

The Poetics of Engagement Improvisation, Musical Communities, and the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Article abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic turned the music industry upside-down overnight and impacted music-making at all levels. In these special issues, we invited musicians, performers, scholars, arts presenters, and other cultural workers to reflect on the extraordinary challenges posed by the pandemic and to begin envisaging a post-pandemic musical landscape. The struggles to maintain connection and the unquantifiable intimacies of exchange that characterize live music at its best are counterpoised against, but also enacted via, the new necrophonics—or sounds made within, and in spite of, moribund, dying spaces—the pandemic has exposed. Improvisation, in this context, becomes even more salient as a practice of adaptation and resistance to the newly emergent norms. This volume is a start at assembling diverse voices that move from first principles to direct action, and we emphasize the remarkable scope of pragmatic, grassroots solutions proposed by contributors across a significant range of voices and experiences. We argue for a fundamental first principle in which direct actions that support the allocation of resources to the creative commons be lateralized to avoid top-down forms that limit access to, and use of, precious public commons resources.

The Poetics of Engagement: Improvisation, Musical Communities, and the COVID-19 Pandemic

Daniel Fischlin, Laura Risk, and Jesse Stewart

Necrophonics: Improvising in the Time of the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic turned the music industry upside-down overnight and impacted music-making at all levels. In a typical year, by the month of March, summer festivals are putting the final touches on a year of planning and programming; venues are hosting a rush of spring tours and have booked the following season, if not beyond; agents and managers are looking a year or more ahead while paying their bills on revenue from current tours; and the artists who are playing these gigs, tours, and festivals are budgeting that work against leaner months to come. In 2020, none of that happened. Instead, we faced the sounds and silences of illness and death. Within the fields of jazz and improvised music alone, a sobering list of people who have passed away as a result of the COVID-19 virus includes Bootsie Barnes, Henry Grimes, Jonas Gwangwa, Giuseppi Logan, Mike Longo, Ellis Marsalis Jr., Wallace Roney, Manu Dibango, Bucky Pizzarelli, Lee Konitz, Onjae Allan Gumbs, and Marcelo Peralta. Not only did the pandemic threaten a generation of musicians whose age made them more vulnerable to the virus, so too did it threaten younger artists and artists from minoritized communities. Phil Edgar-Jones notes how “we are in danger of losing an entire generation of talent, as well as losing the momentum the cultural community has built up around diversity and inclusivity” (Edgar-Jones). He cites data from the Office for National Statistics in the UK showing a 44 percent drop between late 2019 and late 2020 in the number of Black and minority ethnic women working in the arts and entertainment sector.

Communities of freelancers, small venues, local arts organizations, and arts organizers have been some of the hardest hit in the creative economy. Even as other sectors reopen, the performing arts remain on hold with independent venues closed indefinitely, festivals deferred, touring on shutdown, and even music lessons severely curtailed. Social distancing has foregrounded the presumptions of mobility and physical closeness that underpin music-making and music consumption and has called into question the economic viability of current models for musical performance, curation, and dissemination. These three special issues of *Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études critiques en improvisation*, in two volumes, challenge us to reflect on this extraordinary moment and begin envisaging a post-pandemic musical landscape. That landscape is strewn with the wreckage of shuttered clubs. Regionally specific freelance gig economies have been severely disrupted, if not completely upended. And the supra-fragile spaces where the most experimental musicking incubates have been all but obliterated.

While the wreckage is obvious, the resilience of the most fragile forms of the musical socius present remarkable examples of survival. Many of the tactics deployed by venues, performers, and community organizers are deeply connected with the improvisatory forms of practice found in the music they host, perform, and/or use for wider projects of social engagement. Marc Hogan points to New York free jazz non-profit Arts for Art, which has

improvised as well as the musicians it celebrates. They’ve held perfectly legal concerts in the outdoor parking lot of their Lower East Side office building and in privately owned community gardens around the neighborhood. The organization’s co-founder, Patricia Nicholson Parker, notes with satisfaction that it took only about a week to coordinate one recent set of three performances, played from the vestibule of the office building for

passers-by on the street. While many of this year's make-do substitutes for the familiar rituals of live music felt like pale shadows of the full experience, creative attempts like this are a reminder of why gathering together to witness a performance was so special in the first place. The sound is in the air, and then it's gone. (Hogan)

Patricia Nicholson Parker, who has contributed to the community voicings we gather in these special issues, shares (in volume two) that

Improvisation is at the heart of how I work as an artist and as an organizer. With all of the challenges that we are faced with, it is the art of improvisation that allows me to move fluidly through all of the challenges while keeping me in touch with the spiritual. Improvisation is not random. It is about sensing with all of one's senses how everything is already moving . . . Change is what we are looking for, or more accurately "transformation."

As the second wave of the virus intensifies into early 2021, these tactics point to profoundly important ways that improvisation in crisis and its aftermath presents a way out of no way, modeling resilient site-specific responses even as macro-systemic failures ensure that the pandemic will continue to wreak havoc.

Where Naomi Klein's concepts of shock doctrine and disaster capitalism articulate how moments of crisis are used to impose even worse policies on diverse populations as standard operating procedure for corporate and oligarchic self-interest, these special issues propose an approach to crisis rooted in a form of reverse shock doctrine. By this we mean critical analysis rooted in community testimony that advocates to improve conditions for disadvantaged or challenged groups—in this case, musical communities and musicians who have found themselves improvising their very livelihoods in response to the pandemic. Such analysis gathers diverse community voicings and perspectives in ways that allow for new initiatives, concrete action, and innovative policy directions to be implemented as an outcome of the critical learning that moments of crisis afford. Following on Daniel Fischlin and Eric Porter's book, *Playing for Keeps: Improvisation in the Aftermath*, these special issues address the social practice of improvisation during, and in the aftermath of, crisis and the ways in which improvising musical communities model alternatives with widespread implications for addressing the pandemic. As Fischlin and Porter ask, "Might . . . sites of improvisatory agency come to represent a response to the crises that arise from destroyer culture? Might they inspire us to renewed forms of generative agency in which reciprocity, contingency, hospitality, and respect for the integrity of difference survive?" (21).

In this context of crisis and its aftermath, two areas are of particular interest with regard to the COVID-19 pandemic. The first is the new economics of music-making and music consumption, given the disappearance of live performance and the rise of social media and video-conferencing platforms as de facto venues. These new platforms raise qualitative issues around latency and audience experience, and ethical issues around their dependence on big tech aggregators that manipulate end-users to generate revenue from targeted advertising. Algorithms of profit in this scenario produce extraordinary revenue that is only possible because the creative commons—the myriad spaces in which diverse forms of human expression are produced, explored, and celebrated—are so intensely productive and generative in spite of inequitable returns for artists. The second area of related interest includes the new intimacies of music-making and music consumption engendered by an uptick in livestreaming, the proliferation of virtual simulacrum of ensemble music-making, and the restriction of in-person music-making to one's immediate neighbours. Screen and electronic mediation of "live" music

through technologies that capture and sell personal information, that radically alter the listener and performer experience, and that increase the alienation at the core of the trauma associated with the shutdown, threatens the intimacy of encounter on which music is founded.

In these special issues, the struggle to maintain connection and the unquantifiable intimacies of exchange that characterize live music at its best are counterpoised against, but also enacted via, the new necrophonics of music-making in the pandemic. By necrophonics we mean the sounds made within, and in spite of, moribund, dying spaces, whether the empty rooms where music was once made or the virtual spaces—often extractive and highly monetized—where latency and screens mitigate against liveness. In the latter case, we wander through this virtual sonic landscape torn between its proliferative deadness and the ways in which liveness haunts our desire for connection. Music's role in this landscape is significant. And improvisation—as a generative form of musicking that is always pointing to vibe, flow, liveness, surprise, and unintended, irreducible consequence—becomes even more salient as a practice of adaptation and resistance to the new norms.

To play music, and particularly to improvise, is to engage with states of ongoing precarity: how, exactly, the next note will sound, or even what it may be, is unknown—until it is not, and the following note is what hangs on the knife edge. The resilience of improvisational musicians, of all kinds, in the face of the pandemic points to their disciplined acquaintance with creating on that edge. For many, this has translated into an ability to create connection, even life, within the space of necrophonics, and music has rightly been lauded as key to sustaining mental health during the pandemic. What, however, of the mental health of artists who have suddenly found themselves out of work and facing an uncertain future? This is the other state of ongoing precarity for artists, and it began well before the shutdown.

The pandemic hit a musical economy already weakened by the rise of inequitable streaming models and the accompanying precipitous decline of record sales. As Snarky Puppy frontman Michael League says in volume two of these special issues, “The war is over and we lost . . . Spotify is the law of the land.” In her podcast contribution to volume one, Irish fiddler Liz Knowles speaks of the “ever-present feeling of being on the knife edge” that both musicians and presenters experience: not the unrelenting precarity of musical experimentation and improvisation, but that of financial insecurity. In such a context, we are wary of overly facile descriptions of artists as resilient in the face of the pandemic; celebrating resilience is one way to avoid fixing a broken system. In between the sounds and silences of the pandemic is space to rethink the musical economy along more equitable and more sustainable lines. Many of the voices in these special issues come from within the gigging music economy but push back against it in their vision for the post-pandemic, calling upon policymakers to—as in so many other facets of our economy—build back better, in this case by establishing a basic level of economic and social security for freelancers working in the performing arts.

The eminent bass player William Parker, described as “one of the greatest musicians to have emerged from the New York free jazz scene” (Smith) and also a distinguished contributor to these volumes, has spoken of the importance of what he calls the tone world, “a spiritual sanctuary reached through the performance of musical self-expression. As [Parker] writes in the sleeve notes to [his new boxed set] *Migration*, ‘the realization of the music is a joint effort between the composer and the players.’ Working together, they create a spiritual language of sound. ‘If we play soft enough you can hear the entire universe,’ he says, alluding to a piece on the fourth disc, ‘Cheops,’ a set of music featuring vocalist Kyoko Kitamura. ‘We close our eyes and we enter the music. We’ve entered the tone world’” (qtd. in Smith).

The tone world exists as a “spiritual language of sound” against the extractive necrophonics that reduce and monetize sound’s capacity to translate nonverbal experience into affect. The tone world encompasses and amplifies the generative precarity of the musical present. As Parker puts it in the liner notes to the *Migration of Silence Into and Out of the Tone World* boxed set, released early in 2021: “The musical language is based off of love for life and it exists to inspire both the player and the listener to move closer to the center of the poem called compassion.”

Such affect matters more than can be said because it animates the capacity to access intangible aspects of our humanity in concert with other resonances: biotic, spiritual, animate, and inanimate. Improvisation provides a way through to the tone world and in so doing opposes the structures of capital and profit that continue to peck away, like vultures, at the creative commons’ inexhaustible plenitude—a hint of which is amply on display across these special issues.

Moreover, as the structural violence opposed by the Black Lives Matter and Indigenous sovereignty movements continues, oppositional structures based on the creative commons offer ways to resistance, resilience, and wellbeing (however tenuous). As John Paul Lederach and Angela Jill Lederach note:

Violence destroys our ability to feel human. We are lost in a landscape that has no vibration, no way to locate ourselves. At its deepest level healing functions like a metaphoric journey to find ourselves, a search to find a location with meaning in a barren landscape. This journey may in an extraordinary, though mostly unspeakable way, represent the sonic odyssey to re-touch vibrations that create bearings and make sense of our place in the world. People are trying to *feel* again. That is why we so often hear from those living through violent conflict or in its aftermath that they are trying to “feel” like a person. To be human is to feel the basic vibration of life. (132)

Prominent voices in the peace and reconciliation movement, the Lederachs associate wellbeing with vibration that must be recuperated. Music is the space of such vibration. The tone world is the space in which the resonances of the vibrant world gather as a site of survival, adaptation, and resistance, making intangible meaning out of sonances that are “unspeakable” yet deeply affective. Concepts such as these align with others that are modeled in the world of improvisation, including Anthony Braxton’s notion of “affinity dynamics,” which “establishes creativity ‘as a social factor’ that promotes both ‘functional unification’ and ‘social interchange and harmony’ . . . the vibrational flow that moves towards ‘composite knowingness’” (Graham Lock qtd. in Alun Ford 61–62).

In these contexts, then, these special issues outline the contours of the struggle between necrophonics and the tone world, as framed by the generative precarity of making music and the destabilizing precarity of (not) making a living through music. These two linked volumes—the first a single special issue and the second a double special issue—are the most ambitious undertaking of the journal in its fourteen-year history. They model new ways of thinking about academic epistemes in relation to community voicings. But they also foreground the latter over the former with an overwhelming response from musical communities (venues, performers, organizers, activists, and the like) forming the majority of the content in both issues, with some fifty+ original “community voices” contributions and nine peer-reviewed articles.

The impetus for this work came out of a text published by Laura Risk in the *Globe and Mail* in March 2020, “Come Together, Right Now, Over a Livestream: The Power of Music During a Pandemic.” Risk argues:

Community music will survive the pandemic. Even under full lockdown, it persists and thrives. Our need for human connection is strong enough that, when physical contact is forbidden, we find comfort in sonic closeness . . . Behind the livestreams looms a larger question, however: What happens to concerts, festivals, dances, workshops, jam sessions and all the other forms of music-making that bring us together as a community, when events such as these have the capacity to spread death within that same community? (Risk)

Risk's opinion piece points to two qualities at work in the quotidian spaces all over the world where music is made: one involves the critical function of music as an expressive medium that promotes connection, and the other points to how the very thing that makes music such a vital part of the creative commons, its requirement that bodies sound and listen together in space, has now become its greatest liability. Again necrophonics: this time not the deadening that comes with virtual alienation but the potential death in every intimate contact made physically during a pandemic of this magnitude.

When Risk contacted *CSI-ÉCI* co-editor Daniel Fischlin to discuss the possibility of a special issue on music-making and music consumption in the pandemic, the discussion quickly evolved into a wide-ranging and ambitious project that saw another co-editor join, Jesse Stewart at Carleton University. It was clear from the start that the project would require expansive amplitude not only to gather field testimonies from multiple spaces impacted by the pandemic, but also to attend to the full diversity of communities, musicians, community organizers, activists, and academics, who were devising responses to the unprecedented situation. We underline that all three of us are working musicians as well as academics. In March 2020, when the Canadian music industry shut down, we found ourselves asking how we might put our shoulders to the collective wheel. In our case, this question comes from a place of privilege, as we have steady paycheques and access to the resources of the academy. We also recognize the need to question the ways in which privilege shapes the topography of our world, especially when gig economies and experimental local scenes are so vulnerable—even as they remain absolutely critical spaces where diversity can flourish and make significant generative impacts on local communities.

Our CFP, issued in May 2020, received an overwhelming response. In fairness to the multiple voicings we sought to include, we chose to publish two linked volumes devoted to the wide range of community testimonials and academic essays that resulted. We also chose to include a number of pieces specially commissioned for this project.

In the call, we asked contributors to consider such questions as:

- In what ways are socially distanced musicians and listeners using sound to improvise new social connectivities? How are informal and participatory musical communities improvising new, virtual forms of musical exchange and transmission?
- To what extent might the pandemic-generated surge of livestreaming and virtual musical communities persist in a post-pandemic landscape, and how might that impact the economics of live music performance? What inequities in the performing arts have been exacerbated by the pandemic and what forms might an equitable recovery take? Is the impetus to go online producing its own form of burnout and stress for performers and listeners?
- What are the roles and responsibilities of public and private arts funding agencies, music

presenters and producers, and online music platforms during times of social distancing and in the post-pandemic era? What opportunities, if any, does the post-pandemic era offer for furthering long-term economic sustainability for musicians and environmental sustainability for the music industry?

- How has the pandemic contributed to an enhanced profile for streaming and other forms of online music, and what can be done to change the wildly asymmetrical power relations that pit the economic self-interests of high-profile corporate entities that profit from online musical connectivity against the local economies of creatives? What platforms are modeling responsible behaviours in terms of supporting artists? How can these be replicated and made sustainable post-pandemic?

Our call for community voicings pieces was for short expressions that are testimonial, have an engaged point of view, and speak directly from experience with specific examples of sites, musical practices, individual and group experience, and situational contexts and case studies. We encouraged submissions that explored alternative writing styles and creative practices—from testimony and story, to manifesto-style statements, to multimedia practices/exercises arising from deep practitioner experience and/or cultural difference, and so forth—all in direct relation to the pandemic and its impacts.

Introductions to the two volumes situate this project in relation to the creative commons associated with music-making and improvisation, providing an overview of each volume's specific content and structure, and proposing a set of first principles and direct actions arising from the work done across the volumes. We began by referring to the latter portion of the shared introductions as the “policy” section. But it soon became clear that this statist framing was not adequate to the task. The shared etymological origins of “policy” and “police”—both referencing regulatory structures within political communities—gave us pause. How do the policies of dominant cultural institutions, however well-intentioned, police the creative commons, privileging some voices while disadvantaging others? The pandemic has underscored the ways in which the institutional frameworks that surround the creative commons—including the music industry, granting agencies, and university music programs—have benefited a decidedly narrow bandwidth of musical, racial, gender, and class interests historically. Modes of music-making deemed non-normative, including those associated with most forms of improvised music, are at a significant disadvantage because they challenge received notions of economic and/or cultural capital and the profitability/consumption models associated with the music industrial complex. Most improvising musicians have been well aware of this situation for a long time and have managed, nonetheless, to survive and create via a range of innovative adaptations and strategies supported by, or aligned with, their respective, and often local, communities. The pandemic has made clear, however, that no amount of ingenuity, creative resilience, or community support can sustain the creative commons over the long term in times like these. A radical re-imagining of the very structures that allocate resources to the creative commons is sorely needed.

While we are deeply grateful for those who contributed testimonials to these special issues, we also recognize that, for many, the past year has been one of complete exhaustion and contributing to an academic journal represented an untenable additional burden. For instance, when we reached out to Michel Levasseur, Directeur général et artistique of the Festival International de Musique Actuelle de Victoriaville (FIMAV) in May 2020, we received this reply, which we reprint here at his request:

Excusez mon retard à vous répondre, mais nous essayons de finaliser plusieurs

dossiers afin de prendre un temps d'arrêt complet jusqu'en août pour se remettre de toute fatigue et stress accumulés lors des derniers mois des plus éprouvants. En fait vous pouvez me citer en exemple de l'effet dévastateur de la pandémie sur le cerveau d'un directeur général et artistique d'un Festival de Musique Actuelle . . .

[Excuse my delayed response, but we are trying to finalize a number of files in order to take a timeout until August (2020) in order to recover from all the accumulated fatigue and stress brought on by the last most challenging months. You can cite me as an example of the devastating effects of the pandemic on the mind of an Artistic Director of a New Music Festival . . .]

Among the pieces commissioned for these special issues were some which specifically aimed to address how, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the longstanding North American contagion of systemic racism, white supremacy, and corrupt policing was brought into the glare of public attention, catalyzed by the on-camera murder of George Floyd by police in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020. Floyd, it should be underlined, was a hip-hop artist and musician who “grew up in Houston's Third Ward [home also to Beyoncé]—the home of the city's hip-hop and rap scene. Floyd used to spend hours in producer DjD's home studio, making the kind of slow-the-music-down form of rap made famous by the late DJ Screw, who also knew and worked with Floyd” (“Houston's Hip-Hop Scene Remembers George Floyd”). Music writer Kiana Fitzgerald points to how “Big Floyd was just a big, affable character. I think you can hear it in his freestyles: He just loved to have fun. He loved to joke around. And he was also pretty serious on the mic as well. He was someone that wasn't afraid to talk about what was going on in his life.” While COVID-19 has impacted musicians all over the world, Black musicians like Floyd, a freestyle improviser, continue to live and die through the ongoing, and now parallel, pandemic of racialized police violence and structural racism.

Texts by Matana Roberts and Rinaldo Walcott in these volumes address the racial violence threatening the creative commons and beyond. These and other voices herein point to audiopolitics as an important, if largely unheard and ignored, space shared between movements of resistance to racial and other forms of inequity. Critic Michael Denning explains that “It is not that the contemporary world of music lacks an audiopolitics, but rather that it is coded as the politics of the market: who owns and controls the sound files. The politics of intellectual property and piracy have eclipsed the politics of musical form or content” (2). Improvised musicking, alternative venue spaces, and freelance gigging musicians challenge the commodification of the marketplace, offering ritual, spirit, critique, connection, community necessity, and individual and collective expression as predominant values within an economic framework of scarcity that is counterbalanced by the generative richness of this work. In volume two of these special issues, Matana Roberts underlines the power of improvisatory creation to articulate lost histories and the communities whose stories they tell even as those communities struggle against asymmetrical power relations that are profoundly oppressive: “I make records and work that reminds us of past injustices because from my vantage point we have a very eerie amnesia problem that sits at the root of pretty much every struggle to date.” George Floyd's state-sponsored death in the midst of the pandemic underlines the degree to which systems of oppression and profitability, dependent on injustice and historical amnesia, walk hand-in-hand. Forms of community music, like those associated with Houston's Third Ward, provide another way out of no way, even as they threaten the commodity approach to music taken in the name of the music industrial complex. Again: necrophonics at work, where the sound of difference is contained or annihilated through the segregative enclosure of difference that culminated in George Floyd's unspeakably tragic death.

The community testimonials herein went through an editorial review process aimed at maintaining their original voicings while interconnecting them with the themes of these special issues; formal academic texts went through the standard double-blind peer review process. We have chosen, in the layout of these volumes, to interweave the two thematically rather than to separate peer review from non-peer review, as is more typically the case in an academic journal. As a way to tie the two volumes together, we have organized these varied forms of testimony into subsections, including: Improvising Creative Responses to the Pandemic; Improvising Arts Organizations and Venues; Improvising New Forms of Community; Improvising Technologies; Improvising Health, Care, and Accessibility; Improvising Economies; and Improvising Acoustic Ecologies at Home and in the World. Ultimately, the two volumes bring together not only a wide range of writing styles and voicings, but also both textual and multimedia submissions, including a zine, a podcast, and many video and audio clips, thus making full use of the creative potential of the journal's online open-source context.

By intermixing different voicings, these special issues also address the question of knowledge production: What counts as knowledge? Whom do we acknowledge as possessing knowledge? How might knowledges look and sound, and how do we value different types of knowledge when ecologies of knowledges themselves are under severe threat by asymmetrical power relations in which oligopolies of self-interest produce and commodify monoculture? The voices included in these two volumes are disparate and at times contradictory. They point to epistemes that constrain different improvisatory forms of knowing that disrupt power relations predicated on wealth, status, and privileged access to media. In a world where media itself is characterized by increasingly narrow feedback loops, highly toxic ties to monopolistic ownership and clickbait revenue, and racialized structures of power that disenfranchise the majoritarian world in the name of the few, the pandemic has brought into sharp focus the pathological distortions made possible by media monocultures. The role of social media and other platforms in all this—as the harbinger of surveillance capitalism, in which, as Shoshana Zuboff argues, loss of epistemic rights, epistemic inequality, and epistemic dominance all become desirable outcomes that challenge fundamental principles of generative diversity—is to be underlined. Concentration of epistemic dominance is the antithesis of the improvised music scenes that struggle to iterate and proliferate new forms of expression against the tide of singular thinking that produces this form of limited, commodifiable expression. And a key condition of epistemic dominance requires a form of necrophonics, where sonic differences are erased (or marginalized or pathologized) and its practitioners eliminated from, or given limited access to, key resources sustaining the creative commons.

The voices gathered here evoke scarcity and abundance, precarity and resilience, creative wells overflowing and running dry, power and helplessness, adaptation and exhaustion. These are artists, agents, artistic directors, industry personnel, and academics, presented in one place, at times in counterpoint to one another. This collection is unruly—to use a vogueish academic term—in its foregrounding of dissent and difference, but the voices herein are by no means undisciplined; the latter would be to downplay what artists actually do. They discipline themselves, over years—often in spaces of solitary practice—to perform, to enact, to embody that which is beyond discipline. They take scant resources and transform them into generative potential; they articulate inexpressible forms, new thoughts, incubating new artistic practices that model new social practices, all the while plumbing aspects of being that exceed any form of metricized, quantitative cost-benefit analysis that is the domain of destroyer culture.

The articles in these volumes, then, foreground the work it takes to project unruly and disruptive artistic voices into the world. In that context, these special issues take an explicitly activist stance by engaging with issues of immediate import for musicians, audiences, industry

personnel, policy makers, scholars, and educators. These volumes emphasize the connections contributors see among their skills, ethical and activist positions, collaborative relationships, and performances, and the larger institutional trends under which these are in the process of being subsumed, if not appropriated, during the pandemic.

Volume 1: Sound, Silence, and the In-Between

I. Improvising Creative Responses to the Pandemic

The video by Tkarón:to-based multi-disciplinary performing artist Olivia Shortt that begins these special issues juxtaposes their words with rough cuts of city movement and a jagged soundscape. “This isn’t the new normal,” they say. “This is life.” The jumpy gaze of the camera, the halting traffic, and the abrupt play of sound and silence echo the expansion and contraction of hope and death since March 2020—and the odd corners of joy.

The pace of the past year has been neither uniform over time nor equitable across human bodies, some of whom have been affected by both COVID-19 and the unrelenting pandemic of racial violence, particularly against Indigenous and Black people, that continues on both sides of the border. Both pandemics have exacerbated already existing precarities for artists, arts organizations, and musical communities of various kinds but, as Shortt says, these convergences have also generated a new activism: “People are amplifying each other and each other’s works.”

The authors in the first volume of these special issues grapple with the spaces, opened up by the pandemic, between necrophonics and the tone world. The silences of the pandemic are many: for artists, cancelled gigs and postponed recordings; for arts organizations, employees let go and negative budgets; for music teachers and therapists, lost contact with students or clients. The silences of sickness and death ride alongside all of these. We are learning new ways of improvising with these silences and with the silences of solitude and loneliness, and sound, when it comes, can be a balm. Improvisation—the shared interplay of sound and silence, risk and surprise—returns us to life, writes Montreal-based pianist Marianne Trudel, a recent International Institute for Critical Studies in Improvisation (IICSI) Improviser-in-Residence, in the first section of this volume, “Improvising Creative Responses to the Pandemic.” The human connection of shared sound is like oxygen to the diver, plunged in the abysses of “cette réalité abruptissime”—this deadening reality.

Necrophonics: sound within deadening spaces. What does it mean to bring the spark of live music-making, which is always improvisational to some degree, into the never-quite-live spaces of the virtual world? What translates and what does not? Trudel writes not only about sound but also silence, and the lack of “real” silences online: silences on Zoom feel awkward and untenable, so unlike the silence in a crowded venue at the end of a performance and before the applause, or the silences between teacher and student that allow for non-verbal learning. How, then, to make space for the tone world? Ty Defoe, an Ojibwe and Oneida performance artist and activist interviewed for volume two of these special issues, speaks of the importance of taking breath—a form of silence—but also notes that to do so requires the support of others: “Who is holding that space so that everybody else can take a pause?” he asks. Holding space for others is part of what artists do. These volumes highlight the improvisational ways in which they have continued to do so in the pandemic, but also ask who, given the current overwhelming precarity of the arts sector, is holding space for artists at this time?

The creation and maintenance of structures of mutual support in a time of proscribed physical

contact is a theme that runs through these special issues. For some contributors, making music offers a form of respite. “I have to go with free improvisation—playing without thinking but not thoughtless,” writes William Parker. “Silence and sound erase the thought of virus.” Still, his primary feeling is one of intense physical and mental exhaustion, so much so that even for him, one of the most prolific improvising musicians on the planet, music is “hard to do right now.” For âpihtawikosisâniskwêw artist Moe Clark, Indigenizing the virtual spaces in which we have found ourselves has been key to maintaining the community ties that are at the heart of her artistic practice. She describes a new project, the Web of Virtual Kin, of online gatherings, teachings, and ceremonies. The pandemic has required rethinking collective ethics and protocols for acknowledging land, creating safe spaces, and continuing circle-based practices—but has also generated new opportunities for her to mentor 2Spirit youth musicians.

For Filipino-American guitarist/composer Karl Evangelista, who describes the current moment as “not just disruptive” but “cataclysmic” for improvised music communities, creating meaningful art in this time can mean confronting the severe limitations of lockdown and advocating, in a variety of ways, for social justice. He writes of the quarantine projects that he has carried out from his home in Oakland, California: two album releases—one with South African drummer-activist Louis Moholo-Moholo and one with art rock/experimental project Grex—and the curation of two online “Lockdown Festivals.” These projects have found “meaning that exceeds themselves” in the context of the pandemic, writes Evangelista.

Finding parallels between COVID-19 and the flu pandemic of 1918–1920 has been a common sport over the past year, but for Michigan-based dancer Nic Gareiss this pandemic recalls the silences of another, much more recent one: the staggering death tolls from AIDS that did *not* make the headlines. As with the present pandemic, AIDS exacerbated already existing inequities and brought to the fore the unrelenting precarity of occupying a body that is somehow less-than in our society. Gareiss, like so many other authors in these special issues, foregrounds questions of privilege, in this case drawing an analogy between the ways that the pandemic has exposed social inequities and the newly exposed roughness of raw plywood in his regular rehearsal studio, whose owners tore up the Marley dance floor when they could no longer afford rent. AIDS is not gone, Gareiss points out, but the queer community has developed strategies for living with it. What improvisations, he asks, will allow us to “flip the beat” and learn to live with, and beyond, this new virus?

II. Improvising Arts Organizations and Venues

The second section of this volume, “Improvising Arts Organizations and Venues,” foregrounds the voices of Canadian promoters, booking agents, festival directors, and arts advocacy organizations, and reflects the specific challenges they faced at the time of writing, in Summer and Fall 2020. These are the people who, as Liz Knowles says later in this volume, “clear the path” and generate momentum for artists, and vice versa. The pandemic undermined this (typically) mutually beneficial relationship, the reciprocity that is at the core of the live performance, freelance gig economy—an economy that is both remarkably resilient but also extraordinarily vulnerable.

COVID-19 hit traditional musicians in Québec hard, writes Antoine Gauthier, Director of the Conseil québécois du patrimoine vivant (CQPV), an umbrella organization of over 100 intangible cultural heritage organizations from across the province. Thirty-plus “trad” festivals were canceled, though a handful succeeded in migrating their programming online. The newly formed Réseau des veillées de danse du Québec, launched with \$125,000 in funding for community dance events, was paralysed. Still, the CQPV used the pandemic to develop an online course

on traditional music for secondary school students (TRAD-666) and drew on its network of member organizations to provide quick data to the Ministry of Culture and Communications on the impact of the pandemic on the traditional arts.

Also in Québec, Marjorie Deschamps, Yaëlle Azoulay, and Noémie Azoulay, co-founders of the independent booking agency Résonances, describe the challenge of supporting artists on a roller coaster of cancellations, re-bookings, and re-cancellations while simultaneously pivoting their business model and, as an agency of five women, four with children, negotiating their own work-life balances. They describe what might be called an improvisational turning point, when they realized that the usual business model would no longer hold and decided to launch a new project to engage their artists and agency team—without yet knowing what form that would take. The result is a digital capture and broadcasting project, *La Trame*, that they hope will lead towards alternative modes of diffusion for their artists and more socially engaged, community-based programming.

Alan Greyeyes, here in conversation with Anishinaabe musician/composer Melody McKiver, speaks of the impact of the pandemic on Indigenous musicians and music communities. Greyeyes is Director of the *sākihiwē* festival, which works to develop audiences for live music among Indigenous youth, and runs the artist and project management company Ogichidaa Arts. Although the *sākihiwē* festival moved online in 2020 and was therefore able to support artists through performance fees, Greyeyes feels that “we let down the Indigenous families we connect with,” as many could not access events for lack of a strong internet connection or the necessary hardware. He calls for increased funding for participatory practices in the post-pandemic, arguing that powwow artists, for instance, should not have to alter what they do to fit into the “classroom”-style performance model currently supported by federal funding bodies.

Karen Ng and Scott Thomson, Artistic Directors of the Guelph Jazz Festival, mourn the loss of unmediated relationships of creative music-making, or, in their words, “the multiplying feeling of manifest creativity that artists and audiences enact together”; they chose not to move the festival online in part because they could find nothing “festive” in online programming. At the Ottawa Jazz Festival, Programming Manager Petr Cancura and his team decided to replace their cancelled festival with a ten-day series of live online events; he enumerates the “opportunities and advantages” of this turn to the virtual but writes that “no matter what kind of virtual content we create, the human yearning for connection can only be satisfied in person.” Mark Marczyk, musician and co-founder of Toronto’s Lemon Bucket Orchestra, launched the URGNT livestream series to broadcast from empty Toronto music venues in the early days of the pandemic: “Urgent times called for urgent creativity,” he writes. But such initiatives come with a price. Marczyk writes that after the series ended, “I sank into my first bout of pandemic-induced depression, which many people had gone through while I was busy producing the concerts that helped them get through their low points.” Scarlett Raczycski, executive director of Silence, in Guelph, oversaw a complete and ongoing shutdown of the DIY indie venue as it struggled to pivot to new circumstances, with over 100 events cancelled in the first wave of the pandemic. This included temporarily losing her own job for several months. Now back to work, Raczycski is striving to reimagine the venue’s fragile relationship between sustainability and programming in collaboration with other community organizations. Above all, she regrets the loss of the flagship Morning Music community improvisation sessions, a ten-year-old event of weekly meetings between musicians of all levels and types and grounded in community improvisation practices.

Atlantic Canada has been spared the worst of COVID-19 and Lukas Pearse, Artistic Director of the Upstream Music Association in Halifax, Nova Scotia, imagines (from a Fall 2020 vantage

point) a hybrid 2020–2021 season of shorter concerts, with smaller ensembles, that reach both a physically distanced, in-person audience and an online audience via livestream. Still, he wonders what the future holds for new music events: will already small audience numbers further diminish post-pandemic? For David Dacks, of Toronto’s Music Gallery, the move to livestreaming was, in some respects, fairly straightforward, given that “our artistic community has long explored telematic, site specific, and other types of conceptual programming.” Recognizing its privilege as a regular beneficiary of government funding, the venue chose to use its financial resources to address cancelled programming and plan for the 2020–2021 season within a framework of care: for artists, tech crew, venue staff, and also local community members, especially the elderly.

In normal times, these arts organizations, venues, festivals, and agents generate spaces that frame the tone world. The practicality of their statements in these special issues points to their adaptability in the face of precarity but belies the sea change that has been asked of them: to continue nurturing the spark of liveness but via the virtual spaces of necrophonics. “There is something magical about how ephemeral live performances are,” says Sarah Greene, the booker at Toronto’s TRANZAC, in conversation with pianist, songwriter, and community organizer Bob Wiseman. Wiseman and his colleagues at the TRANZAC have responded to the silence of their empty venue through another ephemeral form, the zine. They gather stories and photos that play off of each other within a rough aesthetic of cut-and-paste and black-and-white photocopies, and with something of the human warmth that comes from juxtapositions, or improvisations, of the imperfect and the unexpected.

III. Improvising New Forms of Community

Working musicians often belong to multiple musical communities, both close to home and in the locales to which they travel to perform. But these communities are fragile. Although many are anchored to specific physical spaces, they are constituted through human interactions and can easily dissipate in the absence thereof. Improvised musical communities, in particular, are incubators for new creative ideas and new community formations but may atrophy without new input and the opportunity for connection.

In the third section of this volume, “Improvising New Forms of Community,” we explore the uneven surfaces of moving musical communities online. In a profile of Club Quarantine, a nightly online LGBTQ+ dance party, Hannah M. Brown writes of the challenges of creating a virtual safe space and ensuring privacy for participants, but also the potential for online events such as this to generate increased queer visibility and connect clubgoers with others around the globe. For older adults, notes Brent Rowan, music director of the New Horizons Band Guelph program, online community music programs add the difficulties of hardware and mic set-up to those of learning a wind instrument. Rural communities have faced special challenges, writes Glenn Patterson in a profile of Brysonville Schoolhouse Revisited, a participatory community music evening in southern Québec; when this event moved online, its weekly livestreams reached a wider audience but core community members—including regular volunteers and even the house fiddler—were excluded due to poor rural internet access. Esther Morgan-Ellis, writing from rural Georgia, reports similar challenges but notes that the pandemic has allowed her to join participatory music-making activities from a much wider geographic area; she hopes that at least some of these online communities will persist post-pandemic.

Maine-based Irish fiddler Liz Knowles describes the “in-between” spaces of the freelance musical life: the hours or days spent transitioning between gigs, venues, tours, and bands, that echo the musical spaces “in between” sound and silence. Her contribution here, a podcast

featuring interviews with musicians, a venue owner, a concert presenter, and a festival director, asks what happens when the constant forward momentum of the musical life comes to a sudden halt and we are left only with the physical communities in which we live—limited by social distancing—and the online communities to which we have access. The uninvited stasis of the pandemic has, paradoxically, made remaining in the focused present of the tone world more difficult. To stay on the knife edge, one needs to keep moving—but what if there is nowhere to go? And what if the sounds made under these circumstances fall short of, or undermine, the artistic vision of those devising the sounds?

The improvising musicians who contributed to these special issues have taken a variety of approaches to shared music-making under lockdown: sequential improvisation, where each performer adds their part in turn to a recording; curated series of livestreamed solo performances; and in-person music-making that is outdoors, masked, and distanced. Perhaps the most radical is real-time improvisation over Zoom and other web-based platforms, which requires the inclusion of latency as an improvising partner—making space, as it were, for the hallmark technological deficiency of necrophonics within an expanded, virtual tone world. The long-running Mannlicher Carcano Radio Hour, for instance, here described by Brendan Kent, has found that the “unpredictable nature of lo-fi technological mediators” such as Zoom actually lends itself to the collective’s commitment to “an organic and unselfconscious use of sound” (Waterman 42).

Urban/environmental design scholar Vikas Mehta argues that the pandemic, in confining us to our homes, has generated “a new sociable space” (670) in parks and on streets and sidewalks, though such spaces are not necessarily equitable across neighbourhoods. The voices in these special issues remind us that the musical gathering places shut down by COVID-19 were, above all, sociable spaces. In Guelph alone, that included Morning Music at Silence, New Horizons Band rehearsals, and the Guelph Jazz Festival. When these spaces move online, they may reach a wider audience but they also risk losing their local mandate. Online communities are a place to meet one’s affinity group, not one’s neighbours.

The move online raises additional questions about the role of local venues in defining the character of a neighbourhood (see, for instance, the “Sound and Music in Kensington Market” project [Hemmasi]) and, by extension, the future of “creative hubs” and “cultural corridors,” concepts that have grounded urban arts planning in Canadian cities such as Toronto (see, for instance, the 2008 “Creative City Planning Framework” by AuthentiCity; and the Bloor St. Culture Corridor project). What will vibrant cultural spaces look like post-pandemic? Where will they be located? And will they reach their communities in person, online, or in a hybrid form?

Social connectivity requires listening. Shared music-making—and especially improvisation—offers one way forward at a time when we will need to actively work to restore human conversation beyond our pandemic bubbles. In their co-authored contribution to this volume, Víctor Manuel Rubio Carrillo, Joshua Argueta, Natalie Vanessa Lopez, David Echeverría, Cristina Duque, and Sebastián López present a starting place: through videos of music students and artists’ responses to the pandemic in Florida, Ecuador, and Indonesia, they open up possibilities for transnational dialogue. Moving forward, in dialogue, we will also need to make space for conversations around gender bias in the music industry, writes Carlie Howell; just as the pandemic has increased our awareness of the vulnerabilities of others, so the post-pandemic should be an occasion to recognize and support those who are vulnerable and disadvantaged within the music industry itself.

And beyond that, as mentioned earlier, we must address the deep structures of systemic racialized violence that are the subject of Rinaldo Walcott's moving intervention—and call to action. Walcott reminds us of the many quiet histories of creative endeavour destroyed by systemic racism and unspeakable violence, where the “struggle to breathe” signifies not only bodies brutally choked to death, but also creative Black bodies struggling for space in a system designed to erase their presence. The pandemic has foregrounded how “the profound collective spirit of Black and Indigenous people” perdures in an inequitable system that both needs and wastes those collective spirits.

IV. Improvising Technologies

Improvisers are, perhaps, better than most at working with what they have—or don't have. Still, it is one thing to improvise around the absence of other musicians and quite another to improvise around the absence of income. In these special issues, the tension between these two improvisations arises again and again: the relative ease of engaging in new, virtual forms of musical improvisation, and the relentless grind of improvising how to pay rent, or how a venue will keep its employees, or how to move an entire season of programming online.

The pandemic has replaced brick-and-mortar sociable spaces with livestreams and chat boxes on Facebook, YouTube, and Zoom. As musicians move online, they become, to some extent, social media workers (see Duffy and Schwartz for a gender-based analysis of this type of work) and are subject to the internal governance systems of digital platforms organized to generate profit from “the very fabric of social interaction” (Schwarz 121). Given that these platforms offer a public-facing discourse of “corporational determinism”—that they will, and should, create the future (Natale et al. 324)—the post-pandemic will require that we interrogate their role in mediating and commodifying music-making and musical communities, and the profits that they generate in doing so. The second volume of these special issues foregrounds artist critiques of digital platforms, including calls for a more equitable system of compensating artists for digital content, both live and pre-recorded. In this first volume, the “Improvising Technologies” section reflects on the affordances and strictures of music-making and music listening within the spaces of necrophonics: livestreaming, latency, alternative approaches to listening, and the peculiar loneliness of online performance.

How do we create and listen to music in online spaces? Vancouver-based violinist Parmela Attariwala, who participated in a sequential improvisation project for the NOW Society's Creative Music Series #8 (see Lisa Cay Miller's article in volume two), remarks on the generosity of musicians in offering “the best of ourselves” even when recording at home under difficult circumstances. Sequential improvisations like this one construct a tone world across multiple presents, wherein musicians must improvise in such a way as to leave space for other, future collaborators whose contributions they cannot hear. Along the same lines, Eric Lewis offers a meditation on latency—the delayed and awkward sounds and silences, alternately dilated and compressed, that govern online exchanges—and describes his own process of learning to improvise over Zoom not only with musical partners but with latency itself. He parallels this with the ways in which we as a society have gradually learned to improvise with the latencies of the pandemic: quarantines, incubation periods, and the time from public health policy to societal impact.

Being a musician means knowing how to create spaces of togetherness for audiences and also maintain an “inner practice of solitude,” writes Vancouver-based guitarist Aram Bajakian. What does it take to hold a space, to move an audience, and how does that translate online? The challenge, in a virtual landscape, is not just to increase one's tech savvy and develop a stronger

online profile, but to find those moments of intimacy with listeners and with oneself. Similar questions are addressed in a reflection by Laura Risk on the improvisational aesthetics of pandemic-era livestreaming. Her article positions the pandemic-era turn towards livestreaming within scholarly discourses of “liveness” and in conversation with recent work on the impact of audio streaming platforms on listeners’ understandings of the functionality of music. She then considers the affective labour required of performers to generate a sense of human connection via livestream, arguing for an aesthetic of “imperfection and intimacy.”

V. Improvising Health, Care, and Accessibility

The final section of this first volume, “Improvising Health, Care, and Accessibility,” asks where and how we might find wellness within the silences of illness and death that have marked this pandemic. For persons with disabilities, Zoom may help level the playing field. “For the first time in my life,” writes Erica Argyropoulos, “I am just another academic in virtual space, no longer improvising alone.” Music therapists can potentially reach more clients virtually but, as Nicola Oddy and Rebecca Worden note, our society must first value therapy for children (and adults) enough to provide the equipment and technological know-how for them to move online. Laura Menard writes of similar challenges faced by school and community music teachers: many public-school students lack the technology, internet access, and home workspaces to learn online. Under COVID-19, simply accessing learning and music-making environments is a sign of privilege, and the silences of Menard’s high school classroom now include those students whom she has never seen online.

Even in a pandemic, the lines of belonging and exclusion remain. Malaysian violinist Pei Ann Yeoh describes reconnecting with the London Improvisers Orchestra (LIO) during the pandemic through the practice of sequential improvisation. Even virtual, asynchronous improvisation is regulated by existing social hierarchies, however—who you know and what creative relationships you already have determine if, and at what stage of the improvising process, you might be invited to participate. If improvising communities restrict their numbers post-pandemic, Yeoh asks, “which people might we further entrench into invisibility?” Her comments remind us of the need to critically reflect on idealized constructions of the work that improvisation does in a community context.

We conclude this first volume with an essay by Erin Felepchuk and Ben Finley examining the use of improvisation within the language of crisis response. They argue that “historic cultural anxieties” have generated negative connotations for improvisation within such conceptual metaphors as “illness as war” (where improvisation is positioned as a defensive strategy) and, more broadly, “improvisation as disorder,” and draw on improvisation studies theory and discourse to propose alternate metaphors for disease and disease mitigation.

From First Principles to Direct Action: The Long-Term Implications of the Pandemic for the Creative Commons and Improvised Music Practices

The creative commons are a vital component of any civil society.

Without them, the lifeblood of how feeling, idea, story, and identity interact would not exist. The creative commons are where local meaning (that always has the potential to radiate outward) is created; where resonant and generative micro-histories are made; where new forms of expression are incubated; where community is formed, tested, and revisioned; and where, in optimal circumstances, the intangible assets that enrich life everywhere flourish and are actively nourished.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made this first principle manifest as artists all over the world have struggled to survive and revitalize their creative practices using new tools and new forms of expression—even as the normative, precarious realities under which they have done so have shifted dramatically. The community voices we have gathered in these two volumes are a remarkable testament to the diversity of practice, the capacity for reinvention, and the ongoing, undeniable impact of the creative commons—their potential to make life meaningful, to offer abundant resources for the critical thinking that is a concomitant of healthy community, and to sustain diversity. But these voices also testify to the degree to which endless precarity and struggles to surmount access to ever-shrinking resources are a determining feature of the creative commons. The generative contributions the creative commons make are constrained by the limitations thereon, determined by precarity and its roots.

Social and governance structures that do not *attend to* these realities are impoverished, critically weakened, and emptied of lasting significance. By “attend to” we do not mean empty expressions used to window-dress feelgood public pronouncements on the importance of the arts—and the oft-repeated gestures that cite their economic importance as a percentage of GDP and within other macro-economic realities, which, to be sure, do exist. Rather, we mean the conjoining of creative commons articulations with allocations of public resources, tangible and intangible, where the contingency of each upon the other is recognized as a foundational principle of civil society generally. An effective process for rethinking how this occurs in response to crisis, and in anticipation of worse crises yet to come, is at the heart of first principles thinking around resource allocation and economies of effective distribution.

The word “policy” is always already fraught as a signifier, one of the reasons that our editorial team moved from calling this the “policy” section to calling it the “un-policy” section. Policy carries within it expectations of top-down normative values usually devised within a limited or compromised feedback loop where gatekeepers, unelected lobbyists, bureaucrats, and peddlers of influence (whether Big Tech, networks of wealth and self-interest, political operatives who have discarded the notion of civic interest as a guiding principle, and so forth) have undue access to determinations about the public allocation of material resources. Moreover, “policy” in this mode is firmly tied to the tensions in its etymological origins between public administration and political organization and the deontology of civic conduct that serves the best interests of the collective embodied in the polity. And often, policy is a vestigial expression of state self-interest driven by, in the case of Canada, for instance, colonial and settler narratives and the governance structures that support those, in tension with emergent, or long suppressed, counter-narratives that reimagine the polity and revision the social contracts upon which it is based.

And yet policy is a key part of the struggle to better allocate resources that impact civil relations of all kinds, whether this involves re-evaluation of the massive amounts of money the US spends on its military, amending the funding formulas allocated toward the carceral surveillance state, or redistributing public monies that currently support enterprises actively destroying the planetary ecosystem. From defunding the post office as part of a compromised electoral system (as happened in the US just prior to the 2020 election) to the turning of old age homes into ghastly specters of incompetence and profit-taking, as is the case in Canada during the pandemic, state and corporate administrative apparatuses and their gatekeepers are factors in determining social relations and the lived experiences of people everywhere. These determinations can manifest in terms of the regulatory capture that advantages certain industries like the car or oil and gas industries or by legislative means driven by limited attention to grassroots concerns in favour of lobbyists and other interests. The need to revise and critique

the current structures of how resource allocation is achieved through policy determinations has been a key outcome of the pandemic.

The creative commons sit in this mix uncomfortably, seen as both an economic driver contributing to wealth creation and an amorphous network of activities difficult to reduce to any one category. The unpredictability of what emerges from the creative commons is one of its key features. Approaches that metricize outputs stand in sharp opposition to the indeterminacy that defines the creative commons as a space where improvisatory principles are active. Not-knowing what an artistic practice will yield is critical to generating diversity and new ideas and, because new forms of expression are generally incubated in the freedom of DIY and marginalized spaces, these scenarios are fundamentally at odds with the ways in which governance structures value and imagine the effective allocation of resources.

The creative commons exist in spite of limited access to, or the outright absence of, resources. They always emerge because the creative principles that underlie them, in all the diversity of their expressions, define and amplify core aspects of what it means to be human. But what if we imagine, for instance, a poetics of engagement that begins in grassroots and community sites which then, in the name of their own autonomy and wellbeing, become the source for remodelling governance structures? In such a scenario the flow is reversed from top down to bottom up, producing what recently deceased anthropologist and social activist David Graeber, whose work is discussed further on in this section, calls “economies of solidarity.” There is good reason for the tension between grassroots expressions of co-creative organizing principles and state policy approaches to the same. The poetics of engagement approach begins with the myriad, generative ways in which engagement in the creative commons is productive in, of, and for itself, as a way of inquiring into situations where access to resources are a constraint.

Which is not to say that the creative reimagining of how resource allocation streams to the creative commons does not matter. It does.

In light of all this, we would argue that a fundamental first principle requires that direct actions that support the allocation of resources to the creative commons (for want of a better word, the “policies” that impact that world) be lateralized to avoid top-down forms that limit access to, and use of, precious resources. What this means is a decentralized revisioning of how resources are accumulated and then dispersed. Centralized exploiters of the creative commons—Spotify, YouTube, Google, Facebook, Apple, and so forth—are notoriously extractive and extraordinarily greedy in how they allocate minimal resources to the very makers without whom their platforms would have no content. As is so often the case with these sorts of discussions, direct action involving the allocation of resources should begin with the vulnerable and precarious components of the commons, specifically the spaces where experimentation and incubation of new practices—of all kinds and in a wide range of musical genres—can grow and flourish, and spaces that build and sustain inclusive, human-scale communities.

Accessing these spaces and engaging with these communities in lateral exchanges of perspective, problem-solving, and future-planning is a necessary predicate to other forms of lateral engagement in the equitable distribution of resources. Rethinking resource allocation must begin by addressing precarity and vulnerability, marginalization, and immigrancy—and deep-seated assumptions about race, gender, class, disability, sexual orientation, and language, among others—in order to expand the ways in which the needs of communities find their way into wider public discussion. Sustaining the generative diversity that makes for a healthy public commons requires more transparent forms of dialogue, less gatekeeping, and

more community spaces where creative commons find voice, are listened to, and are given autonomy.

Vulnerability is ground zero for resource allocation. But so too are diversity, equity, and attention to the so-called intangible assets that are a part of any creative commons—the people and practices so unique and beyond measure in what they do that reductive approaches to valuing their work always fall short. These intangible assets contribute to the richness of co-creative ecosystems that sit outside market values (as they are currently configured), bureaucratic metricization, and normative expectations around value—all structures of denomination and domination that cannot compass the intangibility of what is on offer through these creative practices. So, the idea that resource allocation is a critical component when it comes to fostering creative practices—enhancing them, propagating them, and modeling them—requires vigorous new strategies for assisting in the transfer of resources into these spaces.

Fragile spaces and practices that respond to emergent community needs will self-iterate regardless of systems that ignore or oppress them. But they do so at tremendous cost. That is precisely part of their power and resilience but also the price they pay for creating under adverse circumstances. Examples of such resilience abound, from BIPOC communities that have faced institutional and structural forms of racism and colonialism through to other marginalized and aggrieved communities where creative expression and identity merge to sustain the capacity to resist the structures that appropriate and eradicate difference in the name of monoculture. Monocultures and lack of diversity, in whatever form those take, are a forward threat to the public and creative commons. Improvisation, both in the content and form of the diverse music-making with which it is associated, and in the day-to-day choices of the DIY spaces and independent businesses that shape the freelance gig economy, maps out new directions, voicings, and knowledges.

These two volumes, then, are a start at creating the assembly of voices that move from first principles to direct action, from scant (under)resourcing to new models of engagement between the creative commons and the governance structures and cultures within which they operate. We note the richness of the knowledges shared across these two volumes and derived from surviving and addressing the pandemic, although even this wide-ranging set of ideas is far from comprehensive. Further, we emphasize the remarkable scope of pragmatic, grassroots solutions proposed across a significant range of voices and experiences—with the sharp reminder, from Rinaldo Walcott's text addressing racialized violence during the pandemic, that "Yes, you who might be reading this right now. Yes, you have work to do. So, get to it."

Part of that work is listening to voices across a broad bandwidth of experience, a cornerstone of any poetics of engagement. Alan Greyeyes (interview by Melody McKiver), for instance, calls for federal funding bodies to increase support for participatory practices; he notes that powwow artists currently must change how they perform to fit into a (funded) presentational model. The same might be echoed by independent performance spaces like Silence in Guelph (see Raczycki), where years of sponsoring community-engaged improvisatory practices has led to a deep suspicion of how formal spaces can exclude community members from meaningful participation in collaborative creative work. Other contributors to these two volumes (like Bajakian, Block, D. Clark, League, Leger, and Trudel) address fundamental structural inequities and exploitation of the creative commons, calling for fair compensation for the creation and recording of music, whether by Canadian-specific entities like SOCAN or by Big Tech aggregators like YouTube, Apple, Spotify, and Google. Support for youth engagement, too, is critical, especially within Indigenous communities (see Greyeyes), for 2Spirit youth (see M.

Clark), within inequitable public education systems (see Rubio Carrillo et al., and Menard), and indeed for any marginalized group already struggling for space within dominant culture.

Engaging youth early with the creative commons and finding ways to promote access to spaces where engagement, solidarity, friendship, guidance, joy, and expression can be facilitated—community centres, for instance—is of critical importance. A singular observation throughout the two volumes is the challenge of sustaining autonomous community-owned and artist-driven co-op spaces where this can all occur (see Adler, Dacks, Pearse, Wiseman), including new artist-driven virtual spaces generated by the pandemic (see Marczyk), as well as flagship events such as annual festivals (see Ng and Thomson, and Cancura). Support for networks of community organizations (see Gauthier) is thus critical. A country as vast as Canada should be able to create and model these sorts of networks in order to support community wellbeing and foster intra- and inter-community contacts. How else to span the gaping chasm between marginalized and dominant communities? Recognizing that arts and community organizations require infrastructure, organizational leadership, and capacities for programming that are both generative and informed, it is crucial going forward to support these spaces as small businesses that themselves sustain a larger industry of creative outputs—especially as they pivot to survive the COVID-19 crisis (see Deschamps et al.). This includes expanded support for rural community initiatives (see Patterson) and recognition that, in a country as far-flung as Canada (from sea to sea to sea), the importance of local initiatives that foster creative engagement is absolutely critical to overall community and civic wellbeing.

As part of these larger structural suggestions, contributors point out the need to foreground conversations around gender in the creative commons (see Howell, and McNutt), with special attention to the needs of women of all ages, but also to gender differences in whatever form they take. There are also strong calls to support participatory music infrastructures, music therapy, and youth music education (see Rowan, Oddy and Worden, and Menard); to support and enhance fragile local improvising scenes (see Evangelista, Dias and Hunter, Mouillot, and Zucker); and to recognize the topologies of privilege, belonging, exclusion, and violence (see Shortt, Gareiss, Roberts, Walcott, Argyropoulos, and Yeoh) at work even within the poetics of engagement and economies of solidarity we describe earlier. And, among all these ideas yet more: How to make sure that artists, especially freelancers working the gig economy, can “take breath,” renew, and reinvigorate (see Attariwala, Defoe, Pitre and Holder, Knowles, Moore, P. N. Parker, and W. Parker)? How to do away with the facile notion that philanthropy will pick up the slack (see Chapman), especially when philanthropic support for the arts in Canada, the United States, and many other wealthy nations, is so debilitated and stingy? How to recognize and remediate the fact that inequities are inscribed into copyright law (see Campbell and Barut)? How to navigate privacy issues in participatory digital spaces (see Brown)? And outside of Canada, how to address local circumstances and inequities that compromise the creative commons (see Rubio Carrillo et al., Bastani et al., and Calvi)? These are just a few of the insights garnered from the voices gathered across these two volumes—and they are not the only ones with practical suggestions for supporting the creative commons post-pandemic.

In discussing the ambit of these volumes with students in the Critical Studies in Improvisation graduate program at the University of Guelph, the ideas flowed quickly and fluidly. MA student Annais Linares, for instance, whose research focuses on reconceptualizing play spaces for youth to make those spaces more creative and accessible, suggests funding organizations that guide and support “arts-based, [data-informed] strategies within and across municipal departments, offices, and commissions, in order to strengthen social justice reform efforts while maximizing and leveraging the use of municipal assets and resources,” with a focus on strategies that “reduce justice system contact and increase individual resiliency, family

cohesion, and community vibrancy.” Wellbeing and social justice issues go hand-in-hand for Linares, whose recommendations are predicated on reforms that enhance these aspects of public good via creative commons undertakings.

Emma Bortolon-Vettor, an MA student whose research focuses on improvisation-based youth programs for young women, offers a practical suggestion: “Secure disaster insurance for venues and performance spaces,” noting that the pandemic has resulted not only in layoffs but also in unrenewed business licenses. In response to the growing scarcity of community arts spaces for creators working in urban areas, she proposes that municipalities permit “temporary and/or permanent multi-zoning for [commercial buildings that can double] as performance or rehearsal spaces” outside of normal business hours. Bortolon-Vettor’s suggestions underline the critical role that access to community spaces plays in sustaining creative commons undertakings.

And PhD student Joe Sorbara, whose work is included in volume two, suggests a Universal Basic Income to give people living on or below the poverty line a degree of autonomy. As Sorbara puts it: “One should not need a wellspring of privilege in order to answer a calling—to music and art, to carpentry and engineering, to law and health care, to anything at all. I see our collective ability to do just that as a basic human right.” His arguments underline the connection between the creative commons’ drive for autonomy and the overall health and wellbeing of the public commons. This is the beginning of a cure to the hopelessness undergirded by poverty and the growing inequality associated with the obscene accumulation of wealth that we have witnessed as a by-product of the pandemic, where billionaires added approximately 1 trillion dollars to their net worth as their employees faced unsafe working conditions, unlivable wages, and reduced access to health and medical support (see Sainato).

David Graeber, mentioned earlier, underlines how

Hopelessness isn’t natural. It needs to be produced. To understand this situation, we have to realize that the last 30 years have seen the construction of a vast bureaucratic apparatus that creates and maintains hopelessness. At the root of this machine is global leaders’ obsession with ensuring that social movements do not appear to grow or flourish, that those who challenge existing power arrangements are never perceived to win. Maintaining this illusion requires armies, prisons, police, and private security firms to create a pervasive climate of fear, jingoistic conformity and despair. All these guns, surveillance cameras and propaganda engines are extraordinarily expensive and produce nothing—they’re economic deadweights that are dragging the entire capitalist system down. (Graeber)

By contrast,

the last decade [Graeber published these comments in 2011] has seen the development of thousands of forms of mutual aid associations. They range from tiny cooperatives to vast anti-capitalist experiments, from occupied factories in Paraguay and Argentina to self-organized tea plantations and fisheries in India, from autonomous institutes in Korea to insurgent communities in Chiapas and Bolivia. These associations of landless peasants, urban squatters and neighborhood alliances spring up pretty much anywhere where state power and global capital seem to be temporarily looking the other way. They might have almost no ideological unity, many are not even aware of the others’ existence, but they are all marked by a common desire to break with the logic of capital.

'Economies of solidarity' exist on every continent, in at least 80 different countries.
(Graeber)

The creative commons are a major component of these economies of solidarity, and it is clear that the global commons are better for their existence. Might not the energies inherent to these forms of solidarity—many of them characterized by initiative, spontaneity, and improvisatory energy—proliferate in ways that profoundly alter, for the better, the landscape of social and economic relations?

When one asks the question, "What can be done to improve the lot of creatives and their communities?" ideas from within the community abound. We invite readers to explore the contents of these volumes with this question in mind, remembering that the future is a dialogue that remains to be had even as the capacity to take direct action in the here and now shapes what is to come. If we think of the artistic and social practices of improvisation as a form of dreaming enacted upon a world asking to be made better, more imaginatively, might we not also ask the following, as does the great Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano in his text "The Right to Delirium":

What if we were to exercise the as yet undeclared right to dream? What if we were to fantasise, even for a moment? Let's project our vision beyond the current world of infamy and imagine another possible world: a world

Where the air will be clean of every poison that doesn't come from human fears and human passions;

Where in the streets, the automobiles will be run over by the dogs;

...

Where people will work to live and will not live to work;

Where there will be a law that makes it a crime to be stupid, which is defined as living for the sake of possession or of gain, instead of living for the celebration of life itself, like the bird that sings without knowing what it sings and the child who plays without knowing what game it is playing;

...

Where economists will not call the level of consumption "the standard of living," nor will they confuse the quantity of things with the quality of life;

...

Where the world will not be at war with the poor, but against poverty, and to ensure victory the military industrial complex will need only to abolish itself;

...

Where education will not be a privilege of those who can pay for it;

...

Where the deserts of the world are reforested, as are the deserts of the soul;

Where those who despair have hope, and those who are lost are found, for they who despair are those who hope for much and they who are lost are those who seek for much;

Where we are the compatriots and contemporaries of all who want justice and beauty in the world; no matter where they were born and when they lived, without the slightest regard for the boundaries of time and space;

Where perfection will continue to be the absurd privilege of the gods, but in this untidy and messed-up world, every night is lived as if it is the last and every day as if it is the first. (Galeano)

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This huge undertaking truly took a team of people to pull it together in a way that was both timely (with regard to the pandemic, still evolving as we write in the midst of the second wave of the crisis) and in record time—under a year from start to finish. And we note that we publish the first volume of what is a triple special issue of the journal on March 13, 2021, marking a year to the day of the first pandemic shutdown in Canada—with the second volume, a double issue, planned for Spring 2021.

The Managing Editor of *Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études critiques en improvisation (CSI-ÉCI)*, Ariel Oleynikov, was a critical factor in steering a complex set of editorial exchanges and the day-to-day organization of this project. Remarkable and challenging work: her contribution to these special issues was significant. Likewise, Rachel Collins, Project Manager for the International Institute for Critical Studies in Improvisation (IICSI), and former Managing Editor of the journal, was an indispensable presence and had the challenging task, among many others, of paying commissioned community voices contributors across a range of national sites. Her collegial advice and knowledgeable support are deeply appreciated. Hannah M. Brown, Research Assistant to Laura Risk at the University of Toronto, played a crucial role in managing workflow and providing editorial support. So too did the staff at the journal, which assembled a remarkable group of copy editors to help with content. Sincere thanks, in this last regard, to Sam Boer, Erin Felepchuk, Rosalie Fortin-Choquette, Jeannette Hicks, and Joe Sorbara. Additional special thanks go to Alan Stanbridge, Associate Professor of Music and Culture at the University of Toronto Scarborough, without whom none of this may have happened; it was he who suggested *CSI-ÉCI* to Laura Risk as an ideal home for these special issues and first connected her with Daniel Fischlin.

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We also acknowledge, with profound thanks, the institutional support that allowed us to pay the commissioned community voices contributors for their work. From our earliest discussions, it was agreed that we were committed to offering fair compensation to authors from whom we had solicited pieces and who were facing increased precarity as a result of the pandemic. We underline how important it was for us to pay contributors equitably in light of the extent to which exploitation of the creative commons (its own form of necrophonics) continues to be monetized. Indeed, as we write this, recent news of un-unionized *Rolling Stone* seeking Orwellian “‘thought leaders’ willing to pay [*Rolling Stone*] \$2,000 to write for them” has made its way through media and social media platforms (Bland). This “offer,” almost beyond parody, by an iconic pop cultural referent owned by Penske Media Corporation, reinforces how gatekeeping of a narrow bandwidth of media access really works. Along the same lines, in Fall 2020, Spotify introduced a “Discovery Mode” feature by which artists could “opt into a ‘promotional royalty rate’” less than the absurdly low normal rate of four-tenths of one cent per stream, in order to “receive amplified visibility on some of listeners’ algorithmically generated playlists” for specific songs (Yoo). The concentration of resources in the name of aggregate profiteering and the exploitive extraction of value from the creative commons are pressing problems that regulators have been loath to address. More distributed and localized forms of income and revenue generation, as any gigging artist will tell you, are the lifeblood on which these economies have sustained themselves. In such a context, we felt strongly that, when we commissioned community voices for these volumes, we had a moral imperative to pay those voices equitably for their work.

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more clearly what we are.” Thank you for being part of the journey that allows those new imaginings, for being part of that struggle to see who and what we are more clearly.

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