

## Introduction: Unforeseen Encounters

Nicholas Chare and Marcel Swiboda

*[I]mprovisation is the ubiquitous practice of everyday life, a primary method of meaning exchange in any interaction. (Lewis 2007, 108)*

*Improvisation is a human response to necessity.*  
(Muhai Richard Abrams, cited in Iyer, 2016, 88)

In Frank A. Salamone's 2008 book, *The Culture of Jazz: Jazz as Critical Culture*, the author argues that the musical idiom of jazz has been central in helping shape the United States's cultural sense of itself. Like many other practitioners and scholars of jazz, Salamone finds America's historical valorisation of change mirrored in the celebration of change in the history of jazz (2008). What distinguishes Salamone from other proponents of this view is his use of the lexical formulation 'critical culture' to account for the ways in which jazz has historically reflected on the circumstances in which it has been made and, in the process, invited (self-)reflection regarding American cultural history more broadly conceived.

Whether not one chooses to adopt Salamone's formulation, there is no doubt that, for the last century (the first jazz recording was made in 1917), the signature call and response of jazz has helped draw attention to the 'dialogical'

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character of twentieth century American culture, to borrow a neologism from the philosopher and literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (Bakhtin, 2010).<sup>1</sup> And yet here emerges a testing paradox for our time: In an epoch in which a multiplicity of voices can seemingly find expression *without* engaging in concrete, situated dialogue, is there any mileage left in such appeals to neologisms like ‘dialogical’, or formulations such as ‘critical culture’, in helping furnish a basis for understanding or mobilising culture as a vehicle for reflecting on itself and interrogating the conditions in which it is created?

In order to briefly illustrate this paradox, consider the lip-service that has recently been paid to the culture and history of jazz qua ‘America’s art form’ by the US media in the aftermath of the 2016 election of Donald Trump as the 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States. In the weeks and months that followed the election, Google’s online news aggregator featured a sizeable number of often incendiary headlines featuring ‘Trump’ and ‘improvisation’. In one particularly telling example, ‘Trump’s Dangerous Love of Improvisation’, David A. Graham writing in *The Atlantic* in August 2017 drew parallels between the ‘improvised’ rhetoric of President Trump and the extended approach to musical improvisation developed by the pioneering jazz saxophonist John Coltrane.

Given the historical centrality of jazz to American cultural and artistic life, one might approach this article on first reading expecting to find the ad-hoc utterances of the US President to be unfavourably judged in light of the virtuosic experimentalism of one of jazz music’s improvisational titans. What one actually encounters is a comparison between the rhetorical effusions of Donald Trump and the purportedly undisciplined improvising efforts of John Coltrane during his years with the first great Miles Davis Quintet in the mid-to-late 1950s and on the early recordings with his own first great John Coltrane Quartet that followed at the turn of the decade. What unites Trump’s current incarnation and Coltrane in his transition from band member to frontman, according to Graham, is an inability to know when to stop: ‘Both are prodigious improvisers, tending to whip up new ideas and thoughts on the spot. And both seem unsure where to stop improvising’ (Graham, 2017).

The context for this comparison is provided by an earlier article from the *New York Times* by Glenn Thrush and Peter Baker entitled ‘Trump’s Threat to North Korea was Improvised’. The article focuses on Donald Trump’s off-the-

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<sup>1</sup> Dialogue is a key word in academic engagements with improvisation. Cutting across the interdisciplinary incarnations of improvisation studies, theoretical interpretations of improvisation’s dialogical character occur with great frequency. For one of the most illustrative and wide-ranging accounts of improvisation as a mode of dialogic interaction, see Daniel Fischlin and Ajay Heble’s (2004) collection *The Other Side of Nowhere: Jazz, Improvisation and Communities in Dialogue*. For an account of Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism in relation to improvisation and how it has been taken up by scholars of improvisation studies, see Marcel Swiboda’s contribution to this issue.

cuff ‘fire and fury’ statement aimed at the leader of North Korea, Kim Jong-Un, made in August 2017, in which the President pointedly remarked that any military challenges against US interests waged by Kim or his regime would be ‘met with fire and fury like the world has never seen’ – a statement that the majority of media commentators viewed as an improvised instance of wanton brinkmanship (Thrush and Baker, 2017). Graham parallels Trump’s unregulated utterance with the (over)extended length of some of Coltrane’s solos, concluding that what Trane and Trump respectively demonstrate is that, while ‘fun and [...] quintessentially American’, improvisation left to its own devices is profligate and potentially very dangerous (Graham, 2017).

Such an account of Coltrane knowingly or unknowingly echoes those of critics who, in the early 1960s, decried his experiments along similar lines, most infamously in John Tynan’s Shakespeare-derived description of Coltrane’s ‘sheets of sound’ approach to improvisation, as ‘sound and fury signifying nothing’ (Tynan, cited in Kofsky 1998, 272). What historical hindsight now shows however with regard to such claims is that, now as then, they fail to heed the contextual specificity in which Coltrane’s approach was forged – in no small measure one of reaction to America’s toxic racism during the Civil Rights struggles of the 1950s and early 1960s, to which some of Coltrane’s music was quite deliberately responding.<sup>2</sup> In the process they fundamentally miss the ways in which improvisational practice can speak critically to power.

One might try to counter-argue that the kinds of parallels being drawn by the likes of Graham and Tynan are intended to celebrate a worthy conception of improvisational art by distinguishing it from its eccentric avatars. Such an argument would nevertheless have to account for the fact that jazz has historically resisted fixed definition or categorisation – the very term ‘jazz’ itself being of specious origin. Correspondingly, even with the best of intentions, such arguments run the risk of essentialising jazz in ways that ethnically other improvisation by equating it with indiscipline – irrespective of whether this is celebrated or decried. That this is a problem with historical provenance is captured well by Rob Wallace:

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<sup>2</sup> Coltrane’s most explicit response to American racism in the Civil Rights period was his 1963 composition entitled “Alabama”, a dialogical musical rejoinder to the bombing by white supremacists of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, in which four young girls perished, earlier in the same year (see Swiboda, 2005). Coltrane’s composition took as its refrain the spoken cadences of the Reverend Dr Martin Luther King, from a speech he made to commemorate the victims of the bombing. For a more detailed examination of the political aspect of Coltrane’s music more broadly, see Kofsky, 1998. For more on the political aspects of John Coltrane’s music, see Tracey Nicholls’ article in this issue.

The word ‘improvisation’ like ‘jazz’, has had a dubious history. Like—and because of its connections to—jazz, improvisation has been alternately lauded and damned for its supposedly unplanned and thus irrational, unscientific, primitive and suspiciously ‘ethnic’ origins. (2016, 80)

Were Graham’s piece a contemporary one-off it wouldn’t prove a case for concern. However, the journalistic references to improvisation in relation to Trump that abounded as of 2016 have for the most part been used to excoriate him. What this illustrates is that a liberal media culture that prides itself on what it assumes is its moral and political rectitude can seemingly take in vain the hard-won achievements of some of America’s greatest cultural pioneers, in some cases forged in the heat of racial conflict, in order to disparage a President for precisely his own ignorance of time-honoured American values. Such illustrations thus cut to the core of the aforementioned paradox: How did US media culture end up ignoring the well-documented legacy of jazz’s dialogical encounters with reactionary ideologies such that it could negatively invoke jazz to shore up its own critical rejection of the politics of reaction it associates with Donald Trump?

It is important to stress here that the case of Trump constitutes a symptom of a broader and by no means exclusively American problematic consisting in the systematic undermining of the possibility of effective deliberative dialogue. Furthermore, this problematic is not restricted to media or political discourse. For example, it is just as likely to be encountered, albeit in less sensationalist and often stealthier forms, in the fields of science and technology, for example regarding claims of ‘value neutrality’, apparently placing these domains of inquiry beyond the purview of critical questioning outside of the narrowly prescribed limits they set for themselves. Even humanities discourse is far from immune—especially given the instrumentalisation of contemporary academic discourse.<sup>3</sup>

The paradox thus bounces back as a question: Whither critical culture in the current epoch? Where the humanities principally remain at an advantage in terms of providing a possible answer to this question is in their critical versatility and key to this versatility are their well-stocked theoretical and conceptual inventories. Yet the challenges posed to the humanities in their ability to dialogically mobilise their theoretical and conceptual tools by the arbiters of value neutrality demand not only that their inventories remain well-stocked, but that the humanities’ own claims made in the name of theory also be tested for robustness—a test that can be made by way of improvisation.

Improvisation, which by definition consists in the affirmation of what cannot be foreseen in advance, confounds contemporary obsessions with risk aversion. This is doubtless why some commentators view it as profligate or danger-

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<sup>3</sup> Edgar Landgraf’s article attends to the question of science’s need for more critical self-reflexivity. For an exploration of the problematic of instrumentalisation in the humanities, watch the interview with Adrian Rifkin also featured as part of this issue.

ous. Furthermore, that improvisation is liable to invite scepticism or wariness is a phenomenon that extends into the realm of academia – a fact indicated by the remarkably limited attention paid to improvisation by scholars working in the theoretical humanities. While this limitation might have been attenuated in recent years with the emergence of improvisation studies as a field of interdisciplinary enquiry, it remains strongly in evidence, even in areas of research and study that would eminently benefit from more sustained critical engagement with improvisation, for example, in comparative literature, cultural studies and performance studies.

Critical improvisation studies to date has succeeded in providing a crucial groundwork for thinking improvisation within interdisciplinary contexts. This incipient field of discourse has emerged over the last couple of decades, in part due to a cadre of scholars and performers working at the juncture of improvisation, community and social relations, primarily based in Canada. Central to this endeavour has been the University of Guelph-based Improvisation as Community and Social Practice (ICASP) initiative, coordinated across a number of Canadian academic institutions, between 2007 and 2014 and, more recently, the activities of its successor organisation, the International Institute for Critical Studies in Improvisation (IISCI).<sup>4</sup> It is nevertheless important to state that the Guelph-IISCI axis does not account for contemporary theoretical engagements with improvisation *tout court*. In fact there is currently taking place a multiplication of different ‘onto-epistemological’ perspectives within the field.<sup>5</sup>

In terms of published work, critical improvisation studies is slowly and steadily building a substantial body of material, at once attending to the singularity of improvisation and its complex roles in a diverse array of cultural practices. Most notable among the existing publications, in terms of the Guelph-IISCI nexus, it would be necessarily to include Daniel Fischlin and Ajay Heble’s groundbreaking edited collection *The Other Side of Nowhere: Jazz, Improvisation and Communities in Dialogue* (2004), alongside, Tracey Nicholls’s *An Ethics of Improvisation: Aesthetic Possibilities for a Political Future* (2012) and Daniel Fischlin, Ajay Heble and George Lipsitz’s *The Fierce Urgency of Now: Improvisation, Rights and the Ethics of Co-creation* (2013), Heble and Rebecca Caines’s *The Improvisation Studies*

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<sup>4</sup> These two organisations were founded by Ajay Heble, an academic and musician based at the University of Guelph, to provide a scholarly and pedagogic correlate to the long-running Guelph Jazz Festival, which Heble spearheaded in 1994. These initiatives have also variously involved other institutional affiliates, in Canada and beyond, including the University of British Columbia, the University of Regina, McGill University, Memorial University and the University of California: Santa Barbara.

<sup>5</sup> Edgar Landgraf’s article provides a critical survey of critical improvisation studies to date. ‘Onto-epistemological’ is a term used by Landgraf to draw distinctions between different approaches to critical improvisation studies.

*Reader: Spontaneous Acts* (2014) and Gillan Siddal and Ellen Waterman's *Negotiated Moments: Improvisation, Sound and Subjectivity* (2016).

Other noteworthy publications that have pursued the matter of improvisation's theorisation beyond the preoccupations primarily characteristic of this nexus—namely improvisation as a mode of politically-engaged social and community practice—include David Borgo's *Sync or Swarm: Improvising Music in a Complex Age* (2005), Gary Peters's *Philosophy of Improvisation* (2009), Edgar Landgraf's *Improvisation as Art: Conceptual Challenges, Historical Perspectives* (2011) and Franziska Schroeder and Mícheál Ó hAodha's collection entitled *Soundweaving: Writings on Improvisation* (2014)<sup>6</sup>. Broaching the diverse perspectives is George Lewis and Benjamin Piekut's two-volume *Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies* (2016) – the most detailed survey of the field to date. It is also important to bear in mind that critical improvisation studies didn't emerge *ex-nihilo*. There have been a number of important texts which themselves helped set the ground for what would follow in terms of the works already mentioned here, for example Paul Berliner's *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation* (1994), Hazel Smith's and Roger T. Dean's *Improvisation, Hypermedia and the Arts since 1945* (1997), Daniel Belgrad's *The Culture of Spontaneity: Improvisation and the Arts in Postwar America* (1999), R. Keith Sawyer's *Creating Conversations: Improvisation in Everyday Discourse* (2001) and Bruce Ellis Benson's *The Improvisation of Musical Dialogue: A Phenomenology of Music* (2003).

The extent and range of epochal changes currently taking place, whose own outcomes cannot be readily foreseen, are great. From the micromanagement of daily lived experience to the terrestrial upheavals that have led to the recently-minted geological coinage, 'the Anthropocene', an increasing anxiety regarding unregulated contingency effectively demands modes of critical engagement with these challenges that are able to respond to the vicissitudes of the present moment, while simultaneously recognizing that the ostensible newness of these challenges belies what is often a historical basis. Such an ability to affirm the unforeseeable is part of the improvisator's stock-in-trade. However, it is important to point out here that the improvisator isn't just one who is trained in the practice of skilled improvisation, but rather *everyone*, to the extent that improvisation is a feature of daily lived experience.

While improvisation may hitherto have largely been neglected by academics as a means to critically responding to the challenges the world might face at any given time, such disregard is in inverse proportion to improvisation's ubiquity as a facet of lived culture. As George Lewis writes, improvisation is 'as close to universal as critical method might responsibly entertain' (Lewis, 2007). As one of the key figures in the burgeoning field of critical improvisation studies, Lewis finds himself at the forefront of a small but slowly growing academic cho-

rus harking towards an examination of improvisation beyond just the more obviously skilled instances of its enactment. Lewis cites Gilbert Ryle's 1976 lecture on the subject, in order to show how acts of thinking—whether or not they are knowingly undertaken—also necessarily involve a degree of improvisation: 'If the normal human is not at once improvising and improvising warily, he is not engaging in somewhat trained wits in some momentary live issue, but perhaps acting from sheer unthinking habit. So thinking, I now declare quite generally, is, at the least, the engaging of partly trained wits in a partly fresh situation' (Ryle, 1976, cited in Lewis, 2007).

Improvisation, according to Ryle, is central to thinking; he conceives of the practice of thought as a flexible responsiveness to shifting circumstances. It is part pre-formed, part inventive, transformative. As an encompassing phenomenon, improvisation as thought manifests in the most quotidian and the most extreme of circumstances. At Auschwitz-Birkenau, for example, the manuscripts now commonly referred to as the Scrolls of Auschwitz display improvisatory dimensions.<sup>7</sup> Eight caches of documents have so far been discovered. The authors of these writings, Jewish members of the Sonderkommando or special squads, were forced to labour in the crematoria at Birkenau, emptying the gas chambers and burning the bodies of those who had been murdered *en masse*. The conditions in which the Sonderkommando lived seem *unthinkable*. Their writings, however, strive to *think* this situation in different ways, to describe and interpret it. They make use of the languages available to them, French, Greek, Polish and Yiddish, to attest to the Nazi genocide of the Jews.

Rob Wallace has explored how performance-based conceptions of improvisation work against understanding practices of writing as improvisatory (Wallace 2015, 194). Writing is seemingly too fixed. Improvisation, as it is incarnated in performance, is fluid process, frequently ephemeral. Writing often appears static and lasting. As Wallace foregrounds, however, it involves acts of revision and editing and is processual. These acts often subsequently become undetectable. The Sonderkommando manuscripts do retain evidence of the process of their writing. The composition known as *Der Geyresb* [The Deportation] by Lejb Langfus, which was found in 1945 and is now held in the collections of the Auschwitz Museum, shows clear evidence of drafting. A loose leaf found within the notebook that comprises the work is a preliminary version of a description of the burning of bodies from a transport from Langfus's hometown of Maków

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<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of these manuscripts as Holocaust testimony see Chare, 2013 and Chare & Williams, 2015. We are grateful to Dominic Williams for sharing his thoughts and insights regarding improvisatory qualities in relation to the Scrolls and, particularly, Nadjary's letter. In his essay "'The Dead are my Teachers': The Scrolls of Auschwitz in Jerome Rothenberg's *Kburbn*", Williams (2013) describes the Scrolls as manifesting a disciplined unpredictability (75-6). This inspiring reading can be seen to prefigure the discussion of improvisation in the Scrolls that we outline here.

Mazowiecki. The outline contains instances of crossing out, of revising, as Langfus searches for words he feels are appropriate to describe the horrors he has witnessed. The notebook in which Langfus penned what he called *Eyntselbeyten* [Particulars], which was found in 1952 and is now held at Yad Vashem, also shows evidence of revising. Langfus has clearly gone back over his writing, reading it and adding to it. Some sentences are in far smaller script which has been inserted alongside what was evidently previously written text. This leaves the usually neat, well-spaced prose intermittently cluttered, messy. The notebook also includes a series of tallies (these have not been included in published versions of the manuscript). It has been used for multiple purposes.

Wallace, drawing on ideas from Philip Pastras, suggests that there are several ways to determine if a work can be characterised as improvised including whether ‘the work was done in one sitting,’ whether the work displays innovative formal features, and whether the work manifests an unusually marked understanding of ‘what it feels like to be in time’ (Wallace 2015, 196-197). Arguably, none of the Scrolls of Auschwitz include all these features. Langfus clearly did not compose *Der Geyresh* in one sitting and it also seems unlikely that the highly literary writings of Zalman Gradowski were extemporaneous. Marcel Nadjary’s letter in Greek to his family and friends and Zalman Lewental’s account in Yiddish of the Sonderkommando revolt and its genesis do, nevertheless, seem to be the products of a rush of inspiration. Chaim Herman’s letter in French also appears to have been written on the spur of the moment. The letter makes direct reference to improvisation. Herman writes of: ‘*le soir du premier “Kipur” ou Kolnidrés ce que nous avons improvisé chez nous*’ [the first night of “Kipur” or Kol Nidre which we improvised amongst ourselves]. Some of the Sonderkommando clearly used improvisation in the context of religious worship and, perhaps, with regard to religious laws.

The legible sections of Lewental’s account and of Nadjary’s letter are both written in relatively straightforward prose styles. They do not seem to employ improvisatory methods of literary composition. There are nonetheless formal qualities in the writings of Gradowski (who uses highly imagistic language) and Langfus (whose *Eyntselbeyten* eschew chronology, forming varied, sardonic shards that refuse the sense-giving logic of linear narrative) which can be read as methods of improvisation. Time also registers in most of the writings in ways that are qualitatively different to quotidian clock-time. Eva Hoffman (2009) has referred to concentration camp inmates enduring a kind of temporal (as well as spatial) incarceration, being confined to a perpetual present with no sense of a future and with their past felt as irrevocably lost. This bleak temporal outlook manifests, for instance, in Chaim Herman’s letter in French to his wife and daughter in which he refers to penning the message in his final hours. It is clear he has little sense of a future and feels trapped in a contracting tomblike present.



A lack of any sense of futurity also manifests graphically in Langfus's *Eyntselbeyten*. His final entry in the notebook is written in far larger script than on the preceding pages. It is also written horizontally rather than vertically. Through this counter-intuitive act, the short text is made to stand out, rendered visibly qualitatively different from what has come before. Langfus writes: 'We are now going to the "sauna," the 170 remaining men. We are convinced that they are taking us to our death. They have selected 30 men to remain in Crematorium #4. Today is 26<sup>th</sup> November 1944.' The conviction that he is about to die also registers by way of a gesture that can be understood as improvisational. Langfus consciously turns the page to write as a means to signal that these few words are of a different order, building on what has gone before so he can clearly mark a change in his circumstances. The larger script, hastily written but also remarkably careful, records an urgent assertion of self. Langfus's knowledge that he is about to die is painfully apparent here as the shift in the way he writes demonstrates that he knows he no longer needs to economise in relation to his materials. These are his last words and he wants them to be visibly remarked as such.

Focussing in more detail on Nadjary's letter, the twelve-pages he pens were likely composed in haste: words are relatively large in size, sentences undulate. The Greek seems to have acted impromptu, exploiting a sudden combination of circumstances—coming into possession of pen and paper, having an element of privacy, acquiring a means to conceal his communication—which made composing and hiding his testimony possible. The letter broaches various subjects—providing a history of Nadjary's internment and of his arrival at Birkenau, describing his work as a member of the Sonderkommando, addressing his remaining friends and family with pledges and requests, briefly reflecting on his religious faith—and shifts emotional registers. The pressures under which Nadjary writes would seem to compel improvisation but, in reality, only act to amplify it, granting it an unusually enhanced visibility. He graphically enacts what Wallace (2015) refers to as 'the *discipline* of improvisation' (196), composing his witness account with clearly controlled urgency. The letter is structured, it displays nimble forethought, yet also pressured.

There are shifts in subject, in tone, shifts that visibly must have arisen *in the moment*. He changes mode when he feels he has exhausted a given theme or set of emotions and a new topic or different feelings demand expression. These modulations, variations, are mainly affective and/or content related. Additionally there are stylistic shifts, as noted by Niels Kadritzke (Nadjary 2017) in his German translation of Nadjary's letter, Nadjary changes to formal Greek at one point. His message to the Greek embassy is in Katharevousa rather than Demotic Greek, written in (what was then) an official rather than informal register. This break in style also signals a break in flow. Much of the rest of the letter displays change that unfolds as continuity, written against a sustaining backdrop

of urgency. To appreciate the mobile emotional dimension to the prose, which forms part of its improvisatory quality, it is necessary to try and imagine oneself into Nadjary's moment of writing, to become caught up (again) in the process, recognizing the vital modulations in Nadjary's flow that attest to his agency and his efforts at self-representation and at resistance.<sup>8</sup>

There is, as Kadritzke has identified, another instance of Katharevousa in the letter (Nadjary 612, fn 44).<sup>9</sup> This occurs when Nadjary uses the neologism *γκαζαριστάι* [gassers] to describe the members of the SS tasked with placing the Zyklon B in vents of the gas chambers.<sup>10</sup> The need for this word may have arisen during the act of writing, in the moment of bearing witness. It is therefore probably a nonce word, a one-off, a unique term that Nadjary improvised from within the Greek language. The original letter is in poor condition but the fading of this word is consistent with most of the other words that surround it, suggesting there was no break in flow when writing it. In this, it contrasts with the abbreviation Σ.Σ. (SS) in the preceding sentence, which has faded much less. The abbreviation betrays the use of markedly more pressure when it was penned. It forms a break in flow, standing out as a mark of foreignness within a language familiar to Nadjary. Nadjary writes in Greek characters but what he writes of at this point, the *Schutzstaffel*, is not something of Greece.

In his local history of the Sonderkommando, Lewental breaks with Hebrew cursive script when he pens the letters SS as part of a description regarding how the revolt of 7<sup>th</sup> October was initially planned to unfold. In Lewental's handwritten Yiddish, the acronym SS written in standard German script stands out. Lewental carefully composes the letters as they do not flow from his pen with the ease of the cursive Hebrew characters that surround them. The two S's are in a darker ink than the surrounding words. This renders them similar to the Σ.Σ. of Nadjary's letter. In both compositions, the abbreviations index failures of flow, curtailments to inventiveness. They graphically demonstrate how improvisation as it is expressed in writing emerges from out of an intimacy, a profound familiarity, with the material of a given language, the stuff out of which it is formed, the lexemes and phonemes. The term SS, even as it is oppressively familiar to Lewental and Nadjary, also remains distant to them. By contrast, Nadjary is able to pen '*γκαζαριστάι*' without any seeming hesitation, to improvise, as it

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<sup>8</sup> Here Ajay Heble's (2000) analysis of jazz improvisation as self-definition in *Landing on the Wrong Note* provides a template for seeking to understand what is at stake in Nadjary's writing. Like Heble's examples of jazz musicians who seek to move beyond constraining misrepresentations of Black subjectivity, Nadjary is striving to open a space for autobiography from within a milieu that seeks to deprive him of all sense of self-identity.

<sup>9</sup> We are grateful to Dominic Williams for bringing this to our attention.

<sup>10</sup> We are very grateful to Ersy Contogouris for sharing her insights about the significance of this neologism and about how best to translate it.

is a word that has emerged from Nadjary's knowing the Greek language inside out.

The technology that is writing became a way for Nadjary to stage a different kind of revolt against the Nazis to the uprising described by Lewental. Each page Nadjary filled with prose provided a means through which he could perform a kind of tacit defiance towards his persecutors and enact a sort of vengeance. From within a context of ostensible powerlessness, he found agency, he improvised it. His inventiveness, the inventiveness of all the Sonderkommando authors, partly manifested through their exploitation of the performative and representational dimensions to writing. These dimensions provided a way by which to contest the constraints (physical, material, spatial) that were imposed upon them by the SS. The 'doing' that was the act of Nadjary's writing the letter *incarnated* his rebelliousness; the words that remained after the act continue to preserve a sense of that rebellion. Through the practice of writing, Nadjary was able to improvise a mode of resistance. It was a resistance embodied, in part, in the act of bearing witness. He knew his words could provide a holding to account. This can, of course, be said of all the Sonderkommando manuscripts. In Langfus's *Eyntselheyten* direct reference is made to ongoing Nazi efforts to conceal their crimes, to destroy all evidence of mass murder (including the Sonderkommando as eyewitnesses). In this context, the writings in the notebook form tangible acts of defiance.

Nadjary's letter written from within the death factory at Birkenau forms an example of improvisation manifesting *in extremis*. In everyday life, improvisation is also commonplace and there are areas and practices where it is amplified, rendered particularly visible. Specific spaces are sometimes designated loci for the practice of improvisation, spaces where the presence of improvisatory acts are signposted and celebrated. These spaces also function, of course, to contain improvisation, to give the impression of a clear-cut boundary between improvisation and the predictable and predetermined. Such spaces include theatres of improvisational comedy and scheduled performances of dance improvisation or free jazz.

The improvisational comedy theatre company *Ligue nationale d'improvisation* [National Improvisation League], which was founded in Québec by Robert Gravel and Yvon Leduc in 1977, provides a good example of such a space, of a setting that provides what might be viewed as socially sanctioned improvisation. The set-up involves the theatre company dividing into teams who are presented with scenarios and/or themes which they must improvise sketches in response to. This kind of pioneering format of group-based improvisation was also developed by Keith Johnstone in English-speaking Canada around the same time. The format has become hugely popular in Canada and efforts have been made to

export it to France.<sup>11</sup> Initially, however, French actors did not adapt well to the structure as their thespian tradition is highly individualistic and not suited to the team interplay necessary to excel at group improvisation comedy (in which comedians must frequently facilitate situations in which others in their team can be funny, relinquishing the opportunity to be funny themselves).<sup>12</sup> The difficulty of translating specific improvisational formats across cultures demonstrates their singularity, their sociocultural distinctiveness.<sup>13</sup>

French acting has a strong improvisational element as one of the three conversations in this issue, 'Our Automated Lives,' conducted by Bernard Stiegler with the actor Denis Podalydès, a sociétaire of the Comédie-Française, demonstrates. Podalydès reflects on his own personal improvisations in his acting and on the role of improvisation as it manifests in Denis Diderot's (2012) *Paradoxe sur le comédien* [*On the Actor's Paradox*]. His observations also serve as material enabling Stiegler to riff his own views regarding improvisation and the central role it has in his philosophy.<sup>14</sup>

Podalydès is primarily a stage actor although he has performed on screen, most notably in Michael Haneke's *Caché* [*Hidden*]. Improvisation features in film and television as well as theatre. The tenth episode of the first season of highly popular Canadian television comedy *Corner Gas* (2004-2009), which was dedicated to an exploration of comedy, includes discussion of improvisation. The improvisational comedian Colin Mochrie (who came to renown on the British improvisation show *Whose Line Is It Anyway?*) makes two cameo appearances. In *Corner Gas*, a predominantly pre-scripted show, 'improv' is represented negatively as a comedy form. In one scene, Hank Yarbo (Fred Ewanuick), the town's 'village-idiot,' has a discussion with his friends Brent (Brent Butt) and Lacey (Gabrielle Miller) about his plans to act as a compère at the local comedy night. The following exchange takes place:

Lacey: You know stand up can be pretty tough. I used to work in a comedy club.

<sup>11</sup> For more on Johnstone's work, see Gunter Lösel's and Marcel Swiboda's contributions to the current issue.

<sup>12</sup> We are indebted to Nicole Tremblay for sharing her insights about Québécois and French approaches to group improvisational comedy.

<sup>13</sup> In this special issue, we were unable to accord attention to overtly improvisational practices from outside Occidental culture. These practices are often exhibited in music. Indian classical music, for example, such as *ragā* has a strong improvisational facet (Viswanathan & Cormack, 1998). Every *ragā*, for example, follows rules yet these rules are not rigid and are moulded to suit the specific context of each performance. For more on the diverse manifestations of improvisational practice viewed from a range of cultural perspectives, see Bailey, 1993; Nettl, 1998.

<sup>14</sup> Marcel Swiboda's article in this issue also discusses improvisation in relation to Stiegler's thinking.

Hank: That's great you know, maybe you could show me how to get laughs.

Lacy: No, no, no, I worked at a comedy club. I wasn't the one getting the laughs.

Hank: "Oh... Improv act, that's ok Lacy, I mean there's no shame in being an improv act. One of my favourite shows is that *Whose Line Is It Anyhow?*"

Brent: Yeah, I like that show too but, man, does that bald guy have to do a cameo in everything?

Dave (Colin Mochrie): Hey Brent!

Brent: Hey Dave!

As this sketch and a subsequent one in which the town's gas station cashier Wanda Dollard (Nancy Robertson) describes Hank's compering as 'worse than improv' show, in a sense *Corner Gas* does not take improvisation seriously. It is also noteworthy that *Corner Gas* seeks to quarantine improvisation through signalling its distinctiveness, its difference from other forms of comedy. This quarantining is, however, portrayed as ineffective. Mochrie makes a second, seemingly impromptu appearance towards the end of the show, a moment of (scripted) improvisation that *appears* to puncture the pre-scripted, to challenge the shows prescriptive outlook on humour. Here although the moment of improvisation is likely illusory, the show does figure improvisation's insurrectionary potential, capturing the power of the unforeseen to surprise, and also invites its audience to consider whether improvisation in comedy is more commonplace than it first appeared, capable even of appearing in scripted sketches.

The episode of *Corner Gas* about comedy raises serious questions about how improvisation is popularly perceived while simultaneously gesturing towards its transgressive potency. It is viewed by Hank (if not by Fred Ewanuick, who plays Hank's character) as second-rate, a bit of a joke, yet its comedic power is also, perversely, simultaneously foregrounded. *Corner Gas* wants to put improvisation in its place yet also signals that efforts to corral only provide material for further improvisation and boundary-transgression.

Spaces such as the theatre or television are, of course, public. Improvisation also features in private practices and personal spaces. In BDSM, for example, as Robin Bauer (2014) has observed, 'play' involves creativity and improvisation (66). BDSM play occurs within pre-agreed parameters but the parameters function as enabling constraints, encouraging spontaneous acts of creativity, of performance.<sup>15</sup> Danielle Lindemann notes how professional dominants regularly call attention to the importance of their training and past experiences for their work (Lindemann 2012, 84). Pro-doms and pro-dommes draw on this prior-schooling yet the theatres of cruelty they stage also involve acts of impromptu artistry.

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<sup>15</sup> For a discussion of BDSM as creative performance see Chare, 2014.

Scenes are scripted yet the script is flexible and invention important. Most dominants, particularly when they consider their work a form of art practice, do not like to feel they are simply following a rigid template. In *The Colour of Kink*, Ariane Cruz (2016) discusses this malleability in the context of race play pornography. Race play involves staging power imbalances based around race and frequently features the use of racial epithets. As part of her discussion, Cruz foregrounds how race play can involve improvisation on one register (manifesting, for instance, through ad libs in a scripted scenario) yet on another involves the presence of unchanging negative stereotypes, of a persistent conservatism (114-5).<sup>16</sup>

Cruz's nuanced analysis of improvisation is paralleled by the conversation about the topic between D Ferrett, Bridget Hayden and Gustav Thomas that feature in this issue. Entitled 'weaving intuitive illegitimate improvisation,' the conversations explore improvisation from multiple perspectives. Ferrett, Hayden and Thomas are all musicians with an intimate, practical knowledge of improvisation. They combine their hands-on understandings of the improvisational with theoretical insights to offer multi-faceted perspectives regarding the unruly and the unforeseen. Ferrett and Hayden, for instance, adroitly tease out some of the ways in which gender issues can intersect with improvisation in musical practice.<sup>17</sup> Thomas takes the example of Jamaican sound system culture as a means to examine how improvised musics can provide a means to resist 'musical authority'. Their conversations are clearly an embodiment of improvisation as the participants pick up each other's threads and unpick particular ideas and points of views. It is an improvisational quality which has parallels with the conversation with Adrian Rifkin also in this issue. 'weaving intuitive illegitimate improvisation' identifies many positive attributes linked to improvisation but also acknowledges that it is sometimes viewed with mistrust.

In her essay 'Can Improvisation be Commodified?', Susan Leigh Foster also considers improvisation from varied standpoints. She contemplates improvisation in dance as a force of rebellion but also a practice that continually risks being co-opted as 'product,' commodified. Foster has previously written insightfully about improvisation in relation to dance in her essay 'Taken by Surprise: Improvisation in Dance and Mind' (Foster 2015a). In the earlier essay, she traces how improvised dance pivots between the known and the unknown, drawing

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<sup>16</sup> Mireille Miller-Young also examines improvisation as it manifests in pornography featuring black women describing it as a locus of agentive black subjectivity. Improvisation manifests through ad libs but also via modes of delivery of scripted material which enable black actresses to perform powerful deconstructions of white appropriations of black culture and vernacular (Miller-Young 2014).

<sup>17</sup> Ferrett (2014) has previously explored this intersection in conversation with the vocalist Maggie Nicols. Ferrett discusses gender issues in relation to musical performance more broadly in an interview with Diamanda Galás (Galás 2007).

on technique yet exceeding the already learnt, rendering a body or bodies agential rather than merely instrumental. In 'Can Improvisation be Commodified?', Foster explores how dance improvisation comprises both a commodity form and, sometimes, a subversive undoing and resisting of the drive to commodify. The choreographer William Forsythe, for example, encouraged dancers at the Frankfurt Ballet to stand the standard phrases employed in ballet on their head, extending the possibilities of *épaulement*. Through giving the cold shoulder to performances solely choreographed using classic movement combinations—movements that have congealed as commodities—Forsythe and his dancer-collaborators revitalised ballet as 'a set of generative principles,' as a practice of physical inventiveness. The group did not efface *épaulement* as a set of rules but rather worked across and against it, with classical training facilitating improvisation.

Foster thought-provokingly examines how the improvised dimension to dances staged by the Frankfurt ballet sometimes manifested through signs of exertion exhibited by the dancers, through the labour of decision-making that accompanies a practice which embraces the unforeseen rather than simply executing the pre-planned. Laura Mulvey has observed that, for Marx, commodity fetishism describes the disguising of the worker's labour as that which is productive of value in the capitalist economic system (Mulvey 2013, 3). Drawing on Foster's insights, performances such as those encouraged by Forsythe, by way of their promotion of visible indices of effort, might be viewed as refusing to disavow the role of labour in dance. In this, they can be seen to sully the 'seductive sheen,' (to borrow and repurpose Mulvey's phrase) of classical ballet as commodity fetish (Mulvey 2013, 4). Foster also examines the work of Savion Glover, who crafts performances that resist audience identification with spectacle. The audience pay to see Glover, to see the unforeseen, but he often deflects the gaze, privileging sound over sight and inviting active engagement rather than passive consumption.

Dance, as already mentioned, forms one of those practices where improvisation is often praised and encouraged. A key aim of our project, however, was also to consider how improvisation is a feature of practices and professions that fall outside those activities that are commonly discussed in relation to the improvisatory. In this context, we draw attention to Nicholas Chare's consideration of improvisation as a feature of testimonial endeavours and to Jonathan Deutsch's exploration of improvisation in culinary education. In his essay 'After the Thylacine,' Chare builds on Bracha Ettinger's psychoanalytic theories to examine ethical questions relating to depictions of the thylacine as they have appeared in literature and film. Through readings of Julia Leigh's novel *The Hunter* and of its film adaptation of the same name, he contends that improvisation is a necessary component of ethical witnessing (Leigh 1999).

As discussed in relation to the Scrolls of Auschwitz, it is not common to think of writing as improvisatory. In her essay 'Improvised Flow,' Susan Leigh Foster (2015b), for instance, has discussed the difficulty of writing spontaneously, of becoming immersed in writing. Chare's reading of the novel *The Hunter* suggests it cannot be considered improvised but does meditate upon the nature of improvisation. He goes on to argue that aspects of the film adaptation of *The Hunter* are improvisatory. Usually, improvisation is more associated with avant-garde film making than with mainstream cinema. In her essay 'Magnificent Obsession,' for example, Laura Mulvey (1989a) discusses how the films she co-directed with Peter Wollen employed aesthetic strategies designed to 'allow flexibility [and] detours of the imagination,' seeking to perfect a form of film-making that was not prescriptive but openly receptive to varied responses and interpretations (138). Her collaborations with Wollen embrace the unforeseen. Mulvey (1989b), as her ground-breaking essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' makes abundantly clear, wished to free the spectator from the allure of mainstream film as spectacle, a spectacle which encouraged viewing dynamics that privileged patriarchal imperatives. For her, this freedom, a freeing of the look (which might be read as the fostering of improvisatory viewing practices), is accomplished through distanciation, through a 'passionate detachment' (26).

Improvisation is therefore bound up with reception. As Ika Willis observes, 'the responses of real readers to texts are idiosyncratic, unpredictable and/or undisciplined' (Willis 2018, 74). Avant-garde films of the kind made by Mulvey and Wollen actively encourage this unpredictability rather than working to inhibit it. Chare suggests that *The Hunter* promotes a different kind of improvisation, one generated through sub-narrative aspects (via visual and acoustic effects) which permit the affective to resonate and enable the film to become hospitable to the unforeseen. This improvised hospitality registers for the film's audience through receptive reverie, through immersion rather than detachment, an immersion that contrasts with the negative kind described by Mulvey.

Jonathan Deutsch's essay 'Can Improvisation Save Culinary Education?', breaks with traditional theories of culinary pedagogy with their emphasis on learning by rote and on following instructions without deviation or question. In conventional culinary education there is scope for improvisation but it is minimal, subject to disabling constraints. Students, for instance, may be taught the ratio and technique for a basic vinaigrette and then, Deutsch explains, have the license to flavour it as they wish. Improvisation outside of very narrow parameters of this kind is overwhelmingly regarded as culinary heresy. Reinforcing this view, in *The Philosophy of Improvisation*, Gary Peters (2009) quotes Diane Seed observing that 'Pasta is the anti-jazz: Improvisation destroys it' (75). In a book chapter exploring the role of audience suggestions in theatre improvisation, Keith Johnstone (1999) invites parallels between theatre performances and cooking, suggesting that being advised a chef was improvising would not excuse



a bad meal in a restaurant and that theatre improvisation that is perceived as bad or tasteless is similarly not easily justified. Johnstone's analogy is comedic, reinforcing how out of place improvisation is perceived to be in a culinary context.

For Deutsch, however, cooking as a form of performance is taken seriously as is a chef's artistry. Improvisation as a skill is important in the culinary profession for many reasons. The most evident is in emergency situations and Deutsch's, Billingsley's and Azima's (2009) co-authored book *Culinary Improvisation* examines this aspect of a chef's practice in depth. Deutsch also emphasizes the importance of improvisation for culinary creativity. Ultimately, he feels that improvisation is crucial to the future of culinary pedagogy because of the role it can assume in fostering a sustainable food system by, for instance, minimizing wastage. Through pioneering initiatives such as the Drexel Food Lab, which encourages culinary students to engage in improvisational practices, improvisation as it intersects with cooking has a major role to play in contributing to the systemic improvement of the global food system. It is improvisation of this kind, occurring outside the domains popularly associated with improvisation, which, despite its tangible benefits, risks dropping out of sight in current discussions of improvisation as practice and philosophy.

These are numerous other areas where improvisation assumes a crucial, if frequently, overlooked role. One such area is modern medicine, a profession where safety reigns. Safety is about repetition and standardisation. Untimely deviations from safety standards, from safe practice, attract unwanted attention. Practices of improvisation form such deviations.<sup>18</sup> Nicolas Barnett has observed of contemporary medicine that 'progress is all about the outlier, the unwanted deviation but practice must be about the norm'.<sup>19</sup> Safety is about regulating systems, by their essence chaotic, entropic, and bringing the regularity that safer care in medicine demands. Consonant with this is the development of evidence based medicine, a credo based on population science. Evidence accrued from the many is generalised to the few or even the particular. Of course if evidence says that such a treatment works then such a treatment must be applied and to neglect this in favour of non-evidence based treatments is, by extension, to practice reckless medicine. At the heart of the medical universe, however, is the individual patient with their desires, expectations and bio-personal singularities, characteristics which may or may not be applicable to others. By this logic, individualised medicine demands improvisation, in the sense of personalisation. It requires a particularity of approach that builds upon a general backdrop.

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<sup>18</sup> We are obliged to Nicolas Barnett MD for sharing his insights regarding examples of improvisation and improvisatory practices in contemporary medicine. His perceptive exploration of the topic in personal correspondence (25/08/17) has significantly shaped our thinking and writing on the subject.

<sup>19</sup> Nicolas Barnett, personal communication with the authors, 25<sup>th</sup> August 2017.

Technique forms another area in medicine where improvisation potentially manifests in spite of the heavy regulation of health services. There are numerous apocryphal stories of how doctors have deflated pneumothoraces with coat hangers or created emergency tracheostomies with biro pens. The safety com-misars of modern medicine would never allow this kind of technological extemporing within the hospital context and yet emergencies create a different dynamic, when a vital piece of equipment, fluid or medication is missing and improvisation is necessary and becomes life-saving. This kind of improvisation conforms to textbook definitions of improvisation in that medical practitioners draw on their training and prior experience yet also do something unforeseen and novel in the moment of an emergency. Such vital moments of improvisation occur daily and occur everywhere as doctors and nurses respond to the unexpected.<sup>20</sup> They are, however, likely often downplayed because cultural ambiguity towards the improvisatory bleeds into contemporary medicine causing improvisation to be, overly simplistically, perceived as symptomatic of irresponsibility and carelessness.

The equating of improvisation with injudiciousness and negligence may also explain the dearth of scholarship investigating the practice in other professions such as law enforcement. Sara Ramshaw's (2013) *Justice as Improvisation* explores how the extempore manifests in the judicial system but there are few considerations of improvisation as a feature of policing.<sup>21</sup> Writing in the context of emergency management, David Mendonça and William Wallace (2007) draw attention to how the processes that constitute improvisation have been 'comparatively underexplored' (547). They provide examples of how improvisation can feature in police work and call for further studies to examine how 'skill in improvisation can be learned and managed, so that improvisation becomes an additional tool for organizations that need or want to address nonroutine events' (547). The police drama *Rookie Blue* (2010-2015) provides a popular cultural representation of how such skills might be nurtured. The tenth episode ("Big Nickel") of the first season of the show begins with the five rookie officers who comprise *Rookie Blue's* central characters engaging in a firing range exercise called 'Shoot/Don't Shoot.' In the exercise they must make rapid decisions about

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<sup>20</sup> A prescient contemporary illustration of this phenomenon is to be found in the ways doctors have responded to the needs of patients in the exceptional circumstances wrought by the civil war in Syria. See Schwartzstein, 2016.

<sup>21</sup> A rare exception is Barry Ancelet, Marcia Gaudet's and Carl Lindahls' edited collection entitled *Second Line Rescue: Improvised Responses to Katrina and Rita*, which explores the ways in which the residents and in some cases the local emergency services were forced to improvise their responses to the titular hurricanes in 2005, rendering their improvisations those of 'vernacular first responders' (Ancelet, Gaudet & Lindahl 2013). For an examination of improvisation in relation to Hurricane Katrina—a propos Ancelet et al. and George Lewis's work on this topic—see Marcel Swiboda's contribution to this issue.

whether to shoot at specific targets. After their first effort, the sergeant observes of one rookie's efforts: 'That is a nice shoot under controlled circumstances, but we all know out there in real life things are never controlled, they are unpredictable, wild'. The sergeant then endeavours to introduce unpredictable dimensions into the exercise, to simulate the unforeseen. He strives to teach the rookies how to improvise. The ways in which improvisation manifests in fields as disparate as cooking, law enforcement and medicine affirms its singular ubiquity.

The need to recognise improvisation's signal combination of singularity and ubiquity at the same time as confronting simplistic or reductive invocations of the term is the focus of Marcel Swiboda's contribution, 'Improvisation in Disruptive Times'. Such a task is urgent, Swiboda argues, to the extent that our contemporary moment rhetorically trades on terms in ways that profoundly belie their real-world import. Among such terms are 'disruption' and 'improvisation', which have tended to be used reductively in recent years, in particular when considered in corporate, technological, media and political contexts. Through a detailed tracking of these usages, Swiboda's contribution draws attention to this reductive tendency, while at the same time seeking to reclaim these tropes and related concepts in order that they might be more meaningfully mobilised as critical and methodological spurs, by way of concrete cases derived from improv comedy, digital technology, music and philosophy. Swiboda also implores theorists to attend critically to our contemporary relationships to technology, in particular in light of the contemporary encroachments of generalized automation on work, life and thought. To suggest ways to counter this tendency, Swiboda employs the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, George Lewis and Bernard Stiegler, in order to show how improvisational compartments of various kinds might help shed light on the ways in which it remains possible to dialogically encounter the world.

Benjamin Piekut's article 'Another Version of Ourselves' draws attention to the need to revisit questions of agency invited by encounters—both practical and theoretical—with improvisation. In doing so he shows that it is necessary to recognise that thinking doesn't always occupy the same epistemological register. Furthermore, Piekut also shows that a failure to recognise the different epistemological modes in which the thinking of agency takes place runs the risk of uncritically valorizing one given viewpoint to the detriment of others. Reprising George Lewis's all-important distinction between 'Eurological' and 'Afrological' epistemological modes of interpreting improvised music-making (Lewis, 2004), Piekut interrogates this issue through a critical reading of the experimental performance practices of Henry Cow. Piekut's engagement with documentary accounts of the band's activities provides his article with a salient case study by means of which to sound the question of agency, as more broadly practiced by experimental and improvising musicians. He does this in order to show how the 'Eurological' tendency universalises its own eschewal of agency, by, for example,

seeking to remove ‘personality’ from a musical performance, leading its claimants to disavow agency-driven approaches to improvisation *tout court*, and thereby disavowing the ‘Afrological’ tendency in the process. Piekut ultimately views Henry Cow’s approach to improvisation as providing a critical basis for exploring these differing tendencies as ‘braided pathways’, rather than as entrenched positionalities.

The need to recognise improvisational theory and practice as necessitating a plurality of perspectives is also taken up by Tracey Nicholls. In her article entitled ‘Improvising Rage’, Nicholls focuses her attention on the contemporary political polarisation of American society and shows how improvisational rhetoric has been affirmatively mobilized in recent years, in order to countervail the problematic nationalist invocations of ‘identity’ rhetoric that have insinuated themselves (quasi-)political discourse in the United States in the last couple of years—epitomized for Nicholls by the attempts to weaponise language by right-wing nationalistic elements, aided and abetted by Donald Trump, since the latter’s entry onto the US political scene in 2016. Nicholls focuses on two recent lyric-based attempts to positively mobilise improvisation in the service of a rhetorical critique of this nationalistic turn—Lauren Hill’s ‘Black Rage’ (2012/14) and Janelle Monáe’s ‘Hell You Talmbout’ (2015)—alongside a contemporary invocation of a far older but still eminently prescient politically-charged use of rhetorical and lyrical word-play: Abel Meeropol’s withering indictment of racial violence in the early decades of the twentieth century, ‘Strange Fruit’, which singer Rebecca Ferguson infamously offered to sing at Trump’s presidential inauguration in January, 2017. Ferguson’s pointedly ironic gesture hereby echoes Billie Holiday’s defiant proto-Civil Rights performances of this song. Nicholls argues that these examples point to the need for a ‘vernacular politics of recognition’, a need encapsulated in the efforts of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Gunter Lösel’s ‘Can Robots Improvise?’ takes up the issue’s intermittent preoccupation with questions of technology in relation to improvisation, although this time approaching the question of this relationship through a primarily-scientific optic. This specular metaphor proves apt as a descriptor for article, to the extent that it revolves around attempts to visualise what takes place cognitively and neuroscientifically in the act of improvising. Drawing on a range of recent and examinations of improvisation in contemporary neuroscience and the philosophy of mind, as well as the practices associated with improv theatre and comedy, ‘Can Robots Improvise?’ approaches the issue’s concern with the complex imbrications of technology, agency and improvisation under the auspices of ‘embodied cognition’ and ‘social interaction’. As such, Lösel’s article repeats from a scientific purview the issue’s technology and automation refrains, in the process showing that the question of the relationship between improvisation, automation and technology needs to be thought in ways that invite critical im-

provisation studies to broaden out beyond its primarily liberal and theoretical humanities remit.

Landgraf's article, 'Improvisation, Posthumanism and Agency in Art' also considers the question of agency in relation to improvisation and the challenges science and technology discourses pose to liberal arts and theoretical humanities approaches to the topic. Landgraf explores this question in terms of the contemporary critical preoccupation with 'posthumanism'. In doing so he brings recent work in critical improvisation studies—in particular Lewis and Piekut's *Oxford Companion to Critical Improvisation Studies*—to a conjuncture with 'critical (or radical) posthumanism'. In exploring this conjuncture, Landgraf opts to examine the agency-improvisation nexus primarily in relation to art, yet at the same time engaging with important contemporary concerns with 'technological embodiment'. Landgraf's art-based focus is the contemporary German painter Gerhard Richter, whose work confounds the canonical interpretations of art derived from modern European aesthetics in their eschewal of improvisation, according to Landgraf.<sup>22</sup> By way of what he articulates as Richter's posthuman painterly improvisations, Landgraf advocates for a more robust, non-anthropocentric conception of distributed agency and therefore a need to move beyond the liberal purview that starts and ends with (human) representation. However, rather than eschew these concerns, Landgraf argues that a radical posthuman decentering of existing hierarchies and schemes would actually help address the contemporary issues of inequality, exclusion and de-humanization, so long as theorists are willing to move beyond existing, all-too-human, models of thought. Improvisation invites such a radical realignment of thought, according to Landgraf.

Conducted in person with only limited prior planning or discussion, completing the triad of conversational encounters featured in this issue is an interview with Adrian Rifkin. This documentary encounter constitutes an attempt at an experimental dialogue regarding improvisation's relationship with theory, whose situated and largely unplanned character would necessitate a willingness on the part of the interlocutors to entertain open minds as to what more precisely would manifest as a result of this dialogic encounter with these themes. This is not to say that the interview was entirely devoid of forethought – various different sets of possible questions and discussion topics were placed under consideration, along with a range of formats (text-based, using VOIP tools, for example Skype, and in person). The reasons for having opted for an in-person interview were multiple and just as much determined by practical as well as intellectual constraints, yet the results of this approach having been the one chosen evidently speak to the issue's overarching concerns with the need to think the relationship between improvisation and theory as an essentially contingent one. In fact the encounter itself presented the participants with numerous unforeseen con-

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<sup>22</sup> Landgraf has explored this problematic at length elsewhere. See Landgraf, 2011.

tingencies that needed to be negotiated, both synchronically and diachronically. The documentary outcome of this experimental effort finds the interview subject being asked to respond to three questions, each one corresponding to a broad area of thematic focus, on the order of ‘what for you is the relationship between improvisation and *x*?’, all regarding his intellectual and practical academic relationships with improvisation. The three areas Rifkin is asked to consider are ‘improvisation and art history’, ‘improvisation and academic audit culture’ and ‘improvisation and pedagogy’. The responses find Rifkin proffering numerous insights into his relationships with these aspects of his academic and intellectual practice and some much-needed words of caution along the way, in particular regarding the dangers attendant upon theoreticism.

In his collection of interviews entitled *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music* (1993), Derek Bailey infamously proffers some words of warning that no academic wishing to engage with improvisation can afford to ignore. Bailey infamously stated that ‘only an academic would have the temerity to mount a theory of improvisation’, by which he meant that only an academic would seek to apply a pre-existing theoretical framework to improvisation. Bailey’s warning, however, does not preclude the possibility of successful academic engagement with improvisation *tout court*. If this is to be achieved it will only be done by taking care to accommodate theory towards the processual character of improvisation, rather than aiming to come up with a theory *of*, or *on* improvisation. The contributions to ‘Unforeseen Encounters: Improvisation and Theory’ collective comprise a series of interdisciplinary responses to this challenge.

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