

weaving intuitive illegitimate improvisation

D Ferrett, Bridget Hayden & Gustav Thomas

Woman's desire would not be expected to speak the same language as man's; woman's desire has... been submerged by the logic that has dominated the West since the time of the Greeks." She is in search of "a different alphabet, a different language," a means of communication which would be "constantly in the process of weaving itself, at the same time ceaselessly embracing words and yet casting them off to avoid becoming fixed, immobilized. (Luce Irigaray quoted in Plant 1998, 140)

D: It takes a lot to get to zero. You have to move through all kinds of internal/external violence and disappointment; be prepared to start all over again. Zero in improvisation, and in writing, embodies the possibility for something different. Zero is a state of awareness, not ignorance. It can feel the powerful impression on all its sides from being pressed upon by sharp sets of values, and squeezed to the point of suffocation by extreme territorializing forces that demarcate and occupy "insider knowledge". Zero is mimicked, subsumed, fragmented and pushed into nothing floating in nowhere, vulnerably tethered to a coherent grounded 'centre'. Zero can hear the demands set by the lawmakers for correct syntax; it feels the requirement to re-articulate the name of the Father through legitimate discourse as the determinate of au-

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thority, whilst it bears the pressure of the threat of exile from civility and of being branded with an abject “bastard” status. Zero pulls a reactive move. On each breath, it opens an ever-expanding black hole within itself that is the space and time of unbound desire. Cutting ties with the limelight, zero cultivates movements in the dark that cannot be mapped as ‘progress’ on a linear time line, nor approved or charted by the makers of his-stories. Zero is the beginning of a mobilization that is the dark music practice of another space and time.

Bridget: dreaming, breathing, listening to nothing. Listening to birdsong, walking, swimming, listening internally to rhythmic melodies, bowing strings for harmonics, allowing mistakes, breeding mistakes, pretending you can’t see.

D: How do you create and sustain zero in academic writing about music? Embrace and then cast over words before immobilization? The binding logics of legitimacy weave through academic language and music commentary, and are bound by patriarchy and Eurocentrism; so how do you cast off the words of founding Fathers before the breath has gone? Alongside academic language, the critique of patrilineal discourse could be launched, not just at music, but at any art form which insists on continually resituating historical narratives, canons, heroes and aesthetic judges.

Gustav: Actually I don't necessarily think you *can* say this about any art form. When approaching any discussion of music, especially within an academic context, *especially* if one (as *we* do) seeks to embrace as broad a field of music as possible (partly in order to make sense and meaning out of “teaching” about “popular” music), it's crucial we don't underestimate the extent to which this is a subject area so much more convoluted and complex than most because of how deeply and pervasively it inhabits the lives of nearly everyone, relentlessly. ... Except with musics (such as “pop” and improvised vernacular forms) that function beyond the limits of the conventional academic modules, which are based on the European classical tradition of harmony & counterpoint, their ubiquity and immanence in people’s daily lives dramatically mark them out from other artistic disciplines or any other academic field: people with no interest in music as a subject love music and pay for it; people who ignore the ever-present contradictions, or even those who recognize them but don’t care, also love and buy music. What academics delineate as “popular” music is so much more tied up with people’s lives, so much more tied into the mechanisms of commerce than just about any other art form.

D: Improvisation potentially offers a relief, if not a way out from stagnant discourse, and this may account for the reason some practitioners are anxious to protect that potential from the legitimacy of academia. However, if academia is abandoned altogether, then we are moving towards an arguably

dangerous anti-intellectualism. I'm suspicious of practical utopias as much as I am of consigning academia and "theory" to unambiguously dystopian realms.

In *How to Write About Music*, former editor of *The Wire* Tony Herrington (2015) asserts that there is a way of writing about music critically that avoids the trappings of academic writing:

The music critic should aspire to the status of the autodidact. They should eschew academic and systemic study in order to amass an idiosyncratic and syncretic personal cosmology from the stuff of the world around them as a way of both better understanding and negotiating a way through the world. This will result in an approach to the critical process that will by definition be non-doctrinaire, non-hierarchical and anti-dogmatic. (366)

On the basis that an autodidact is a self-taught person, the implication of the *absence* of a teacher and "traditional" education to which academic and systemic study is undeniably cemented, appears to be an essential requisite for the music critic. Although within Herrington's contention, there is certainly a sense of anti-authority written into the prescribed vicissitudes of effective music criticism, it is not so much that academic study should be subverted, but rather that it should be avoided altogether... or, if it's too late to avoid, necessarily forgotten as a way of producing the individuality of one's relationship to music alongside an ability to fuse concepts together, in writing. The refusal to admit academic voices belies a concern with a system of ideas and principles that are rigorously applied to music at the detriment of a subjective and linguistically fruitful relationship. Indeed, academic music writing might here be understood as the Law, or the *rigor mortis* of writing about music inducing a *dead stiff language*. Curiously, the deathliness of ideological knowledge as disseminated through education coheres with a kind of cultural cliché that especially attaches itself to music improvisation, the practice of which requires you "to forget what you know". As an improviser and a theorist, this "forgetting" cannot be categorically accepted or dismissed, but rather problematized as an important feature of (anti-academic) writing about music as well as tied to the discourse on improvisation. Whilst the awkward cliché of forgetting what you know, or rather what is known in the academy, appears positively tied to ideas analogous to improvisation such as illegitimacy, intuition, creativity, idiosyncrasy and risk taking, it is an ideology that nevertheless risks undermining critique of the assumptions underpinning a priori knowledge inside and outside the academy...and in all forms of discourse. In other words, if personal/collective memory and cultural knowledge is organized through dominant legitimate historiographies, the opportunity to forget presents itself to those who always already *knew* an appropriate language to adopt within a context that privileges certain voices, and any apparent deviation from that might only form just another hierarchy attached to the same premise of (white male) superiority and dominance.

The caution implied by Derek Bailey's observation, "only an academic would have the temerity to mount a theory of improvisation" (Bailey [1980]

1992, x) and expanded on by the call for this issue, picks up on the suspicion of academic writing and many of the reservations around meetings between music practice and critical language. It also specifically warns against the conceits of scholarship as it seeks to explain and justify based on the assumption of certain principles. Taking the word “temerity” in the context of this quotation, we might not only characterize the academic’s audacity, but more importantly the excessiveness of that gall as the critic attempts to grasp *improvisation* as the object of study, which is implicitly attributed with a special status (and by proxy perhaps its practitioners). Either through ignorance or temerity, the academic bypasses the proper status of improvisation, and boldly approaches what cannot and should not be theorized. According to the implications of both Herrington and Bailey’s observation, the risk of academic writing is that it loses the vital sense of subjective listening and experience as well as bypasses what could be learnt through the subjective experience of music as an improviser, as a listener. The result is a dry mode of language that pompously assumes a “false” objectivity whilst the significance of the personal and social affect is reduced in favour of a non-self-critical inaccessible privileged hierarchal ideological discourse that applies unwanted principles: a language that generally misses the point and ignores the possibilities for other kinds of knowledge produced in music practice.

I suspect that Herrington is fully aware of the many credible and interesting examples of “academic” writing about improvisation (not least as featured in *The Wire*) and the growing field of critical improvisation studies which is precisely critically concerned with the “hopeful” and inclusive potential of improvisation (Fischlin and Heble 2013; Siddall and Waterman 2016). Nevertheless, broadly speaking, these (sampled) quotations warn against the conceits of academic discourse and the notion that, as a legitimate knower, one can apprehend improvisation as an object within specialist fields that have tendencies to exclude in the process of processing. To follow this logic, over-intellectualizing corrodes the social, musical, creative, cultural, subversive potential of improvisation to the degree that an (academic) writer should forget what they *know*...become illegitimate in that respect, in order to be able to correspond with the vitality of improvisation’s potential and open to learning from unforeseen encounters. In many ways, the suspicion or disdain launched at academic writing about improvisation may reflect a sense that theory per se, as part of an elitist esoteric culture, inevitably applies a system of rules and principles to its object in contrast to the ideal state of openness and contingency.

Gustav: Naturally I too have struggled, and continue to grapple, with this. I waver between two essential positions, which rather than presenting a dichotomy, are prone to inform each other dialogically: either it can only be written about academically if the manner in which it references actual practice and the repertoire of that practice’s historical documentation (I firmly believe that musicians should listen extensively to recorded improvisation from whatever tradition it emanates) is playful, fluid, ironic, committed and

engaged; *or* the writing itself is subject to the same spirit of spontaneous invention as freely improvised performance.

D: Recalling experiences of improvisation and writing, the threat of ridicule and the voice of critical judgment come first and foremost from oneself and the “knowledge” one has acquired as a being in culture, in language, in music. The challenge for all thinking and playing bodies is how to purge the acerbic voice of the law-makers, the surveillance of conservative inhibited white privileged MAN and the mumblings of the zombie voice; their time is over yet they continually return (recently in ever louder brash terms) both internally (psychologically) and externally (socially/culturally/politically). Improvisation practices ways of tearing away from these voices – for good. How do you kill a zombie, an animated but dead language? Read books? Improvise? Avoid institutions? Write/play non-academically? Become illegitimate?

There is a social stigma attached to the word bastard that speaks of patriarchal power and the sexual social subjugation of women, especially working class women. Yet there is something that might be positively valorized in detaching from the name of the Father and retaining a connection with the Mother. Etymologically, bastard is linked to improvisation through the notion of a child conceived on an improvised bed (not the marriage bed). Socially, it is linked to the vital improvisation skills of a woman carrying and giving birth to a child: she improvises from a position of social powerlessness, and her improvisation constantly works at the liminal point of nothing and being, of limitation and possibility, of life and death. In this respect, the trauma, pain and ingenuity of working class women are at the core of improvisation.

Gustav: “Bastard” has always felt like a male epithet so that whenever applied to a woman it seems at once somehow harsher, ironic and somehow, even, according to the rigidly entrenched values of bourgeois parlance, *blasphemous*. Yet irony, blasphemy and illegitimacy are core dynamics of a “pure” (as in *truly committed*) improvisation (what many performers prefer to call ‘free music’) that seeks to unmoor itself from countless musical traditions that use spontaneous invention within a formal structure as a kind of embellishment to harmony (“changes” in Jazz) and themes (“head” tunes, melodies, grooves etc.). Advocating illegitimacy as necessity brings to mind Donna Haraway’s (1991) much-cited essay “A Cyborg Manifesto,” and it is her text that places irony and blasphemy alongside illegitimacy:

Blasphemy has always seemed to require taking things very seriously. [...] Irony is about humour and serious play. (149) [...] illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. Their fathers, after all, are inessential. (151)

These three statements are perhaps equally illegitimately culled and sampled out of context (as any collage, which is an improvisation of *meanw*, must be);

to exacerbate my crime, their original purpose in Haraway's text shan't be revived here. But it's those three things, *blasphemy*, *irony* and *illegitimacy*, and the manner in which Haraway argues for their necessity, that are important here – "here" being my making a case for a critical discourse around (and from within) improvisation that ignores protocols of both academic musicology and "music critic" anorakism.

A former student tells of how, when he was in my Jazz Criticism class some years ago, during a lecture early on in the course I had a PowerPoint slide on the screen that simply had the word BASTARDS in bold caps. Even though the slide remained onscreen for some 20+ minutes, I apparently never told the class what the word's context was. I would probably have been talking about the ways in which African American music has been historically misappropriated, misrepresented, and thus misunderstood. The twin institutions of the culture industry and schooling (which is to say scholarship in the broadest sense, from actual *school* school to postgraduate research and HE teaching), in so far as they represent the interests of "musical authority," have only absorbed the Blues, Jazz, and subsequent African Diasporic forms through a process of normalization and sterilization, making it fit within the frame of European traditions, that neutralizes those musics' capacity to convey their intuitive sense of questioning and meaning. In all the "usual," authoritative senses, such musics were illegitimate, born of a meeting between polarized traditions, producing offspring determined by a tendency to interrogate and indict the forces of oppression responsible for their existence. A bastard dialectics emerges, characterized in part by the paradox that the real "bastard," in its most usual sense as a low, derogatory epithet, is the oppressor whose twisted value system (bent on exploiting) makes an illegitimate heresy out of any attempt to work beyond, and subvert, his masterplan.

Improvisation *is* illegitimacy. Which is to say, in so far as its practice as "free music" is devoted to exploring gesture, expression and performance beyond the limits of established, authoritarian orthodoxies, it will always question and undermine authority. But in making this claim, it becomes necessary to embrace it fully: improvisation is illegitimacy, thus is defined by it, so that illegitimacy itself becomes fundamental – which is to say, in the case of music (whether making it or talking and writing about it – three disciplines that must become as synonymous as possible in the mind of their authors) one must consciously seek to "do it wrong." This isn't the same thing as "forgetting"; it is closer to the idea of "nonknowledge" that Georges Bataille (2014) pursues in his text *Inner Experience*:

NONKNOWLEDGE LAYS BARE... therefore *I see* what knowledge was hiding up to there, but if I see, I *know*. In effect, I know, but what I knew, nonknowledge again lays bare. If nonsense is sense, the sense that is nonsense loses itself, becomes nonsense once again (without possible end). (57)

Forgetting, in the manner that Cage advocated it through his banishing of

“remembering” (which itself equates with the doctrine of the non-idiomatic which became something of an orthodoxy in free improvisation) would appear to be a strategy of denial, failing to account for the ever-problematic contradictions that one’s subjectivity, and the place of one’s self in the various social contexts that performance presents, and all that it is subjected to (hegemonic forces of manipulation, control and identity formation), bring to any given improvisation.

And “wrong” in this case includes what authority considers the crime of theft that is deemed manifest in sampling, collage and reusing existing material (upon which the whole of Jamaican sound system culture is predicated (Bradley 2001; Lesser 2008), as is, indeed *cantus firmus*); sampling and collage are the improvisation of means – this commonality shouldn’t be overlooked since it carries one of the ways in which improvised musics might resist appropriation by “musical authority.”

John Cage, who was consistently against improvisation in principle, expressed his mistrust of it in terms of memory, as if somehow what a musician brought to a performance in terms of their experiential history should somehow be denied or suppressed: “I’ve always been opposed to improvisation, because you do only what you remember” (Cage quoted in Retallack 1996, 270). What Cage missed, perhaps because his musical purview didn’t encompass the literature of recorded traditions initiated by Jamaican sound system DJs like Prince Buster, Coxson Dodd and Duke Reid, wherein historical experience speaks from the uniquely convoluted *assemblage* of individual memory directly to the shared social expression (through the function of the sound system) of a community for whom improvisation *through* memory is a vital source of practical and spiritual sustenance.¹ In fact, in my experience of many improvisation sessions featuring inexperienced participants who aren’t genuinely that interested in doing it (historically, as a module option, it has attracted students who think it might be a bit of a doss), it’s precisely a tendency among such players to not bother trying to remember anything, nor to apply any structured or meaningful thought based on any remembered dynamics or meaning, which can make the performance lose its purpose or shape. I’ve always harbored a skepticism with regard to Cage’s disavowal of the “ego” in art, along with his apparently antisocial desire to rid performers from music altogether, suspicious of what it was meant to achieve... Thoughtlessness, myopia and amnesia can never serve as surrogates for an absolute. We are biologically unique individuals whose experience is also unique from the very onset of it; our character is too readily formed by outside forces (mostly exploitative in some way, frequently parasitic) and *that* is where work needs to be done: dismantling identities forged by the ruling hegemony, allowing greater access to, and agency within, *Gnosis* – the core principle of Gnosticism, its alluring power, is its imperative to undo the shackles of ignorance foisted on individuals by hegemonic orders.

¹ Notwithstanding that the separation of *practical* and *spiritual* is an Europeanist concession, nay handicap.

But whether that work is done or not, whatever “you remember” will always be a limitless resource of thoughts and gestures whose selection and emergence will always be subject to any number of intersectional factors; it is in fact precisely that – what is or isn’t remembered and how what is remembered is manifest – which will make improvised performance interesting and engaging: what gets said about what is understood to be.

I don’t subscribe to Herrington’s requirement that the music critic “should aspire to the status of the autodidact.” Instead, I *know* that a more nuanced and epistemological approach will much better serve the needs of anyone seeking to write *meaningfully* about music (on this point I’ll propose that conventional academic criticism within the majority of institutionally approved musicology tends, if anything, to resist, even eschew, *meaning* in favour of constructing a would-be scientific framework through which to lend advocacy to the bogus hierarchy of musical value we’re still too embeddedly taught to inhabit. In this regard, I recall Frantz Fanon’s ([1952] 1967) reflexive supplication, “O my body, make of me always a man who questions!” (232) (from *Black Skin, White Masks*), even though his desire to be “always a man” is more telling than one might like it to be for my purposes here, which is to say it’s the uncompromising commitment to questioning and interrogating *everything* and *anything* that is vital in order to maintain the potential for autonomy and self-determination. Yet, Fanon’s “questioning” is in essence a bastardizing of formally accepted and reinforced structures and norms: all minority groups, once interrogated, reveal themselves to be the ur-bastards in so far as the exploitation and oppression they suffer within white patriarchal (imperialist) culture and society are symptomatic of a misrepresentation, a fiction that casts them outside of discourses on meaning, value and insight (three things that define the place of music in the wider social experience). To what extent, after all, are we prepared to question and (if necessary, as would seem to be the overwhelming case) dismantle the established, Europeanist-bourgeois codes that are underpinned, and reinforced by, the white patriarchal forces that still dominate “Western” cultures of “developed” societies?

D: The publication from which Bailey’s quote is torn was written in the mid-Seventies and originally published in 1980, a full eleven years before Susan McClary received “outraged, vitriolic reactions” and death threats for her feminist challenge to traditional musicology, launched within *Feminine Endings* published in 1991 (McClary 2011, 2). Situated alongside this context, in “Afterward to ‘Improvised Music after 1950’ The Changing Same,” George E. Lewis (2004) discusses the “cultural hegemony” of music studies in relation to “experimental music” during, broadly speaking, the period between 1950-2000 where “notions of class and race, are in the shortest conceivable supply” (164). Lewis contends that by the mid-1990s “few histories had confronted the connection between experimental music, ethnicity, and race in a sustained or serious way,” with accounts dwarfing if not completely omitting bebop and free jazz and what Lewis terms “Afrological” influence, practice

and perspective, resulting in a general “ideology of colorblindness” (164). Processes of exclusion and historical amnesias are not restricted to academia, neither is the white male privilege that weaves through these processes. Current experimental music scenes are similarly implicated as discussed for instance in an online article titled “Beyond the Boys Club: Striving for Diversity and Inclusion in Experimental Music” (2016) wherein Max Alper invites musicians and performers based in New York City experimental scenes to comment on the (ironic) apparent exclusion of LGBT, women, people of colour, in communities committed to exploring innovation and “outsider” music. Responses to Alper’s questions cohere around a tendency to homogenize communities into cliques/clubs and also share affinities in drawing figures such as “well intentioned white men making harsh noise?” (Taja Cheek), “jazz bros” (Muyassar Kurdi) and “noise boys” (Regan Holiday) (see also Fitzpatrick and Thompson 2015).

Bridget: I knew I wanted to be involved in the experimental and improvisation music scene and had something to offer, but it really took me a very long time to feel that I had a right to be there (at performances, not at practices so much), despite having grown up around a female musical role model where it was normal in my world for women to play music. Because I was a very self-conscious anomaly within that scene (as a member of Vibracathedral Orchestra, Termite Club, and the experimental music scene in Leeds during the late 1990’s to mid-2000’s), I was constantly taking on the perceived and real opinions of the audience which really affected my playing. I suppose it gave me something to push off/react against – like how we can define ourselves by resistance.

In my case, because I was surrounded by father figures, I felt appallingly conscious of my body to the point where I almost tried to fold it up. Makes performance very difficult! I tried to be like a man to take the edge off. I am far more comfortable dressed in masculine clothes in performance. It’s easier for the audience to imagine I might be able to play.

Sound tech etc., can really fuck you up with slights – especially if you have been ridiculed for your gender throughout your whole life – it’s hard enough when they don’t do that shit! You begin to doubt yourself, and this is just suicide. I have been ready to align with the opinions of my worst enemies and then just fight instead of truly play/listen. Less so now, but it still creeps in if I am feeling out of sorts. I guess it’s the musician’s duty to evolve to a point where you let that stuff go by, and trust in the forces that come through you.

But I became exhausted with that fighty part of it, and wanted to find a way to listen to more gentle far off sounds, which all too often were drowned out in the maximalist music which is why I split off to do more solo work.

I am getting more and more interested in performers and improvisers who are able to hold space - Improvisers who are brave enough to let the silences breathe. Players I’ve seen that are able to do this are not many...Part Wild Horses Mane on Both Sides, the late Arthur Doyle. Having said that

there are a load of maximalist players I love too – Borbetomagus, Junko/Hijokaidan, Alice Coltrane, The Dead C.

D: Illegitimacy at its simplest means unlawful, illegal, unfathered and nameless. Women are arguably very familiar with, if not namelessness, the potential transitory nature of nomenclature as part of a binary endorsing economy that sanctifies a tradition in which the signs of belonging are applied and re-applied to female identities in the name of the Father. For a woman unmarried or married within the context of this cultural history, the contemporary choice to “keep” a name, is very often to keep a name that belongs/belonged to the Father, the son, the husband, the brother, but never to oneself (or one’s Mother despite any return to the so-called “maiden name”). Whilst this deeply held knowledge might be harmful in terms of the psychological impact on one’s understanding of femininity in relation to masculinity (i.e., the social vulnerability of the feminine and its namelessness or the cultural guilt/shame/terror of illegitimacy – in effect “harshness”), there is also something of this transitory illegitimacy as allied with the feminine that arguably provides women with a potential critical distance and an ability to move/play/write differently.

Bridget: I feel there is something distinct that women can bring, but I couldn't define what it is. I believe there's a spectrum and that much of gender difference is learned - but at the same time I would not say that the womb is an insignificant entity - I believe it to have a deep impact psychologically. I know in terms of my own body experiencing sound, I think of the womb as some kind of resonating chamber and I feel this can translate into the music, for sure. I hear it in other women and I feel it happen within me.

In “The Contribution of Women as Composers,” Oliveros (1984) writes:

There are two modes of creativity - 1) active, purposive creativity, resulting from cognitive thought, deliberate acting upon or willful shaping of materials and 2) receptive creativity, during which the artist is like a channel through which material flows and seems to shape itself (132)

and later on...

The role of intuition is associated with mystique, or mysterious appearance - unbidden - in otherwise normal, actively pursued analytical work. Would not any human being benefit from the knowledge and ability to call on intuition as well as analysis at will? (136)

Dancer and choreographer, Alkistis Dimech refers to Butoh, Japanese dance theatre that involves emptying the body (“the body turns into an empty shell”) and abandoning self-consciousness.² Japanese dancer Kazuo Ohno talks about Butoh as “an art of improvisation. It is dangerous. I try to carry

² Available online: <http://sabbaticdance.com>

in my body all the weight and mystery of life... to follow my memories until I reach my Mother's womb" (Ohno quoted in Velez 1989, 33 mins in).³ I guess the congruent theme as far as I understand it with both the practice of Butoh and Oliveros's sound improvisation, is the emptying of the mind so that the division between listening and playing become non-existent and the intention is removed...this I feel is orientated towards transcending the divisions between the perceived self and its environment.

I spend a lot of time day dreaming – adjusting to a realm inhabited by tones very far off in the distance. The tones are fine and delicate, soothing, ghostly, notes within notes. Suggestions of chords. This is often the kind of music I am attracted to as well. I often fail to translate these tones – to be able to do them justice, reach their level of sweetness – but they offer a starting point for harmonies/refrains and a state of sensitivity to aspire to.

Often I will carry around a repetitive melody in my head as I go about my day. These are at once insistent and very subtle – difficult to catch hold of. They tend to drift in and out, but certain refrains will find their way back if they are important.

So with this base as I play it over and over in my head, melody appears.

I have noticed that in a certain state of trance, my body knows what to play much better than I myself. Of course, this depends on circumstance upon my state of mind/anxiety/circumstance as to whether or not I succeed – i.e., whether I am working with a group or alone, performing or just playing at home. Trying to become un-self-aware, or "devoid of intention", as Oliveros would have put it, is the main aim I guess.

When I am doing this successfully I think I would say the notes have more in common with running water than with any conscious design.

Certain situations are more conducive than others. Certain combinations of improvisers - particularly playing with one other person - the potential begins to be revealed. For me it helps to have a steady base - like a drone or a loop that provides a bed of sound/steadying repetition to bend in and out of, as much for the sake of settling tension as for musical addition.

It can be more about the mood in the note being true. Integrity is always the first aim. But integrity to what? What to play and why play are both big questions that emerge from doing a lot of reactive/panicking performances. As regards to the apparent contrast between a "gentle" approach to playing and the relentlessly harsh sounds I come out with, it's to do with panic. The panic of performance. How I handle the threat of being scrutinized.

It almost feels to me that every sound uttered resonates eternally, which puts a huge onus on me as a practitioner to aspire to create pure sounds that heal rather than harm. I am guilty of neglecting this, succumbing to performance panic, and reactive playing. I feel like I have to take this more seriously, now that I'm older and use my opportunities more wisely.

³ *Dance of Darkness* [Documentary], Dir. Edin Velez (France: WNET and La Sept, 1989). <http://www.edinvelez.com/articles/display/Dance-of-Darkness>

D: Ajay Heble (with Gillian Siddall) (2013) discusses the innovation within Oliveros's music and her "intuitive strategies of listening" which genuinely sought to extend beyond obvious and/or virtuosic reactions to sound/context, and instead "explore the possibilities of sound" (158). As Heble writes, Oliveros's feminist mode of practice and her "aesthetic of receptivity [...] because of its reliance on intuition, has been traditionally devalued as 'feminine'" (159). Oliveros continually fought for the equal value of this approach in creative work.

I wonder about "receptive," "intuitive" practice; as a "woman," it seems simultaneously trapping and liberating depending, I suppose, on context and collaborators. I wonder about the effects of not been able to return "home" as it were, in relation to a kind of cadence inertia where the feminine is continually associated with excessive ornamentation, the dissonant, the non-verbal, the "intuitive" and "receptive," and the inevitable sonic sojourn of many women musicians on the "outside" making something out of nothing. Further to this, I question whether what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari ([1980] 1987) refer to as "becoming-woman" is either audible and/or necessary in any music practice that is orientated towards *true commitment to free music*. Improvising with other women, I've never felt playing "intuitively" a problematic issue. It has felt more "feral" than intuitive in that it gradually practices separation from relations of domination and opens up sources of changes: "This kind of separation from relations of domination, even while remaining within the dominant society in order to survive, is not unlike the situation of ferals who have escaped captivity and the direct control of humans, even while they remain in human-built environments and depend on these to survive." (Struthers Montford and Taylor 2016, 8) And so on some level I can attest to feral as a feminist strategy aligned with the potential of improvisation to "escape captivity". It is only when the context and collaboration seems to gender (and so divide into binary code) the distribution of skills between "intuitive" and "technical" knowledge and ability that stifling restrictions emerge, and this distinction is also racialised and distributed amongst the classes at the level of "primitive" versus "civil". These distinctions provide the excuse to "mansplay" (playing on Solnit's (2014) "mansplaining" – "men explain things to me") over an anticipated/demanded 'receptivity', which tends to lead to all parties reacting with increasing volume at the expense of individual and collective potential. The association between femininity and intuition has been particularly embedded within the figure of the female singer, and in many cases this seems to legitimise her marginalisation or her complete erasure from music history. At times, I've also noted an tendency to perceive the (female) singer as "singing over" rather than integrating or weaving through, and this designated territory of "top line" can be inhibiting in that it relegates her to an area distinct from the potential of a shared musical space, and requires a greater receptivity from the singer in relation to other instrumentalists instead of listening from all parties to all

parties. This in some way seems to speak of an anticipated feminine vocal zone.

Lara Pellegrinelli's (2008) "Separated At 'Birth': Singing and the History of Jazz" critically interrogates the erasure of singers and vocal activities in jazz historiography as it represents the "birth" of jazz. Referring to key texts in the history of jazz, Pellegrinelli formulates a convincing argument that jazz historiography has not only feminised the role of singing, but confined it to an inferior space associated with the natural untrained product of a body and the sexuality of performers (as opposed to the "technical skill" of instrumentalists). She contends that devaluing and erasing the role of the singer, effectively cut the cord from the "Mother(s)" and placed the narrative firmly in the hands of "father figures" as a way of containing the sexuality of the singing body in a cultural context anxious about "loose sexual mores, racial mixing, and the corruption of youth" (43).

Consequently the vocal sounds of African-American female singers such as Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey are then relegated to "primitive" sounds and birthing vocalisations taken up and sophisticated through the celebrated playing of instrumentalists that *resemble* singing:

Instead of including singers, historians alternatively focus their attention on instrumental practice that resembles singing: talking horns. They emphasize what are usually termed "vocal effects" in the literature: the potential to create microtones, bend pitches, and replicate speech; singing, preaching, shouting, and loud-talk; cussing, whining, squawking, and groaning; growling, whispering, wailing, screaming, and playing the dozens, many of these "primal utterances" said to originate with the voice. (Pellegrinelli 2008, 43)

In jazz literature the "singer" is attributed the "primal" feminine role of vocal soundings that instrumentalists refine through technical skill and by filtering feminised vocal timbres, textures and pitches through "horns" (the phallic connotations are obvious). Zachary Wallmark (2016) draws attention to the fundamental significance of timbre to an understanding of the different responses to the "scream" of John Coltrane's saxophone, which, he notes, are received and interpreted either as blissful, spiritual, transcendent *or* as noisy, painful and alienating. Whether celebrated or avoided, saxophonic timbre is invariably described in terms of vocal mimeses and metaphors such as scream, shriek and cry which "are heavily gendered terms, associated since the Greeks with uncontained female vocality and hysteria" (Wallmark 2016, 240). On the understanding of the corporeality of screaming and of its "power to feminise," male performers are threatened with the possibility that "technical control" and "transcendent power" might be compromised by "uncontrolled" hysterical feminine soundings ideologically linked with "monstrosity, disorder and death" (Carson [1995] quoted in Wallmark 2016, 241). Wallmark proceeds to argue that "unruly" vocality is not only gendered but racialised in a discourse that links blackness with the threat of radical anti-white man politics alongside the established discourse

of “wildness” and the primitive. This *academic* writing, reveals the construction and the conditions under which, gendered and racialised, the recurring motif of the “primitive” (signified through timbre, high pitches and non-verbal) translates in the discourse of improvisatory motives and jazz historiography through notions of primitive, feminine and “wild” sound. Caught in the corporeal signification of “primitive” sounds, Othered bodies struggle to participate in improvisation without rehearsing the discourse of oppression that has them as “savage,” raging hysterics and/or physical sexual originators of sound, sophisticated within educated terms of knowledge(s) they can never legitimately “own”. How does a caught body participate in and yet distinguish themselves from a musical and cultural context where “free” unruly (subversive) sounds are appropriated and experimented with, on the basis of a kind of “primitive” tourism, performatively controlled through technical skill of (male) players and the evaluative narratives of the story-tellers who always have the last “word” as arbiters of the symbolic? In effect, to speak (and play) *legitimately* is anticipated by white heterosexual men and by virtue of what Roland Barthes ([1957] 2002) called “exnomination” [*ex-nomination*] (849) whereby the legitimacy of white male musicians is established as natural and therefore the norm against which any deviance or illegitimacy is measured.

Scholarly writing and music practice can creatively intersect to address and challenge white privilege, sexism and Eurocentrism by establishing collective memory, sonic archives, critical theories and re-shapings of time and space in words, music and activism, for instance, the collaboration practiced through Black Quantum Futurism Collective between Camae Ayewa (aka Moor Mother) and Rasheeda Phillips alongside the publication of their *Black Quantum Futurism: Theory and Practice* (2015) and the featured “African-centered” scholarship. Moor Mother’s combination of electronics, poetry, hip hop, free jazz and punk raises historical legacies at the same time as envisaging futures through Afrofuturistic concepts and a framework she created called “Anthropology of Consciousness”:

“Anthropology of Consciousness”: to explore how we calculate the relationship between space and our bodies, our living spaces and the ways in which these things affect the way we remember or forget our past and future memories. BQF also uses the boundless aspects of quantum physics and communal and ancestral memory to search for new meaning and methods in order to reshape the future now. [...] The soundscape [...] [made for the book] is aimed at releasing new modes of time and space that are currently trapped inside of the rhythms of our society. I use sonic noise and tonal memory to act as a compression of all sounds to both agitate negative and positive vibrations, breaking through the cyclical vortex of oppressed Black identity and consciousness in America. (Moor Mother Goddess 2015, 8-9)

This approach speaks to a disconnection with the Eurocentric vision of time and space, and the progressivism of centered white subjects. It is movement

that “can increase the ‘knowability’ of the future and the past by treating both modes of time as formally equivalent” (Philips 2015, 12). Improvisation has within its consciousness features of time which have the ability to develop and source changes through ties that link the musical with the social within an auditory consciousness of the past and the future, so that, whilst voices may be marginalised from its formal history (female jazz singers for instance), they are nevertheless present within a complex sonic archive that weaves through time, bodies and consciousness. Moreover the blues aesthetic, often dismissed as “simple,” returns in the memory of improvisation through the playful defiance and blasphemy of singers like Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith and Nina Simone; it was their singing of “the Devil’s music” that challenged white male supremacy and the churches condemnation of sexuality (Davis 1998, 120-137) by making playful, musical performative improvisatory space for black female sexuality and agency in the meaningful friction between “song” and “improvisation,” between words and non-verbal vocalisation. Angela Davies (1998) discusses the aesthetic control assumed through the blues by Rainey in for instance “Countin’ the Blues,” by drawing attention to the invocation of power through words that “recapitulate the West African practice of nommo, which conjures powers associated with things by ritually pronouncing their names” (128). Nommo is more powerful than Christian prayer, it speaks of the creative life of words on earth to the degree that words, in the process of enunciation, produce what it names. Improvisation cultures have, in certain instances, endeavoured to omit the power of words. Free improvising vocalist Maggie Nicols has spoken about how her irruptions into singing “snatches of songs” have often caused “overtly negative reactions” and have been criticised as “not true improvisation” (Nicols 2014, 88). Blasphemy is a charge particularly located in (feminised) singing, because within singing practice (the rub between sound/words/music/improvisation) lies the powerful ability to create (new, plural) meaning, and this creation, undermines the enforced association between “primitive” and the unintellectual with feminised, racialised, classed bodies. In other words, words can’t be left to patriarchy.

Gustav: It quickly becomes clear that illegitimacy and blasphemy are crucial devices with which to open up a discussion of something far more fundamental and profound with regard to what improvised performance really is and why it matters. This is partly why “true commitment” is so important, because to perform entirely according to rigid codes (doing things “right”) is also to *avoid commitment* (just following orders); to freely improvise is to commit yourself to what the music is becoming as it unfolds, carrying your subjectivity, identity and their histories along with it – it’s an obvious thing to say, yet so easy to overlook: the improvising performer is inseparable from the music, becoming unhinged from hegemonic structures. Thus it is also a commitment to questioning, tugging at the seams and unravelling the threads sewn into the fabric of accepted apparatus; this is where the “dialogue between practice and theoretical writing as a fundamental way of learning to

question, articulate and challenge” becomes inevitable – to begin to question through intuitive playing leads directly to an imperative to articulate and challenge, because the experience of improvisation’s power to unhinge the subject and to contradict enforced reality changes everything for ever, makes it impossible to turn back. Such a progression renders creative and destructive synonymous within a schematic you identify as *agitation*; movement becomes vital in rejecting institutional orthodoxies.

Technique, in the conventional sense (getting things right, doing things properly according to rigid and ossified codes) is replaced by *facility*, which is nurtured through constant, daily playing; virtuosity, then, resides in a critically engaged subjectivity made audible, salient and *effective/affective* through performance.

As an aside, here, I think I need to mention that Frank Zappa keeps interfering with my thoughts whenever the notion of illegitimacy as “doing things wrong” crops up. My musical consciousness was always drawn towards Zappa because of his capacity to be poignantly inventive at the same time as being deeply musical – over the years, it was the purely instrumental albums (*Shut Up e Play Yer Guitar*, *Sleep Dirt*, *Jazz From Hell*) that I listened to, and his challenge to the improvised guitar solo as an opportunity to ‘invent’ new melodies (rather than the more general tendency to build emotional intensity and catharsis via a lathering of scales and arpeggios) had a strong influence on how I developed my own improvising approach. What I *always hated* (even in my early teens) was his frat-boy, puerile sexist-misogyny (the *songs*), which for me consigned a good 80% of his oeuvre to the listen-once-and-move-on pile; above all because I just thought it was weak material. At some point in the 1980s I sat down with a fellow improviser friend to watch the concert video *Does Humor Belong In Music?* I’ll not forget my sense of indignation as the opening titles went up, proclaiming, ‘ZAPPA. “The Group that Does Everything WRONG.”’ ... before proceeding with a highly technical, complex and polished show. Zappa’s own sense of his being somehow subversive, absurdist or even surreal always puzzled me, given his stature among ‘serious’ musician and his relatively comfortable place within a conservative mainstream, making weirdness safe for the bourgeoisie. I was indignant because *we* were the group who did everything wrong: by never discussing what we would play, by casually swapping instruments during gigs, by never caring for our gear which we acquired as cheaply and as disinterestedly as possible. Because we plied our trade in conventional settings (rather than academic or avant garde ones) we continually garnered the disdain of soundmen and the bands we shared bills with, something that always felt the same as the “real-man” derision I’d been subject to during school sports sessions, which then fed into one’s status on every other levels of social and institutional life. And that’s also what I saw in Zappa’s band of young, eager professionals.

Once we’ve reached the point of embracing continuous, critically engaged improvisation, which is necessarily blasphemous and illegitimate within the current hegemony, then the idea of “freedom” becomes problematic

too: a critical practice that is necessarily creative/destructive must be allowed to function devoid of such teleologies and utopian “dreams”. I have long found the presence of the word “free” in descriptive attributions around improvisation irreconcilable with my own experience of it, above all because struggle is its own thing; freedom is another matter – what marks out total improvisation from any other means of making music is that the performer commits fully in the moment of the music’s realisation to what it will be, rather than taking more time to modify and refine; ultimately even the most meticulous composer has to *commit* to a “final” version at some point. But also, as with universal consensus, there can be no such thing as freedom within the current human context which is defined by oppressive hegemonies and impassioned antagonisms.⁴ The “free” (in music as elsewhere) has always been bogus. There is no “freedom” worth pursuing that could fundamentally undermine the dominant narratives of bourgeois-imperialist capitalism (exploitation and oppression) that we have been living through/with/underneath; the term “free improvisation” might be more aptly supplanted by “*questioning performance*” or “*material interrogation*,” or better yet “*rude interruption*”.

Freedom and consensus, as well as the absolute, are beyond mortal human grasp. But the notion of an indefinable, indescribable absolute that is beyond Earthly reach has been the ultimate destination pursued by most mystical creeds and philosophies, as well as the gravitational pull of dialectics. But, as C.L.R. James (1980) is at pains to point out in his *Notes On Dialectics*, the point is never to actually arrive at a final, absolute conclusion but to continually cleave and re-cleave the contradictions that define all encounters and experience:

[...] in true dialectical fashion, we establish a category only to break it up. That is the point. You no sooner have fixed that you must at once crack it wide open. In fact the chief point about a finite category is that it is not finite. You can *make* it so, you can torture reality to keep it finite, but we must now see it is not only thought that moves the categories, creates the truth of the Idea, but that it is natural to man to do so. (47)

An advanced improvisational facility engenders a critical subjectivity that erodes the dominant societal tendency to classify, stratify and fix.

The “dialogue between practice and theoretical writing” *must* be reciprocal: “Thought is not an instrument you apply to a content. The content moves, develops, changes and creates new categories of thought, and gives them direction” (James 1980, 15) While a sharpened critical faculty is essential in learning to negotiate the dynamic intersubjectivity of a socially relevant improvisation, the performer must bring to critical thought (both written and read) their capacity for play in the truest, performative/improvisative sense. In this regard, C.L.R. James provides further inspiration:

⁴ The writings of Chantal Mouffe, for example *Agonistics* (2013)

*All error, in thought and action, comes from [settling on a finite category].
All error. All. [Hegel] is right, so we will, if you please, look and stop and
look again and in and out and in and out and round and about, constantly
setting off in different directions from the same spot. (1980, 16)*

All error. All. Which naturally includes the institutionally coded frameworks that “legitimate,” “proper” and “professional” musicmaking represents. And of course, those codes reflect and reinforce the dominant white patriarchal ideologies of the ruling hegemony. The generally accepted and unquestioned legitimacy of ruling ideologies (what’s normal and good) is predicated on the common assumption that certain cultures, societies and communities, due to a position of relative disadvantage, are perpetually aspiring to attain the status of the most powerful nations; hence the patronizing term “*developing nations*.” While our contemporary cultural institutions teach us to “respect” and “value” the contributions of “developing” countries, as well as those born out of colonialism and its enforced diasporas (including African American musics), it is never possible for those cultures to fundamentally challenge, undermine or restructure our own collective or individual subjectivities – because they are still *developing*, therefore devoid of *authority*. Despite all the ways in which successive waves of feminist thought and critique have forged a general sense of socio-political progress, the same goes for women. And the micro-universe of experimental music, along with its various substrata of improvisation, is as troubled by this condition as any other community. ... There are frequently, perhaps increasingly, glimmers of hope: festival bills and the review pages of publications like *The Wire*, not to mention the playlists of NTS or WFMU, are more substantially populated by female artists either taking a leading role (if not solo) or having a defining role in cutting-edge projects, than possibly ever before. Yet, despite such promising signals, it’s hard not to suspect that a set of acceptable criteria have become established that once again neutralizes the potential for women to be responsible for any kind of fundamental paradigm shift. It was disheartening, for example, to read Yeah You’s Elvin Brandhi described as singing in a “riot grrrl squall”⁵ – riot grrrl has become the safely finite category to which any unmelodic or unconventional female vocal can be attributed to.

When Peter Brötzmann says that he never liked the term “free jazz” because it suggests “you can do what you want... [o]f course you can’t, because if you are on stage together you want to build up something *together*,”⁶ (Peter Brötzmann quoted in Toop 2016, 174) it makes me think of Chantal Mouffe’s (2013) observation in *Agonistics* that “[w]hile ‘liberty’ is the final word in European culture, for the Far East, from India to China, that word is ‘harmony’” (31).

⁵ See Allen, 2016.

⁶ Toop himself has taken it from KVB’s *Free the Jazz* a documentary previously available for free on youtube (judging from Toop’s sourcing a now-dead link) and that now can be purchased in digital format from <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/freethejazz> (accessed 16 January 2017).

Bridget: In our culture I'd say we are rarely ever "free." I think we are fighting to try to find that. We are full of strange complexes, fears and shame and we are trying to work through via improvisation relearning our own pagan origins, our own connection with the divine.

As long as that is the shared goal then you've got some hope of finding free moments, hopefully for extended periods but it could and should be much more diverse.

Each member of the group has an equal voice. The aim is to support the zeitgeist to encourage each to find and maintain access to "the zone: each unlocking door for the others, or steering them away when they are banging too hard on a locked one...! I think it can work better in rehearsals than on stage because in our set ups the stage is often this reinforcement of hierarchy. But you are encouraging each person's truth to come out and that is something. Maybe they won't listen to you speak, but they listen to the notes you make. It's a start...!

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