immediately: they must do so here and now, or, as we pun later in the book, hear and now. They need to prepare themselves for the inevitable conflicts, ruptures, obstacles, and disappointments that occur in human interactions, yet remain committed to working things through with others and solving problems together. Improvisation can cultivate dispositions, attitudes, and traits with enormous applicability to rights struggles of various sorts. But improvisation is not merely an artistic practice that can be adapted for the purposes of social justice. As example after example in this book reveals, the kind of improvisation we champion depends on breaking down distinctions between life and art, to cultivate a view of art as a practice firmly implanted in and connected to the political and social life of communities. "The improviser is at the focal point of multi-directional energies that occur at the interstices of creative potential. These energies are both embodied in the creative gestures that make the music occur and in the reception gestures that continue to make meaning of that music once it has been played" (Fischlin, "Wild Notes . . . Improvisioning"). Improvised musicking is a critical form of agency, of embodied potential that is inseparable from other social practices that call upon us to be purposeful agents of our cocreated, lived reality.

Without serious shared purpose and collective responsibility, expressive culture runs the risk of becoming little more than a trivial form of self-indulgence. Without firm grounding in and accountability to the life and death issues of human dignity and decency central to rights discourses, improvisation surrenders its epistemological power and squanders its moral potential. Improvisation is not merely an artistic form potentially useful to civil-rights activism, but is also an artistic, political, social, and moral practice that cannot succeed on its own terms unless it does meaningful work in the world. As Sun Ra repeatedly warned his musicians: "Be careful what you play . . . every note every beat, be aware that it comes back to you" (qtd. in Szwed 236).

Improvisation teaches people to enact the possibilities they envision. It emerges from communities whose members have been compelled to look beyond surface appearances, to imagine how what "can be" lies hidden inside "what is." Slaves in the United States who were given star-

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/596635/9780822378358-xi.pdf by guest on 18 September 2024

vation rations discovered ways to cook the fatback and intestines of pigs, discarded as garbage by slave owners, and mix them with collard greens to create nutritionally balanced meals. Colonial subjects in Trinidad who were forced to let multinational mineral-extraction companies loot their national resources took discarded metal oil canisters and transformed them into musical instruments perfectly suited for blending Western tonal, functional harmony with Afrodiasporic polyrhythms. Native Americans participating in powwow ceremonies in Minnesota turned poison into medicine by taking discarded Copenhagen tobacco tins and deploying them as ornaments on "jingle dresses" worn in healing ceremonies. Adaptability, improvisation, and invention are the weapons of the weak.

In music, improvisation creates new kinds of art and new kinds of artists. In his important study of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), George Lewis shows how the seemingly simple act of breaking with dominant ideas of instrumentation and orchestration opened up new possibilities, how playing triangles and tuned garbage cans created new sonic inventions, how encouraging musicians to play more than one instrument produced a wider range of orchestrations and enabled new multiplicities of timbre that gave the group a sound that "exceeded the sum of its parts" (*Power* 362). Unconventional orchestration and instrumentation interrupted old habits and conventions, forced musicians out of comfort zones, and compelled them to discover things about themselves and their music they did not know they knew. This made them better improvisers, for as Lewis explains in a felicitous phrase, "Chance favors the prepared mind" (*Power* 364). Changes in instrumentation and orchestration also encourage new attitudes about the relationships between music and other forms of expressive culture. The AACM had affiliations with other arts groups, including the Organization of Black American Culture, which created a twenty-by-sixty-foot mural about black heroism on the wall of a Chicago tavern. The painting of the wall became an arts event in itself as activists, tourists, and artists flocked to see the mural evolve. Musicians, poets, and dancers came to the site to inspire the painters. Once completed, the mural became known as the Wall of Respect, a site for political rallies and meetings as well as an inspiration for similar projects in other cities.

In Los Angeles, Horace Tapscott's Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra sometimes featured five bass players and four drummers. The experimental

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/596635/9780822378358-xi.pdf by guest on 18 September 2024

nature of the ensemble promoted new arts collaborations as well as new sonic imaginings. Tapscott later recalled in his oral history memoir, "After we had developed a piece of music, somebody would create a dance to it or we'd have some words or some poems written for the tune. Everyone had a shot at creating something in this particular composition. A poet might write a beautiful line for a certain spot in the composition and we'd add it. A dancer might develop a nice step for it and we'd utilize that in presenting the tune. We'd try to present all faces of the composition" (*Songs of the Unsung* 99).

The active and open stance toward art, encouraged by improvisation, drew from and contributed to a broader sense of self-activity in the world. Tapscott's group, in Los Angeles, and the Black Artists' Group (BAG), in St. Louis, did especially important work using art as a vehicle for expanding the sphere of politics. Tapscott made an album with Elaine Brown that featured songs central to the organizing activities of the Black Panther Party. He played benefit concerts for political prisoners and draft resisters. The Black Artists' Group assisted rent strikers in public housing projects in St Louis. The saxophone player and BAG cofounder Julius Hemphill claimed that the BAG's music was "a sounding board for social issues," noting that "unsatisfactory conditions" affect everything in a person's life and therefore have to affect the music too (qtd. in Lipsitz, *Footsteps* 117).

In Chicago, John Shenoy Jackson drew on personal and collective traditions to do important work with the AACM as an administrator, organizer, and publicist. Born in 1923 in Hot Springs, Arkansas, Jackson was raised by Garveyite parents who believed that their own actions had meaning for other black people around the world. "My father didn't wear diamonds," Jackson once told an interviewer, "because he knew if he wore a diamond some Black family was suffering in Capetown" (qtd. in Lewis, *Power* 132). Jackson came to music late in life, first picking up the trumpet as a man of forty, when he purchased instruments for his sons to play. Yet he immersed himself in the challenges of the instrument, noting at one point, "I firmly believe if I'd started when I was a child I'd be one of the giants in the field" (qtd. in Lewis, *Power* 133). Jackson had no intention of becoming a professional musician, however. Instead, he used administrative talents he had accumulated in the military and in social services to organize and deploy the work of others.

Just as improvisation needs a connection to basic rights and attendant struggles for social justice, rights activism desperately needs a more fully

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/596635/9780822378358-xi.pdf by guest on 18 September 2024

realized sense of the importance of culture in promoting mutual respect and collective responsibility. Civil rights cannot be produced merely by endless recitations of rules for good conduct. Civil rights require active constituencies capable of deciding fit standards of human conduct through democratic deliberations, debates, and decision making. Yet as we argue in chapter 1 of this book, the prevailing Western understanding of "human" rights as the personal possessions of individual rights-bearing subjects may itself be a constraint on more expansive notions of rights: human rights in this sense is a parochial construct emanating from the history of Europe, which now functions falsely as a universal norm. This formulation defines human rights in a negative sense through a series of specific prohibitions against practices by nation-states. It is, of course, important to ban torture and genocide, to guarantee free movement and free speech, to protect the religious and cultural rights of minorities, and to promote elections—among many other things. But rather than augmenting the actual agency, dignity, and decency of humans, these prohibitions too often simply serve the self-interests of power, alerting governments and corporations to the minimum standards they must maintain to avoid culpability as violators of human rights. They prohibit torture, but allow starvation wages. They require elections, but do not guarantee people meaningful access to decision-making processes. They ban genocide, but allow companies to concentrate toxic waste hazards in minority communities, to patent seeds and privatize water supplies in a world where people are dying of hunger and thirst. Capital is free to move across borders, but workers may not. As the human rights scholar Catherine Albisa maintains, "To be free only to suffer deprivation and exclusion is no kind of freedom at all. Freedom inherently includes the ability to exercise choices, and that ability is fully dependent on a protective, effective, and rational social infrastructure" (173). The ability to exercise choices also depends on mutual recognition and responsibility, on cultural inclusion and belonging. Without concrete, self-active constituencies deciding democratically the contours of acceptable human conduct, human rights can become a tool of capital's desires for predictability, stability, and security, a discourse that regulates human suffering rather than prevents it. Just as improvisation needs to speak to human rights issues, human rights discourse needs to promote the culture of collective responsibility, dispersed authority, and self-active democracy embedded in improvisation as a social and musical practice.

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/596635/9780822378358-xi.pdf by guest on 18 September 2024

In this book, we conflate categories in order to study improvisation and rights in concert. In the process, we go against the grain of centuries of academic and popular knowledge, which have taught us to create bounded categories and to honor the borders that divide them. Music and politics are studied in separate departments in universities. Books about these subjects are placed in different sections of bookstores and on different floors of libraries. Even inside these disciplines, the musicologists who study improvisation are generally divided from those who study formal composition, notation, and transcription, while the social scientists and legal scholars who examine human rights rarely become knowledgeable about performance and expressive culture. There is, of course, a certain utility to this division of labor; specialization often produces depth and complexity. Yet outside and beyond classrooms, course syllabi, libraries, and bookstores, improvisation and rights struggles inhabit the same world. Their fates are linked in ways that are hidden when we relegate them to separate realms and categories. Duke Ellington repeatedly warned that fidelity to prefabricated categories inhibited understanding. "The category is a Grand Canyon of echoes," Ellington explained. "Somebody utters an obscenity and you hear it keep bouncing back a million times (38). Even worse, in Ellington's opinion, categories exaggerate differences and prevent us from seeing similarities. "In order to have a category," Ellington argued, "one must build a wall, or two, or more" (360). The practical work of achieving meaningful outcomes for social justice requires us to tear down walls, to cross boundaries, and to see how the categories that contain and constrain us might be turned into vehicles for liberation. This is not a simple matter of rejecting categories, but of finding the right tools for the right jobs.

Many of the categories that we inherit, that build walls artificially and unnecessarily, do not serve our interests. When we learn to think about culture and politics as discrete and mutually exclusive spheres of existence, we neglect the political work performed by culture and ignore the inescapably cultural dimensions of political mobilizations and identities. Yet academic disciplinary boundaries encourage musicologists and political theorists to inhabit separate spaces. People working inside disciplinary categories do not always inhabit fully the identities by which they are hailed, but, over time, socially constructed separations like the ones dividing music from politics come to seem natural, necessary, and inevitable.

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/596635/9780822378358-xi.pdf by guest on 18 September 2024

This book, then, is written out of the space of what Boaventura de Sousa Santos, the sociologist and rights scholar, calls the ecology of knowledges, in which "the logic of the monoculture of scientific knowledge and rigor, must be confronted with the identification of other knowledges and criteria of rigor that operate credibly in social practices pronounced nonexistent" ("A Critique" 168). De Sousa Santos has theorized the "abyssal line" that divides dominant structures of sanctioned thought from other ways of viewing the world.[2] The abyssal line is an adjunct to hegemony. The line creates profoundly dysfunctional effects in the ecology of knowledges by reinforcing monocultural spaces that exclude forms of knowing that exist beyond the abyssal line. Separating the globe into First and Third World, or developed and underdeveloped nations, is one aspect of this abyssal line, whose specious and value-laden worldview is severely put to the test when one substitutes for Third the term *majoritarian,* or *overdeveloped* for developed. In such a frame, the primacy of the First World is undone by understanding that it is, in fact, in the global minority. Likewise, construing the space of the overdeveloped challenges how the developed is privileged over the underdeveloped. Thinking beyond the abyssal line is profoundly tied to the capacity to integrate difference into one's scheme of things. Other ways of knowing, other ways of being, other ways of coming to knowledge generate a richer ecology of knowledges. Moreover, in accepting this, there is a profound tie to social justice and rights issues, whose equitable outcomes often are unthinkable without precisely this sort of capacity to cross over the abyssal line, to integrate difference and other ways of knowing into a more expansive sense of what knowledge means. In many ways improvisation and even alternative concepts of rights remain beyond the abyssal line or have been set to the margins of ossified epistemological structures. They present potentially radical, oppositional, and critical forms of knowing that challenge us to imagine a much broader worldview beyond the abyssal line.

This sort of thinking is precisely that described by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in his Massey Lecture "Conscience for Change," delivered in November 1967 on CBC Radio, just six months before his assassination on April 4, 1968. There King takes great pains to point out how "difficult it is to exaggerate *the creative contribution of young Negroes* [to the spirit of resistance inherent in the civil rights movement]. They took non-violent resistance, first employed in Montgomery, Alabama, in mass dimensions, and developed original forms of application—sit-ins, freedom rides, and

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/596635/9780822378358-xi.pdf by guest on 18 September 2024

wade-ins" (195; emphasis added). But King saw these strategies as resonant within an even wider context: "The Negro freedom movement would have been historic and worthy even if it had only served the cause of civil rights. But its laurels are greater because it stimulated a broader social movement that elevated the moral level of the nation" (196). Worth noting in King's analysis is the creative power of the freedom movement insofar as it came from the application of a knowledge drawn from across the abyssal line. Young African Americans were able to deploy creative strategies that not only gathered force in the localized civil-rights contexts of the United States but that led to wider national and global impacts as well. The resistant strategies born of African American youth culture and its affiliation with other global sites of resistance (think of Gandhi's use of ahimsa to achieve the independence of India from British imperial culture) located themselves in an expansive notion of the ecology of knowledges. In this instance, rights, resistance, and creativity located in a specific cultural moment came to produce one of the most notable social movements in the twentieth century's struggle with dominant culture. The silo mentality of academic disciplines, then, which resists or prohibits thinking of music as a form of social practice with wider implications and that imagines rights struggles as being disaffiliated from creative forms of expression, is something we challenge throughout this book.

We conceive of things differently. We see politics as cultural and culture as political. In our view there will not be better works of art unless we build a better society, but we cannot build a better society unless works of art expand our imaginations and our aspirations. We work in the tradition of C. L. R. James, who argued, "A revolution is first and foremost a movement from the old to the new, and needs above all new words, new verse, new passwords—all the symbols in which ideas and feelings are made tangible" (qtd. in Ransby 374). In this book, we explore music and politics as mutually constitutive elements in our shared social life. To do this, we need to challenge prevailing categories, rethink fundamental questions about the bounded confines of space and the linear progressions of time. Of course, we are grateful for all good work and we respect all that we have learned from previous paradigms. Scholars across the disciplines have often done honorable and generative work by studying the particularities of place and the meanings of change over time. Ethnomusicologists, for example, have drawn skillfully on principled commitments to understanding the rich relations that connect cultures to par-

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/596635/9780822378358-xi.pdf by guest on 18 September 2024

ticular places. At its best, ethnomusicology has been a site of generative thinking about the dynamics of difference. In the face of scholarly and civic ideologies that fear difference and promote uniformity, ethnomusicology teaches that universality is rich with particulars, that contingencies of time and place matter, that we can learn as much from the things that divide us as from the things that unite us. Ethnomusicology helps us see which differences make a difference.

What ethnomusicology does for place, social history does for time. Accurately locating our inquiries about culture inside the long arc of history, with its cumulative legacy of events, ideas, and aspirations, helps us see that part of what things are in the present is how they came to be in the past. Archives of the past expand the discursive spaces of the present, populating them with perspectives no longer accessible from the common-sense and quotidian experiences of everyday life. Social history promotes social projects by enabling us to perceive what the literary scholar Ramón Saldívar calls “the present signs of the incompletion of the past” (189).

Yesterday’s victories, however, can become today’s problems. In our time, the assumptions about the isomorphism of culture and place that have been central to the traditional practices of scholarship in the social sciences and the humanities are complicated by mass migrations and new media forms that transmit ideas, images, and sounds across the globe, rapidly and even instantaneously. The focus on linear temporalities and grand narratives endemic to cultural history promotes the perception that history is something that happens to people, not something they create. It promotes passivity and obscures agency. The monumental arc of linear history can persuade people to believe that short-term problems are insignificant because they always get resolved in the long run by long-term solutions, an optimism that is difficult to support responsibly in the face of today’s growing environmental, economic, and educational catastrophes.

The Fierce Urgency of Now examines new spatial and temporal imaginaries of politics and culture. Improvisation serves as a focal point in our effort because it can create performance spaces that transform physical places. It can produce performance times that interrupt and redirect historical times. The scholarly categories favored by disciplinary knowledge teach us that there is a time and a place for everything—that people need to be on time and to stay in their place. That is exactly the kind of thinking that improvisation at its best can help us overcome.

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/596635/9780822378358-xi.pdf by guest on 18 September 2024

Improvisation has a lively and well-chronicled history as a practice prevalent in music, theater, dance, poetry, performance art, and even sculpture all around the world. Through our shared work with the Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice project, we have learned that improvisation is a social practice that goes beyond the arts, that physicians, teachers, community organizers, and athletes also improvise. In the ICASP project, and in this book, we explore musical improvisation as a model for social change. Our examples generally focus on the links between the rich traditions of Afrodiasporic improvisation and the dynamic forms of social critique and social-movement mobilization attendant to them. Much of the music that we discuss gets classified as jazz in generic discourses, but we view the vital forms of improvisation that emerged among jazz musicians in the post–Second World War period as nodes in a network that spans generations and encompasses musics known by other names, including blues, ragtime, swing, gospel, rhythm 'n' blues, and hip-hop. For us, ragtime from the 1890s is a form of jazz, even though the term jazz was not used in print as a generic marker until the 1910s; blues forms and sensibilities pervade jazz and gospel compositions and performances; chords associated with jazz (like augmented ninths) appear in gospel songs sung by Sam Cooke; and hip-hop inherits and incorporates elements of all previous genres of black music (Woods, "The Challenges"). As the late Christopher Small demonstrated so clearly, the Afrodiasporic tradition in its many different incarnations coheres around the idea of music as an integral and essential part of everyday life, as a mechanism that facilitates both social interactions and self-realization (Small, *Music of the Common Tongue* 24).

We believe that these examples demonstrate the value of thinking about improvisation as a model for social change. Our examples are meant to be illustrative but not exhaustive. Contemporary listeners to Western art music recognize improvisation in compositions by John Cage and Pauline Oliveros and in the interpretive performances of baroque music by Glenn Gould. They may have forgotten, however, that Handel, Mozart, and Beethoven improvised, that Bach did not expect his scores to be played the same way in every performance, that opera singers often gain distinction by inventive embellishments of the written scores they sing. Indian classical music expressly requires improvisation from its musicians.

We do not adhere to the formalism that would dictate that any form of improvisation is automatically democratic, egalitarian, and emancipa-

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/596635/9780822378358-xi.pdf by guest on 18 September 2024

tory. Female musicians often discover that the world of improvisation is as resistant to their inclusion as any other. Dana Reason, a pianist, composer, and musicologist, points out that experimental and cutting-edge female improvisers do not get their work reviewed, and do not receive invitations to participate in improvised-music festivals. On the rare occasions when they do receive attention, Reason argues, they find themselves described mainly by their physical features (62). Similarly, the singularly accomplished composer and performer Pauline Oliveros notes that a distinctly gendered "invisible barrier" marginalizes her inside improvisatory groups, because "males bond strongly around music and technology and leave women out of their conversations and performances" (54).

Some of the improvisational practices most effective in advancing the interests and ideas of black men have contributed to the repression and suppression of black women. The gospel singer Marion Williams and the jazz singer Betty Carter deployed their voices the way advanced improvisers used instruments, yet rarely received critical or commercial recognition for their achievements (Heilbut 222; Bauer 27–30, 94). Male musicians deeply resented Carter's leadership style even though men who led ensembles routinely treated their musicians in similar fashion (Bauer 153). Horace Tapscott and his fellow musicians built an extraordinary improvisational community in Los Angeles in the mid-twentieth century, a community in which women played key roles. The flutist Adele Sebastian, the composer and multi-instrumentalist Linda Hill, the vocalist Amina Amatullah, and the guitar player known as Avotcja made important, if unrecognized, contributions to the ensemble. Gender bias posed a huge problem for them. Adele Sebastian observes that it was not Linda Hill's musical brilliance but rather the willingness and ability to care for the men in the ensemble that earned Hill appreciation in the group. Sebastian felt she could not follow that path. "As much as I loved Horace," she recalls, "I wasn't the follow the leader kind of sister. And those were the kinds of sisters they wanted. I didn't sleep with them. I was just interested in music" (Isoardi 58). Tapscott lived off the earnings that his wife, Cecilia, brought home from her job at the Los Angeles County Hospital during this time, and other men in the aggregation had similar arrangements. "We hung out together all the time," Al Himes remembers. "Horace wouldn't get no job and I wouldn't get no job. Our old ladies were running us crazy because we wouldn't do nothing but play" (Isoardi 52). We do not know what the history of improvised music would have been if

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/596635/9780822378358-xi.pdf by guest on 18 September 2024

sexism had not continuously and artificially constrained the participation of women within it. Improvisation is a tool that can be used for many different purposes. The same medicine that can cure can kill if used in the wrong ways. Yet for all the inevitable flaws that come from its immersion in the social relations of a hierarchical society, improvisation is the right tool today for a very difficult job that needs to be done.

This book is not an encyclopedic and exhaustive survey of either improvisation or social movements, but an argument about the benefits of breaking down walls and transcending the categories that relegate music and politics to discrete and mutually incommensurable realms of existence. It is easy to overlook the limits of conventional categories in ordinary times. Today, this is no longer possible. As Immanuel Wallerstein argues, we are in the midst of a major systemic crisis, not just a period with many economic, social, and political problems. Our time is a time of chaotic disintegration, a period when the traditional mechanisms used to restore social equilibrium no longer work. The question is no longer whether there will be a radical transformation of social institutions and social relations, but rather what kind of institutions and relations will emerge from the upheavals of the next quarter century (Wallerstein). In a hierarchical, exploitative, and unjust society, a period of systemic crisis leaves us without good short-term options; our only choices entail deciding which evils are the lesser evils. The chaotic consequences of systemic breakdown also make it impossible to plan for the long term, to design blueprints in the present for the kinds of social relations and political institutions that we hope will emerge out of the protracted struggle we are certain to see in the years ahead. This unavailability of short-term or long-term options makes the middle term crucially important. Wallerstein explains that in this middle term—the next five to ten years—we need to develop new forms of political education and practice that will deepen the democratic strata of social life, that will help people become accustomed to deliberative talk and face-to-face decision-making, that will sharpen our senses of solidarity and teach us to work together democratically and productively.

The work that we seek to do in *The Fierce Urgency of Now: Improvisation, Rights, and the Ethics of Cocreation* addresses this middle term by calling for new understandings of politics, new understandings of music, and new understandings of the dialectical and dialogic relationships between them. We have found that work of this kind is easily misunderstood. Cul-

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/596635/9780822378358-xi.pdf by guest on 18 September 2024

tural critics satisfied with the conventional categories of humanities and art generally do not want to see the walls come down. They read our arguments about the importance of the political contexts in which music is created, performed, and received as an unwarranted intrusion on the autonomy of art. Educated to make fine distinctions about musical figures and devices, these critics are often "tone deaf" to politics. They view the political realm as bounded by the voting booth, as an activity that takes place at the ballot box for five minutes once every two or four years. But for us, the political realm includes the time between elections: the three hundred and sixty-four days and twenty-three hours and fifty-five minutes that we spend every year outside the voting booth. For most people, in fact, even the exercise of the franchise is a ritual structured in dominance, a selection between unsatisfactory alternatives, and a moment of choice with no real agency. The political realm that interests us is broader than the ballot box. It pervades practices not usually considered to be political that permeate everyday life.

We remind readers of a complex set of interrelated histories involving music and rights as a concrete instance of this argument. Following the Civil Rights Act of 1957, President Eisenhower introduced yet another civil rights bill in late 1958 that was not to become law until 1960. The new bill was a response to an extended streak of bombings against African American churches, schools, and communities in the South, though the infamous bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church, in Birmingham, Alabama, on Sunday September 15, 1963, that killed four young girls had yet to occur. That bombing spawned memorable musical tributes by both John Coltrane (the song "Alabama," on Coltrane's *Live at Birdland*, recorded on November 18, 1963, was an elegy for the young girls) and Nina Simone (whose song "Mississippi Goddam" was written in reaction to the racially motivated bombings). The event caused widespread revulsion and radicalized a generation of young African American activists, including people like Angela Davis, whose family not only lived in Birmingham in the area known as Dynamite Hill (because it was so frequently the target of Ku Klux Klan bombings), but who was also friends with one of the victims and whose mother had taught another one of the young girls killed at the 16th Street Baptist Church (Davis interviews that appear as part of the film from 2011 written and directed by Göran Hugo Olsson, *The Black Power Mixtape, 1967–1975*).

The bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church proved to be a turning

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/596635/9780822378358-xi.pdf by guest on 18 September 2024

point for the civil rights movement in the United States, giving rise to the passage of the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964, which outlawed discrimination against blacks and women (including racial segregation in schools, the workplace, and public-service facilities) and ended irregularities in the voter registration process that discriminated against minorities. It is worth remembering, though, that integrationist arguments were deemed to be denigrating by activists like Stokely Carmichael, who in 1966 argued, "Integration speaks to the problem of blackness in a despicable way. As a goal, it has been based on a complete acceptance of the fact that in order to have a decent house or education, blacks must move into a white school. This reinforces among both black and white the idea that 'white' is automatically better and 'black' is by definition 'inferior'" (qtd. in Panish xxi). Jon Panish shows with acumen how this attack on normative whiteness was echoed in some of Cecil Taylor's (and others') pronouncements in the same year: "There should be a boycott by Negro musicians of all jazz clubs in the United States. I also propose that there should be a boycott by Negro musicians of all record companies . . . We're no longer reflecting or vibrating to the white-energy principle. The point is: we know who we are. We have a whole history of music in this country" (qtd. in Panish xxi).

Guerino Mazzola and Paul Cherlin, scholars focusing on this period in jazz history, also note that the

> situation with jazz in the early sixties was the impression that this music had been stolen from its mostly black creators by white companies, white intelligentsia, and white organizers. Archie Shepp commented . . . that "Jazz" had become a commercial brand like "Coca Cola." According to him, free jazz was also an attempt to liberate the music and its creative expression from packaged commercialism. In a *DownBeat* interview in 1965, he argued that "jazz is one of the socially and esthetically most significant contributions to America . . . it is against war; against Vietnam; for Cuba; for the liberation of the peoples of the world. This is the nature of jazz . . . Why? Because jazz is itself born from oppression, born from the subjugation of my people." The community of jazz musicians progressively felt miserable and exploited. Ornette Coleman sums this up with his comment: "I am black and a jazzman. As a black and a jazzman I feel miserable." (4)

These voices were part of a much broader alliance of African American artists whose work was explicitly political. Poets like Abiodun Oyewole,

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/596635/9780822378358-xi.pdf by guest on 18 September 2024

of the Last Poets, and poet-musicians like Gil Scott-Heron (along with others like the Watts Prophets) "operated at the nexus of Black America's two most radical art forms: poetry and jazz" (Lynskey 181). In the case of the influential Last Poets it is worth remembering that they had taken their name from the South African revolutionary poet Keorapetse William Kgositsile and his poem "Towards a Walk in the Sun," which argued that the time for poetry was over in the fight against oppression, that poetry was to be replaced by the spearpoint. Kgositsile had a radically active sense of the place of art in a world capable of apartheid and systematic racism, stating, "There is nothing like art—in the oppressor's sense of art. There is only movement. Force. Creative power. The walk of Sophiatown totsi or my Harlem brother on Lenox Avenue. Field Hollers. The Blues. A Trane riff. Marvin Gaye or mbaqanga [a Zulu style of music that originated in the 1960s and led to a South African version of jazz]. Anguished happiness. Creative power, in whatever form it is released, moves like the dancer's muscles" (qtd. in Ro 569). Kgositsile shifts the terms of art from that of a static, inert object to that of an active agent in creating social momentum, movement: art, in short, as the embodiment of agency and social practice—art as aligned with the same sense of movement to be found in the term *civil rights movement*.

Here, as in the other comments from prominent African American artists cited throughout this book, explicit connections are said to exist between civil rights struggles and the explicit content of the art produced by African Americans. It is worth remembering that these artists faced real systemic challenges to producing their work and getting it disseminated. These challenges were posed by formidable surveillance and interventions from government agencies and operations like COINTELPRO and the disruptive operations carried out by the FBI (1956–71) that explicitly targeted for the purposes of "neutralization" (in FBI director J. Edgar Hoover's words) everyone from King to the NAACP, the Congress of Racial Equality, various African American nationalist groups, and the American Indian Movement (to name only a few). It is also worth remembering, as the music critic Dorian Lynskey points out, that even after COINTELPRO was dissolved in 1971, "the government continued to monitor black artists in other guises throughout the decade" (193). Darthard Perry, an FBI informer code-named Othello who infiltrated the Watts Writers Workshop (and by extension the Watts Prophets), "revealed [in a TV interview] how much importance the bureau placed on art in the black community.

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/596635/9780822378358-xi.pdf by guest on 18 September 2024

'You can take their culture and use it against them,' he said, emphasizing that the FBI's archive of African American books, magazines, videos, and records exceeded that of a well-stocked Harlem library. His white FBI supervisor . . . 'could name some jams of Miles Davis that I hadn't even heard of'" (Lynskey 193–94).

In such contexts bringing together momentous rights histories with the specific experience of musicians battling oppression, how is it possible to disassociate some of the most prominent improvisers and their music in the so-called jazz idiom (and, we hasten to add, this improvised music was radical even in jazz terms) from the political contexts to which they were responding, both musically and verbally?

To apolitical culturalists, any mention of politics seems dogmatic and orthodox. They are especially wary of political arguments that threaten their claims about their own innocence, that trouble their certainty that they are not accountable for the hierarchies of class, race, gender, sexuality, and national citizenship that give them privileged lives. Willing to accept a discussion of politics only as a gloss aimed at better interpretation and appreciation of the music, they reject arguments that take music seriously as a social and cultural force. Any politics strikes them as dogmatic orthodoxy, because it intrudes on their fun. These critics sometimes consider themselves to be politically progressive because they are against censorship and oppose intrusions on the rights of artists, but they reflexively reject efforts like ours that show how musical practices both reflect and shape macrosocial, political inequalities, how they permeate the micropolitics of everyday life. These critics want to live more comfortably in this society as it exists. They are embarrassed by its injustices and inequalities but do not believe they have anything to gain by helping to build fundamentally new ways of knowing and being. We argue, on the other hand, that doing principled research about cultural life requires political engagement and action, that we do not understand culture unless we recognize its political dimensions. Too much is at stake in the work we do to surrender the terrain of the political to the politicians. As Toni Morrison maintains, "Excising the political from the life of the mind is a sacrifice that has proven costly. I think of this erasure as a kind of trembling hypochondria always curing itself with unnecessary surgery" (12). We view political analysis as a necessary part of principled cultural analysis and critique, but we also think that focusing on culture makes it possible to rethink politics in useful and generative ways.

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/596635/9780822378358-xi.pdf by guest on 18 September 2024

Conventional categories also shape and constrain the ways politically minded critics respond to our work. Accustomed to defining the political sphere as a series of public competitions among individuals and interest groups battling over the creation and implementation of government policies, music often strikes these critics as a realm that is too private, too personal, and too small to be thought of politically. Yet we know that politics is an embodied activity, an affective and emotional endeavor, a sphere of life that revolves around desires for collective association and reciprocal recognition, as well as for rights and resources. Political thinkers outside the academy who have been immersed in popular struggles have long understood the importance of culture to democratic and egalitarian social change. For example, writing from within the ferment of the Algerian anticolonial struggle, Frantz Fanon explained how cultural change prefigures political change. “Well before the political fighting phase of the national movement,” he noted, “an attentive spectator can thus feel and see the manifestations of a new vigor and feel the approaching conflict” in “unusual forms of expression and themes which are fresh and imbued with a power which is no longer that of an invocation but rather of the assembling of the people, a summoning together for a precise purpose” (243). Similarly, reflecting on radicalism in Italy in the years immediately following the First World War, Antonio Gramsci attributed working-class insurgencies to “a new social group that enters history with a hegemonic attitude, with a self-confidence which it initially did not have.” In his view, this group “cannot but stir up from deep within it personalities who would not have previously found sufficient strength to express themselves fully in a particular direction” (98).

Yet acknowledging the dialectical and dialogic relationships linking culture and politics is not enough. Scholars studying the politics of culture and the culture of politics have become attached to conventions and categories that substitute feelings for actions, that resort to moral condemnation rather than cultural analysis that leads to social action. Bored by the everyday suffering of ordinary people, they seek out sensational images of human degradation and debasement. The abject for them is not a potentially generative site of critique and struggle, but proof of the immorality of capitalist culture and of their moral superiority to it. To borrow the apt phrase coined by Felice Blake and Paula Ioanide, they “feel good about feeling bad.” They aestheticize their own alienation and seek solace in the scholarly version of residential gated communities where others be-

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/596635/9780822378358-xi.pdf by guest on 18 September 2024

lieve exactly what they believe. They give their readers plenty of things to feel, but no actual work to do. They craft eloquent descriptions of other people's suffering and promote melancholy resignation in response to them. They savor what Raymond Williams discerned in Bertolt Brecht's plays of the 1920s, "a raw chaotic resentment, a hurt so deep that it requires new hurting, a sense of outrage which demands that people be outraged" (100). Like Williams, we disagree with this approach to culture, even though we understand the logic of it. It reflects the disillusionment that many people feel with past efforts at social change, what Williams called "the discovery in ourselves and in our relations with others, that we have been more effectively incorporated into the deepest structures of this now dying order than it was ever, while it was strong, our habit to think or even suspect" (98). There is an undeniable element of truth in this perception, and we fault no one for feeling discouraged or demoralized, given the increasingly indecent social relations that prevail in our society. Yet we believe that this radical negativity is ultimately a form of collaboration masquerading as critique.

Improvisation appeals to us because it is work that makes a difference in the world. It compels us to leave our comfort zones, to forge meaningful interactions with others across categories and social identities, to deepen the democratic strata of society through cultural activities that resonate fully with the contradictions and possibilities of our time. Improvisation in both expressive culture and social-movement mobilizations can keep us attentive to our responsibility to build the world we hope to inhabit. As the civil rights worker Willie Ricks used to say about the activities of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in the 1960s, "Mr. Say ain't the man, Mr. Do is the man" (qtd. in Jeffries 190). Our work in *The Fierce Urgency of Now* challenges political and cultural orthodoxies, not for the sake of novelty, but in solidarity with and in the spirit of the improvisers whose work we believe points the way to a new and promising path.

When categories collapse, creative community-making begins. This idea is a baseline precept for understanding the ethics of cocreation. In her indispensible book *Black Noise*, Tricia Rose reveals how many of the core categories of hip-hop emerged directly out of the confusing contradictions, conflicts, and crises of African American life in New York City in the 1980s. Young people in the inner city found themselves trapped in inadequate vocational schools, learning soon-to-be obsolete technological skills of the industrial era, like hot-type printing, blueprint making,

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/596635/9780822378358-xi.pdf by guest on 18 September 2024

and repairing electronic equipment. But seeing possibilities where others might only see obstacles, they attached themselves to new technologies in off-centered ways. Futura, a graffiti artist, abandoned the technologies of print, taking up the spray-paint can, while DJ Red Alert and DJ Kool Herc took out their frustrations with obsolete blueprint and auto-repair technologies by pioneering new ways of transforming the digital sampler from recording device to an expressive instrument. These artists used their knowledge as consumers to transform themselves via improvisation into cultural producers, and turned street corners into impromptu theaters and youth centers. Displaced from Brooklyn and Manhattan by urban renewal projects, they created new communities in the South Bronx through rapping, sampling, break dancing, and graffiti writing.

Drawing on the insights of Arthur Jaffa, Rose explains how these youths created improvised art organized around the aesthetic principles of flow, layering, and rupture. Their art equipped them with important training for life. The geometric flowing lines of graffiti echoed the musical lines flowing from the turntables of DJs, establishing and maintaining feelings of continuity and circularity. The layering of sounds, images, and even clothing added to these sensations of continuous movement, yet "break" beats in songs and physical breaks in graffiti lines constructed a unity of opposites between flow and rupture. Rose notes that these aesthetic devices resonated with their creators' experiences of social dislocation and rupture—that they produced a blueprint for social resistance and affirmation by instructing participants to "create sustaining narratives, accumulate them, layer, embellish, and transform them, but be prepared for rupture, find pleasure in it, plan on social rupture, when ruptures occur use them in creative ways that prepare you for a future in which survival will demand a sudden shift in ground tactics" (39). More than mere recreation, the diverse practices promoted by hip-hop came from and spoke to the conditions of an aggrieved community battling dislocation and dispossession.

Improvisation requires renegotiation of the social charter between individuals and groups, but it also enhances and augments the capacities of individuals. A perhaps unexpected but nonetheless powerfully illustrative example of this appears in a rumination of Ken Dryden, a Canadian professional hockey player turned federal politician, on the qualities that made Guy Lafleur a special hockey player. Conceding that Lafleur's in-

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/596635/9780822378358-xi.pdf by guest on 18 September 2024

arguable physical gifts as an athlete had much to do with his success, Dryden nonetheless identified Lafleur's ability to improvise as the key to his special status in the hockey world. Dryden noted that unlike most players trained in organized suburban youth leagues, Lafleur spent long hours alone on rivers, ponds, and rinks. Unlike his contemporaries, who developed their skills in organized competitions, Lafleur drew on these long hours of what Dryden calls "time unencumbered, unhurried, time of a different quality, more time, time to find wrong answers to find a few that are right" (157). This time made Lafleur different from other players.

Athletes trained by structured play in competitive leagues are described by Dryden as "student[s] cramming for exams." Their skills are developed by rote and remain remote and uncoordinated. When unexpected circumstances demand more of these athletes, they cannot move beyond their training. They have knowledge of the game, but not understanding. They lack the capacity to invent remarkable solutions in response to challenges for which they are unprepared. Lafleur, on the other hand, had a scope and culture in his skills, according to Dryden, that enabled him "to set higher limits, to settle and assimilate and become fully and completely yours, to organize and combine with other skills comfortably and easily in some uniquely personal way, then to be set loose, trusted, to find new instinctive directions to take, to create" (157). What Dryden saw in Lafleur, we see in artists trained by improvisation's networks of apprenticeship and instruction, artists trained to deploy the challenges of free play in ways that activate one's unique agency in relation to others.

If the people of this planet ever needed to cultivate the ability to carve out new instinctive directions, we need to do so now. We cannot study, teach, learn, play, sing, or dance without recognizing what time it is. The communities we care about are confronting increasingly harsh and indecent social conditions. The beautiful music that compels our attention emerges directly out of ugly realities, out of both old and new social conditions emanating from the long and still unresolved legacies of slavery, conquest, and colonialism, but also out of new forms of work and worklessness, new regimes of mass incarceration and austerity, new suppressions of free citizenship and social membership. The times we face today bear direct resemblance to those facing Martin Luther King's during the last year of his life. In 1967 and 1968 King's speeches took on a new tone of immediacy and urgency. "We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/596635/9780822378358-xi.pdf by guest on 18 September 2024

today," he argued, adding, "We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history there is such a thing as being too late" ("Beyond Vietnam").

King called on his followers to move past indecision to action. He observed that men and women around the world, our brothers and sisters, were watching the United States and waiting to see action for social justice. "Shall we say that the odds are too great?" he asked. "Shall we tell them that the struggle is too hard? Will our message be that the forces of American life militate against their arrival as full men, and we send our deepest regrets? Or will there be another message, of longing, of hope, of solidarity with their yearnings, of commitment to their cause, whatever its cost?" In times of ferment and upheaval, such as this one, victories can bring about rapid changes that alter the future meaningfully, while defeats can consign us to decades and even centuries of suffering. King called on his listeners to choose to rededicate themselves to what he termed "the long and bitter—but beautiful—struggle for a new world." In words that apply as much to our day as to his, he explained, "The choice is ours, and though we might prefer it otherwise we must choose in this crucial moment of human history." Or, to put it in the words of Sun Ra: "The possible has been tried and failed; now I want to try the impossible" (qtd. in Szwed 192).

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/596635/9780822378358-xi.pdf by guest on 18 September 2024