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Beneath Improvisation

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Abstract and Keywords

Improvisation has been construed as Western art music's Other. This chapter urges music theorists to take the consequences of this configuration seriously. The decision to exclude improvisation as inherently unstable is not neutral, but is bound up with the endemic racism that has characterized social relations in the West and that is being brought to the fore in Black Lives Matter and other recent social and political movements. Traditional music theory is not immune from such institutional racism—its insistence on normative musical behaviors is founded on the (white) phallogocentrism of Western thought. Does the resurgent academic interest in improvisation offer a way out? No, at least not as it is currently studied. Even an apparently impartial approach such as cognitive science is not neutral; perception is colored by race. To get anywhere, this chapter argues, improvisation studies must take difference seriously. Important impetus for a more inclusive critical model comes from such fields as Black studies, Women's studies, subaltern studies, queer studies, and disability studies.

Keywords: affect, Black Lives Matter, critical improvisation studies, cognitive science, consciousness, embodiment, mirror neurons, subaltern studies, temporality, Women's studies

In music studies, the instability of music as a category should be obvious to us by now. We need look no further back than April 2018, when Kendrick Lamar received the Pulitzer Prize in composition, and was met with a sadly predictable chorus of spiteful howls from the predominantly non-black "new music" circles, coalescing around the central claim that hip-hop (or "rap" as it tended to be called in these responses) is "not music."¹ These critics didn't merely say that it was uninteresting music, or music that lacked their preferred formal concerns or didn't align with their compositional values; they hurled it all the way outside of this vast, seemingly bottomless category. It could not be accepted as music within the laws of this universe. One "music scientist" described "the electronic processing" on the recording as "neurologically divergent from music."²

This litany also rehearsed the also-sad and too-obvious alignment between music and the category of the human. For we could ask: What kinds of human behaviors are not musical behaviors? The opposite of music, presumably, is noise. It is the appearance of disorder, chaos, incoherence, disunity, disorganization, or meaningless sound. As it happens, hip-hop,³ early jazz,⁴ and the musical practices of enslaved Africans⁵ are lumped together in the historical archive of the Euro-American collective memory under the name “noise”—that is, disorder, the unthought, the unplanned, the unwelcome, marked by the apparent absence of the human capacity for reason—and we can be certain that this is the work of the white gaze, in that peculiar zone where the visual and the aural collide: the realm of racialized sound.

The ongoing ejection of Black musics from the category of music aligns directly with the historic and ongoing dehumanization of Black people, the kind that was used to rationalize and justify enslavement, imperialism, plunder, and genocide on the timescale of the past half millennium—what Frank Wilderson (2016) called “the time of the paradigm,” the historical frame that we think of as the age of reason and of global capitalism. As scholars like Cedric Robinson (2000), Gayatri Spivak (1999), Achille Mbembe (2017), Sylvia Wynter (2003), and Lisa Lowe (2015) have carefully outlined, we must rethink these historical frames of Reason in terms of Black and Postcolonial reason, capitalism as Racial Capitalism. What is meant by these maneuvers is not that Black and indigenous peoples have their own special, essentially different forms of reason or trade. Rather, it is that the systems of knowledge and exchange that operate in the West and that influence thought, freedom, power, and wealth distribution around the planet, are constituted from the very beginning by a massive investment in the concepts of race and racial difference. Mbembe’s *Critique of Black Reason* (2017) highlights that Reason as you know it is built around a central “vertiginous assemblage” (2) of Blackness in particular and race in general:

a collection of voices, pronouncements, discourses, forms of knowledge, commentary, and nonsense, whose object is things or people “of African origin”. . . From the beginning, its primary activity was fantasizing.... A range of intermediaries and institutions ... contributed to the development of this reason and its transformation into common sense and a habitus. ... its function was to codify the conditions for the appearance and the manifestation of the *racial subject* that would be called the Black Man (*le Nègre*) and, later, within colonialism, the Native (*L’indigène*). . . . [The] goal was to produce the Black Man as a racial subject and site of savage exteriority, who was therefore set up for moral disqualification and practical instrumentalization. We can call this founding narrative the *Western consciousness of Blackness*. In seeking to answer the question “Who is he?” the narrative seeks to name a reality exterior to it and to situate that reality in relationship to an *I* considered to be the center of all meaning. From this perspective, anything that is not identical to that *I* is abnormal. (27–28)

So Black reason is then a name for this central fact about Western thought, namely that it constitutes itself around and in terms of its racial Others; Western consciousness is none other than Western consciousness of Blackness.

As the above examples suggest, we have to recognize, in our current framework—this convulsive half-millennium of history—that the underlying category of music begins and ends with the category of the human; and, as many scholars, notably Sylvia Wynter (2003; see also Wynter and McKittrick 2015), have pointed out, the category of the human has been primarily organized around enlightened Western rational Man, in relation to which, again, anything that is not identical is abnormal.

Given all of this, I want to apply similar pressure to the category known as improvisation. We might take improvisation to denote that semi-transparent, multi-staged, multi-leveled process through which we sense, perceive, think, decide, and act in real time. But this notion then encompasses such a broad range of behaviors that it becomes difficult to draw a boundary around it, let alone to definitively prove its presence or absence in a given situation. We cannot “know” whether an action is improvised just by observing it in a vacuum. What we seem to be doing, instead of precisely identifying improvisation according to some intrinsic attribute, is allowing cultural and contextual factors to regulate its presence or absence. That is, we “perceive” improvisation through systems of difference.

Improvisation occupies a strange and unstable position in Western music, as if it were the source of an anxiety. Neither “composition” nor “performance,” improvisation is rarely mentioned by name—not because it is actually rare in culture, but indeed perhaps because it is dangerously omnipresent.⁶ By the twentieth century it had become one of Western music’s principal Others: constructed as a kind of epistemological antithesis to composition, improvisation enjoys a status of literally zero value in the Western economy of musical “works.”⁷ Not coincidentally, improvisation plays a foundational role in Black culture and aesthetics. (And we can’t help but read this as one link in a chain of avoidance, repression, or concealment of improvisation: evidence of a kind of centrifugal force in Eurocentric discourse.)

These key oppositional traits—ubiquity and unknowability, zero value and maximum influence—set up a complex field of signifying relations around the concept of improvisation. This chapter maps out the terrain across which that line of inquiry has led me; it summarizes this ongoing attempt not to master the category but to undo it, to look, as it were, beneath it.

I first found myself in this game as a kind of willing shill for one of my mentors, composer and scholar George Lewis, whose influence in the realms of music studies and music-making cannot be measured, and who, it could fairly be said, engendered the “meta-field” known today as critical improvisation studies (Lewis 1996, 2004, 2009, 2014, 2019). Taking up Lewis’s project, many scholars have sought to scour every corner of the humanities, arts, and sciences for traces of this untraceable quality (Nettl and Russell 1998, Solis and Nettl 2009, Heble and Wallace 2013, Fischlin et al. 2013, Heble and

Caines 2014, Siddall and Waterman 2016, Lewis and Piekut 2016, Born et al. 2017).

Music theory has enthusiastically joined the fray; a colloquy under the heading “Theorizing Improvisation (Musically)” was collected in the journal *Music Theory Online* (19.2, 2013) by Paul Steinbeck, one of Lewis’s graduate students, with a critical response from Lewis himself (2013).

I would argue that such efforts to theorize improvisation over the last two decades must be understood as historically inextricable from concurrent efforts to theorize embodiment (Iyer 1998, 2002, 2004, 2014; Cox 2016; Godøy and Leman 2010; Leman et al. 2018), temporality (Hasty 1997; Clark and Rehding 2016; Iyer, forthcoming), and affect (Thompson and Biddle 2013) in music. Rather than treat each movement as yet another proverbial “turn” in the field, we can accept that all of these lines of inquiry have, in a shared post-post-structuralist moment, similarly addressed questions of ephemerality, the limits of textual and score-based analysis, and the crucial roles of bodies, intersubjectivity, and sociality in perception, cognition, and meaning-making.

However, the more closely I have tried to study the perspectives on improvisation resulting from the aforementioned efforts, the less they have cohered into a unified concept. It would seem to me that the notion of improvisation must be viewed as a historically sedimented assemblage of mechanisms, relations, desires, and omissions. But meanwhile, sometime in the last decade I noticed with increasing alarm an accumulation of almost entrepreneurial investment in the term “improvisation.” The neo-disciplinary zeal apparent in the institutional coalescence around the term, with its institutes, festival-cum-conferences, journals, edited volumes, and other stabilizing gestures⁸ dedicated to this most unstable topic, felt out of step with a certain constellation of ethical concerns. How is it that a certain class of events, one already established to have zero value before the law, and already aligned with Blackness, indigeneity, and other forms of alterity, could become the site of such newfound academic value? It started to fit the pattern of a rehabilitative gesture, a vindication, a hollow, performative rescue of that which society has deemed abject. Mbembe writes:

[T]he reaffirmation of a human identity denied by others is part of a discourse of refutation and rehabilitation. But if the discourse of rehabilitation seeks to confirm the *cobelonging* of Black people to humanity in general, it does not—except in a few rare cases—set aside the fiction of a racial subject or of *race in general*. In fact, it embraces the fiction. (2017, 89)

As I read on, and also found myself delivering talks at various conferences in the field, I couldn’t help but notice that in the busy new-construction zone of Critical Improvisation Studies, hardly any Black scholars were ever cited. Despite the epistemological revolution of the last half-century in Black studies, Postcolonial thought, Feminist theory, indigeneity, queer theory, and their intersections, it was rare to find much of it in the bibliographies of Critical Improvisation Studies. There was a severe lack of engagement with Black studies, in particular. The one author I would find repeatedly, the single tolerated exception, was our beloved progenitor George Lewis. This is not his fault; it is the fault of others who

failed to follow up on the implications of his crucial (1996) intervention, “Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Forms.” That one essay has appeared in so many otherwise-non-Black syllabi and anthologies that it has apparently functioned for music studies as a kind of permanent stopgap measure. It’s an example of what Stuart Hall called “the incorporation of the kind of difference that doesn’t make a difference of any kind” (1998, 23).

Juxtaposed against this were the very real histories of violence that coincide with capital-D difference, the violent, constitutive difference that give rise to Afrological forms in the first place. I’m talking about global anti-Blackness, in the history of enslavement and its afterlife. Saidiya Hartman is one of the foremost scholars excavating the lives of the enslaved from their obscure, fleeting traces in the physical archive of transactions and accounts of their oppressors. But there is much articulated about the afterlife of enslavement in the present. Christina Sharpe, in her book *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016), details the case of the girl who wrote “Hi.”

“She comes to us from the front pages of the *New York Times* ... Writing is discovered on a school gym bathroom wall. Two students are accused of vandalism: 12-year-old Mikia Hutchings, who is Black, and her (unnamed in the article) white girlfriend “As part of an agreement with the state to have the charges dismissed in juvenile court, Mikia admitted to the allegations of criminal trespassing. Mikia ... spent her summer on probation, under a 7pm curfew, and had to complete 16 hours of community service Her friend, who is white, was let go after her parents paid restitution.”

(Vega 2014, quoted in Sharpe 2016, 121)

I chose this example—I could just as easily have used any number of recent news stories from 2018 such as the Philadelphia Starbucks incident, or the case of the eleven-year-old African American girl tased by a policeman for suspected shoplifting, or any one of the thousands of tragic, traumatic examples of the removal of Black life in an ordinary encounter gone wrong. What I hope to indicate is that such clearly improvisative moments that are contiguous with everyday life—events of extremely minor import, the innocuous actions of innocents—are systemically suspected, abhorred, criminalized, punished. So this kind of systemic struggle is what I wanted to study: the very unequal distribution of experience itself, the differential ways that the world “shows up” for different populations, in the real-time, improvisative flow of everyday life. Because if we can’t even agree on that, then what do we mean when we speak of improvisation in music? In whose music? Improvisation for whom, and compared to what?

[I]t is not the specifics of any one event or set of events that are endlessly repeatable and repeated, but the totality of the environments in which we struggle; the machines in which we live; what I am calling the weather. (Sharpe 2016, 111)

Living as I have argued we do in the wake of slavery, in spaces where we were never meant to survive, or have been punished for surviving and for daring to claim or make spaces of something like freedom, we yet reimagine and transform spaces for and practices of an ethics of care (as in repair, maintenance, attention), an ethics of seeing, and of being in the wake as consciousness.

(Sharpe 2016, 130–131)

To get beneath improvisation, I sought a scientifically informed humanism, one that could face the instabilities of truth, knowledge, and power with rigor and care. What I wanted from science was a rigorous understanding of the limits of any species-wide claim; what I wanted from the humanities was an acknowledgement of the limits of categories like “music” and “the human.” But for decades, what I tended to find at the intersection of science and the music humanities was a reinscription of those categories; provincial claims to universality; the pervasive tendency to let aspects of nineteenth-century Western tonal music stand for human music; a skepticism of rhythm, improvisation, or creativity in performance; a facile equation of all forms of musical “training”; an unquestioning belief in the measurability of music; a persistent circularity in claims like “music makes us human.” Music was invariably treated as an object, a substance, clearly identifiable, ready to be received and “liked” by human beings, as if it came to us, rather than from us.

Several years ago I found myself gravitating to the work of historical musicologist and evolutionary biologist Gary Tomlinson, in particular his remarkable book *A Million Years of Music: The Emergence of Human Modernity* (2015a). It seemed as though he might make some significant headway in reconsidering the scientific components of musicality as a capacity, musicking as a social practice, musicmaking as a creative (as in, constructive) embodied action, by looking at nothing less than the fossil record. I found myself highlighting a potential point of contact among what Tomlinson calls “cultural archives” (2015a, 38), Foucault’s “archive,” and Bourdieu’s “habitus”—different views on how an accumulation and hardening of past cultural information shapes sociality, behavior, and interaction in the (co-)present. For Tomlinson, what is generally thought of as a cultural archive is at one with biology, as expressed in his term “biocultural evolution.” His succinct, non-essentialist definition of culture—“the transmission to future generations of learning acquired during a lifetime” (42)—allows for emergence, situatedness, local and generational specificity, and historical change. Yet I can’t help but notice how it neither mentions nor rules out difference or power.

Tomlinson does address difference more explicitly in a short essay titled “Beneath Difference” (2015b), in which he offers a corrective to what he identifies as two common “mistakes” in evolutionary considerations of music. “The first,” he writes, “misjudges what is being recognized as universally human. It is not *difference* that the best new evolutionary work judges to be innate, but *similarity*, and as I have suggested,” he continues, “the fascination with alterity in the recent humanities has always been tacitly predicated on this more general human community” (370). In other words, our

theorizations of difference are founded upon an epistemological assumption of species-wide sameness. The second mistake is “to presume that universal features [of the species] will be narrowly deterministic of human behavior” (371): that, for example, the selective pressures that gave rise to our aural capacities led inevitably to an association between a major triad and happiness. In a key passage, Tomlinson responds to that common error, by describing the human production of difference as if it were a kind of situated improvisation: “The foremost innate similarity of all humans is the capacity to respond flexibly to circumstances and so to produce difference through complex social, cultural, and environmental action.... *We are all humanly the same, most deeply, because we are all programmed to generate difference*” (371, emphasis added). He goes on to describe this particularly human flexibility as “very special indeed” and “unprecedented in the history of life on earth,” and he highlights “the *inevitability* that that [biological] sameness, given its phylogenetic history, would burgeon into that [cultural] difference.” This is the benign, celebratory view of sociality and difference that we have come to recognize not only in the sciences, but also in critical improvisation studies. There is nothing particularly wrong with it, but it manages to put the realities of cultural difference rather mildly. How are we to understand the last five hundred years of violence, suffering, and loss as merely the result of a proliferation of difference in the human species? That is why I found it necessary to turn to some far more trenchant perspectives on this “capacity.”

If cultural difference is inevitable, then perhaps so too is the differential distribution of difference, or the differential distribution of power. But I am reminded of another quite singular attribute of the human species. Among mammals, only three species will form arbitrary alliances, to then gang up on and murder each another: wolves, chimpanzees, and humans (Wrangham 1999). Humankind’s doomed pair of capacities—arbitrary alliances (or “communities”), and mutual murder—was perhaps also selected for in some deep past; but whether that places these behaviors in the realm of aesthetics alongside musicality is simply too barbaric to contemplate. But it does place our species squarely in the condition of an endless precarity: the condition, identified with the current neoliberal economic moment but probably predating and outlasting it, in which the most powerful among us take advantage of the most vulnerable. Judith Butler defines precarity as the condition of “differential distribution of precariousness” (2015, 33).

The discourse of critical improvisation studies is full of warm assurances about community. But if we understand that humans can also improvise murderous alliances, we might think twice about this banal category, with its implications for race, nation, and kinship, and its use as a premise for war, hyperpolicing, and other blood rites. More benignly, we might hypothesize that even as bland a formation as community emerges in relation to other such potential or actual aggregates; we gather for safety, to consolidate power and resources, and to share work and its fruits, and it is in these relational contexts—families, caves, tribes, villages, cities, each one situated among many—that musicking emerges.

Beneath Improvisation

In invoking what lurks “beneath improvisation,” I borrow from Tomlinson’s essay “Beneath Difference,” even if my agenda would seem somewhat at cross-purposes from his. If beneath cultural difference is some kind of biological sameness, it is also the case that beneath any presumed unity or “sameness” of improvisation from a bodily, evolutionary, or cognitive perspective lies a differential distribution of possibility, an incommensurate difference. Simply put, we don’t all enjoy the same freedoms. Indeed, “Freedom” will turn out to be the master trope, the devil at the end of this conversation, who’ll be tricking us all along the way.

So, finally, to the core of this chapter. “Beneath” improvisation, I piece together an aggregate of verbs involving varying degrees of volition:

- Being
- Doing
- Sensing
- Feeling
- Thinking
- Speaking
- Acting
- Moving

which maps directly, one-to-one, onto this constellation of recognizable nouns:

- Subjectivity
- Practice
- Phenomenology
- Affect
- Cognition
- Discourse
- Agency
- Migration

We will stroll through a few of these topics, each one a sprawling network of conceptual complexity and scholarly intrigue, and each of direct relevance to the theorizing of improvisation. But also, I want to condition each one with one or more of the following:

- while Black/Brown/indigenous
- while non-male
- while queer
- while colonized
- while undocumented

- while seeking refuge
- while disabled

Practice is a term for how we “do” everyday life. Pierre Bourdieu (1977) developed the idea of the *habitus* as a generative field in culture, the “durably installed generative system of regulated improvisations”—that is, a self-sustaining and continuously evolving relational system of social understandings of how one should act: how we do what we’re supposed to do, and how those suppositions come to be. Though never one to shy away from questions of power, Bourdieu only occasionally addresses structural difference:

[H]abitus could be considered as a subjective but not individual system of internalized structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class ... *each individual system of dispositions* may be seen as a *structural variant* of all the other group or class habitus, expressing the difference between trajectories and positions inside or outside the class. (1977, 86)

That is to say that culture hosts not one but many interpenetrating, overlaid versions of what we call practice, different ways of doing everyday life, which we understand to represent different sociopolitical vantages: what social scientists describe as different structural positions.

Against this again rather benign account of class difference, we can look at Saidiya Hartman’s (1997) theorization of practice in the context of enslavement. She invokes De Certeau in describing Black practice while in bondage as

“a way of operating” defined by “the non-autonomy of its field of action,” internal manipulations of the established order, and ephemeral victories. The tactics that comprise the everyday practices of the dominated have neither the means to secure a territory outside the space of domination nor the power to keep or maintain what it [has] won in fleeting, surreptitious, and necessarily incomplete victories.... These efforts generally focused on the object status and castigated personhood of the slave, the pained and ravished body, severed affiliations and natal alienation, and the assertion of denied needs. Practice is not simply a way of naming these efforts but rather a way of thinking about the character of resistance, the precariousness of the assaults waged against domination, the fragmentary character of these efforts and the transient battles won, and the characteristics of a politics without a proper locus. (50–51)

The term phenomenology puts us in the realm of embodied experience. Elsewhere I have posited (2004) a correspondence between experience and improvisation, in the suggestion that everything we do is improvisative, consisting of moment-to-moment sensory-guided action. The philosopher Alva Noë describes experience as a “temporally extended pattern of exploratory activity” (2000, 128). This could serve as a definition of improvisation: the real-time interaction with the structure of one’s environment. As with improvisation, it is not a passive interaction, for the perceiver/improviser is engaged in

sensorimotor activity, skillfully probing the world at will. This process of embodied action situates the perceiver within the environment; so the perceiver must interact with her embodied self as well.

Phenomenology already offers what is called an embodied view of cognition—the idea that mental processes are grounded in bodily experience. Eleanor Rosch, one of the authors of the influential 1991 treatise *The Embodied Mind*, writes in her introduction to the book's second edition (2017) about what her co-author Evan Thompson calls “enaction,” a particular formulation of embodied cognition:

The core idea of enaction is that the living body is a self-organizing system. This is in contrast to viewing it as a machine that happens to be made of meat rather than silicon. Mechanisms act and change their state only because of input and programming from sources outside of themselves, whereas the living body continuously reorganizes itself to survive and maintain its own homeostasis. (Notice how this alone is a radical departure from the dominant view of the body in present research.) Survival means that the organism must preserve the integrity of its boundaries while having constant interchange with the environment. Even the simplest one-celled organism exchanges materials through the semi-permeable membrane of its cell walls and performs overt actions relevant to its self maintenance, such as swimming towards a detectable food source or away from insupportable temperatures. Actions of the organism are thus purposive and have been said by enactivists to be the embryonic forms of cognition, of mind, and even of values. (xxxviii).

There is a tendency, when talking about phenomenology and cognition, to direct research questions to the self, to the solitary body-mind system, to inner experience, and not to our relationships to others—not to the social. Scientists and philosophers imagine human existence to be more solitary than we could possibly ever be. But here, in Rosch's invocation of a term like “values,” we start to hear faint traces of the social. “The mind in the body in the world,” it must constantly be stressed, only exists among other such bodies and minds; basic cognitive skills like language are acquired from others, in relation to others, in the presence of others, and serve primarily to connect us to others.

In the last twenty years, the discovery of mirror neurons allowed scientists to imagine a possible neural basis for “empathy” in embodied cognition (Gallese et al. 1996; Kohler et al. 2002; Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia 2010; Gallese et al. 2011). To see or hear someone move was shown to activate the networks in one's own brain involved in an analogous motion. This is what neuroscientists call “action understanding”—to see or hear someone do something with their body is to imagine or fantasize doing it oneself. However, in a study at the University of Toronto, this neuronal empathy was shown, chillingly, to fail across racial categories; test subjects (all white Canadians) were shown to display far less mirror neuron activation when shown, say, a video of a black person picking up a coffee cup, than they would when shown a video of a white person performing the same motion (Gutsell and Inzlicht 2010). So a top-down belief in racial difference seems to have the

power to override what is otherwise described as a bottom-up neural response; the most basic forms of empathy seem to be constrained by belief in racial difference. This extends to higher levels of cognition; a search for the term “racial empathy gap” produces a depressing mountain of research revealing, for example, that doctors prescribe less pain medication to black people (Silverstein 2013). We have an abundance of such scientific findings about dehumanizing systemic interactions across differentials of power and privilege.

We don’t need to go too far down the murky and controversial road of mirror neurons, but we can consider the function of such systems in light of the following assertion: what we call music perception begins with an aural action of understanding (Iyer 2014). In the embodied music cognition framework (Iyer 1998), to hear music is to hear the actions of others. The now-conventional thinking about mirror neurons as a system that generates simulations of actions and mental states of another—what has perhaps abusively been called empathy—has been challenged by Maria Brincker (2012), who essentially asks us to rethink what constitutes the social:

In terms of social cognition I question the traditional focus on hidden mental states. I suggest that the motor contribution might have more to do with understanding the process of how others choose their actions, navigate the world and relate to others than with simulating specific actual actions or mental states. (159)

This isn’t mere mental mimesis of another person’s actions, but rather a process of tracking the way that person improvises in the here and now, in relation to what’s at hand. How is this person making choices and taking action in real time? Brincker suggests recasting it as affordance understanding, invoking J. J. Gibson’s term for how our bodies make use of what’s at hand: “In terms of social cognition ‘mirror’ circuits might thus help us understand not only the intentional actions others are actually performing—but also what they could have done, did not do and might do shortly” (Brincker 2015, 18).

Again, scientists have a way of glossing over difference, but we now know that when individual armed state actors somehow “mis-track” a Black person’s intentional actions—Philando Castile, Tamir Rice, and on down the ghastly list—the gruesome consequences are, in the vast majority of cases, tolerated and sanctioned by the state. So where do we find ourselves, along this interface of sameness, difference, and power?

Agency—the socially mediated capacity to act (Ahearn 2001)—seems to overlap significantly with what we mean by improvisation. It does not function in a vacuum; agency forms part of a dyad with what’s called structure, the social systems that do the mediating (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). Much ink has been spilled on questions of agency, most recently in a special colloquy in *Music Theory Online* (Montague 2018), and it’s especially often used to condescendingly heroicize the oppressed: agency as resistance. The historian Walter Johnson, in his essay “On Agency,” cautions against “a teleology ... which ultimately reproduces the idea of a liberal agent as the universal

subject of history” (2003, 117). He warns that framing every act under the rubric of “agency” has the effect of “obscuring important questions about both the way in which enslaved people theorized their own actions and the practical process through which those actions provided the predicate for new ways of thinking about slavery and resistance” (2003, 118).

Regarding subjectivity, or the sense of autonomous selfhood, we can look at a century of rethinking of the subject—including poststructuralist challenges to the notion of the unified self. Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, and Saussure revealed economic, ethical, psychological, and linguistic underpinnings of contemporary subjectivity; however, as Moten (2003) points out, none of these four thought very much about the subjectivities of those who are not conferred a basic status of personhood, despite the fact that these thinkers, like all of us, lived within a historical framework characterized by the large-scale revoking of personhood. Accordingly, what we learn from centuries of African diasporic writing is that the privilege of subjectivity cannot be taken for granted. Writers and theorists from Zora Neal Hurston ([1933] 1999) to Houston Baker (1984) and Henry Louis Gates (1989) have identified and catalogued improvisative tendencies in African American culture. These projects form a counterpoint with the trenchant interventions of Black Feminist theorists like Hortense Spillers (1987), Sylvia Wynter (1994), Audre Lorde ([1979] 2007), Saidiya Hartman (1997), and Christina Sharpe (2010), who seek, by training the critical tools of literary analysis on the archive itself, to destabilize and topple the conceit of Western Man as the idealized, transcendental subject. Their efforts lead us to construe subjectivity as relational; the self must be understood in terms of its position in the realm of the social, which is to say, in a network of power relations with other subjects. There is not one subjectivity, but many. There is no transcendent subjectivity; there is only intersubjectivity. Quoting Fred Moten’s influential introductory chapter, “The Resistance of the Object,” from his book *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, in rethinking Black subjectivity from the condition of the person-as-property:

The animative materiality—the aesthetic, political, sexual, and racial force—of the ensemble of objects that we might call black performances, black history, blackness, is a real problem and a real chance for the philosophy of the human being (which would necessarily bear and be irreducible to what is called, or what somebody might hope to someday call, subjectivity). (2003, 7–8)

Crucially, this line of thought leads us to construe diaspora as a form of improvisation: collective movement in relation to power. Diaspora is not only a state of displacement, but also an ongoing navigation of social difference. It is a condition of having to perceive, decide, and act under the watchful gaze of a suspicious and distrustful host culture, particularly intensified by the hypervisibility associated with racial difference. Diaspora is, we might unremarkably observe, improvisation within constraints. Franz Fanon described the experience of colonial occupation (which has often been a precondition and impetus for diasporic movement) in a similar way:

There is not occupation of territory, on the one hand, and independence of persons on the other. It is the country as a whole, its history, its daily pulsation that are contested, disfigured ... under these conditions, the individual's breathing is an observed breathing. It is a combat breathing. ([1959]1967, 50)

This brings to mind the case of Eric Garner, whose gruesome public strangulation by a New York City police officer was documented on a bystander's cell phone. The officers involved were not indicted. Similarly we think of Ferguson, Missouri's Michael Brown, an African American teenager whose supposed crime of jaywalking led to him being shot at a dozen times by white police officer Darren Wilson, and his dead body left out on the street for hours; of unarmed Black teenager Trayvon Martin, pursued and killed by a vigilante, who deemed him a trespasser in his own Florida neighborhood and was later acquitted of all charges; and many thousands more. The condition of Blackness is one in which basic bodily acts—walking and breathing—attract extreme, state-sanctioned violence and terror. Improvisation here takes on radically different meanings for privileged actors and for their victims, for those who move with power and those who simply seek to move across it.

Improvisation could be therefore accurately described as movement in relation to power; or since power is omnipresent, we could just call it "movement in relation." Here I invoke Relation in the sense employed by the late Martinican poet and theorist Edouard Glissant, in *The Poetics of Relation* ([1990]1997). In an interview with Mantha Diawara, Glissant explained,

Relation is made up of all the differences in the world and that we shouldn't forget a single one of them, even the smallest. If you forget the tiniest difference in the world, well, Relation is no longer Relation. Now, what do we do when we believe this? We call into question, in a formal manner, the idea of the universal. The universal is a sublimation, an abstraction that enables us to forget small differences; we drift upon the universal and forget these small differences, and Relation is wonderful because it doesn't allow us to do that.

(Diawara 2011, 9)

One of the universals that we drift upon, that Glissant and others seem to be referring to, is the concept of freedom. One of the most potent signifiers in Western discourse, freedom may well be heard as improvisation's master trope. Yet freedom, as scholars like Orlando Patterson (1985) and Mimi Thi Nguyen (2012) have observed, can only be thoroughly understood in relation to its opposites: unfreedom, subjection, incarceration, bare life. The concept of freedom as we know it scarcely exists outside of histories of enslavement and domination.

This was illuminated in a recent talk by Hortense Spillers (2014) about Thomas Jefferson's personal enslaved concubine, Sally Hemings. It's well known that many of the U.S.'s so-called founding fathers were slaveowners. What's truly strange is that the rhetoric of freedom that was used to usher in the birth of the nation was authored by

such men in the immediate presence of its complete opposite. Jefferson's phrase "All men are created equal," which appears in his famous preamble to the Declaration of Independence, is starkly contradicted by his own and his country's dependence on the enslavement of others. In the 1780s Jefferson became minister to France, where he discussed the revolutionary ideals of *liberté, égalité, fraternité* with the Marquis de Lafayette, advising him on his Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. Jefferson brought slaves with him to France, including Sally Hemings, a black woman born into bondage who was the biological daughter of Jefferson's father-in-law, and who gave birth to many of Jefferson's own "illegitimate" children: Sally Hemings, one of the most unfree human beings imaginable, was literally standing in the same room with Jefferson and Lafayette as the two statesmen discussed freedom and the rights of man.

This wrenching contradiction embedded in the very authoring of the notion of freedom affects every one of us. We are all caught up in and benefiting from not just the business of music, but the business of enslavement. In an interview in 2014, Patterson offered the following:

The idea of freedom is seen as "inherent"—so there is nothing to explain ... [The idea is that] "Everybody wants to be free because it is part of the human condition." That's nonsense. Freedom as a value, as a cherished part of one's culture, as something to strive for and die for, is unusual in human history. You can't just take it for granted. So the question turns into, how did freedom become important? My explanation is that freedom emerged as the antithesis to the social death of slavery."

(Lambert 2014, 46)

Under slavery, he explains, there were three groups of people: masters, slaves, and non-slaves.

All three come to discover this thing we call freedom through their relationships. For the master, freedom is being able to do what you please with another person: freedom as power. For the slave—well, what does a slave yearn for? To be emancipated, to get rid of the social death that is slavery ... The third group, the non-slaves or freemen, look at the slaves and say, "We are not them. We are born free." Suddenly, being born free becomes important, in a way it never could be for slaves. Freemen have a different status in society, one that does not depend on their socioeconomic class. (ibid.)

In the horrific context of slavery and its afterlife, freedom is then best understood not as something that Black people have, but something that they must get. The phrase "get free" is a familiar one; it is a goal in Black music and a dream in Black life. It is in his reading of a moment in Frederick Douglass's (1845) classic narrative of his enslavement that Fred Moten notes "the freedom drive that animates black performances" (2003, 12).

Today when we talk about freedom in Black music, or freedom for Black people, we are still talking about something closer to fugitivity: escape.

Today it seems that we are gripped by questions of freedom—of movement, of speech, of assembly—in our cities and towns, on our campuses, in our presses, in our public restrooms and our elementary schools. We are also witness to the endangered passage of unprecedented numbers of people across the earth, within, outside, and across the political borders of the state. How do our troubled core concepts of freedom give rise to the expressions of empire, as expressed in theaters of war with their code names, Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom, and the massive flows of refugees that they might engender? Mimi Thi Nguyen, a scholar of Critical Refugee Studies, asks this question in *The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and Other Refugee Passages* (2012). She argues, “the gift of freedom is not simply a ruse for liberal war but its core proposition, and a particularly apt name for its operations of violence and power.”

I could have continued, pointing out disparities between, say, “affect” as it is routinely theorized (e.g. Massumi 2002) and, say, “refugee affect” (Harney 2013), or “temporality” (Bowker 2015) and “queer futurity” (Muñoz 2009)—but by now the pattern is clear enough. The most we can say at this point is that the transparency of the machineries beneath improvisation—being/doing/acting/sensing/feeling/etc.—cannot be taken for granted while Black/non-male/queer/undocumented/disabled/precarious. These mechanisms’ theoretical manifestations—subjectivity, practice, agency, phenomenology, affect, and so forth—seem not to operate equally in the universe of constrained affordances and potentialities that characterize non-normative, othered bodies. Even “relationality” falls short in accounting for these incommensurabilities (Feldman 2016).

If music theory asks us to consider formal analysis in the abstract, or musical experience in general, or music cognition on the scale of the human species, then we will always inevitably find ourselves up against multiple incommensurabilities and differential relationships to the assumed freedoms underlying these disciplinary quests. We cannot theorize improvisation uniformly across incommensurate domains of experience, without accounting (endlessly) for freedom itself. Indeed, the presumed separability of the humanities was always a consequence of humanity’s massively unequal distribution of freedom—the separations and differentiations imposed by humanity on itself. We are left with a handful of inconclusive phrases:

response to necessity
movement in relation
(co)Presence while (un)free

Or, quoting Moten (2016):

The paradox is all about what it is to want to escape the history of freedom, or the history of the struggle for freedom.

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Notes:

(¹) The Twitter account @NewMusicDrama aggregated many such responses in real time in the days following the Pulitzer announcement. See, for example, <https://twitter.com/NewMusicDrama/status/986672029758836736> and <https://twitter.com/NewMusicDrama/status/986672031092617222>, accessed December 10, 2018.

(²) <https://twitter.com/NewMusicDrama/status/985984043731898370/>, accessed September 7, 2018.

(³) Evolutionary biologist Steven Pinker listed “rap music” as an example of “not-quite-music” (1997, 534–535). Rose 2008 observed that the “blanket rejection of the creativity in hip hop is categorical for some critics [who insist that] hip hop is not music, the rhymes are not poetic, and everything about it is simple and requires no special talent” (218). Despite the fact that a team of data scientists (Mauch et al. 2015) recently reported, upon surveying a vast corpus of recorded music, that hip-hop was the single biggest influence on popular music in the last half-century, it seems that there remains a persistent and powerful minority who refuse to confer on hip-hop the ontological status of music.

(⁴) Kettlewell 2018 outlines a number of such positions: “‘Does Jazz Put The Sin In Syncopation?’ asked Anne Shaw Faulkner in a 1921 issue of *The Ladies’ Home Journal*. She quoted the opinion of Dr. Henry Van Dyke, a Presbyterian clergyman and professor at Princeton, that jazz ‘is not music at all.’ Sigmund Spaeth took the same position in his piece for *Forum* in 1928, which was flatly entitled ‘Jazz Is Not Music.’ Mr. Spaeth, who would later become well-known as radio’s Tune Detective, heard the music of the golden age of early Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Bix Beiderbecke, and the rest as ‘merely a raucous and inarticulate shouting of hoarse-throated instruments, with each player trying to outdo his fellows, in fantastic cacophony.’ The American modernist critic Paul Rosenfeld began an essay with the sentence: “American music is not jazz. Jazz is not music” (1969, 221). *The New York Times*, on November 14, 1924, quoted concert pianist Ashley Pettis: “Jazz is nothing more or less than the distortion of every esthetic principle” (see Kettlewell 2018).

(⁵) Quoting Jeffrey Robert Young’s (2007) review of *The Sounds of Slavery* (2006) by Shane and Graham White:

In ritualized celebrations such as the Pinkster holiday that emerged in the New York region and the Jonkonnu festival celebrated in North Carolina, the singing and joyful sounding of African American voices worked in tandem with the instruments and drums wielded by black musicians to create a sensory experience that clearly belonged to the slaves themselves. White witnesses to these performances sometimes marveled at them and sometimes bemoaned what they deemed the alien noises emanating from the African American participants, but in either case, whites were acknowledging that they stood outside the cultural space forged through African American sounds.

(⁶) The centrality of improvisation in Western music history is still mentioned often (usually emblemized in the claim that “Bach/Mozart/Beethoven/Bartók/Messaien was a master improviser”). However, improvisation itself does not appear as a prominent feature of contemporary European or European-American glosses on “classical music.”

(⁷) Copyright law confers value (as intellectual property) to fixed compositions, and improvisation is taken to denote the absence of fixity. For a case study, see Sheridan (2002).

(⁸) The Oxford University Press webpage for the Lewis and Piekut (2016) edited volumes describes critical improvisation studies as “one of the fastest growing areas of scholarly inquiry.” <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/the-oxford-handbook-of-critical-improvisation-studies-volume-1-9780195370935>

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