

# Critical Studies in Improvisation Études critiques en improvisation



## The Poetics of Engagement Viral Contagions and the Dream of Liveness

Daniel Fischlin, Laura Risk and Jesse Stewart

Volume 14, Number 2-3, 2021

Improvisation, Musical Communities, and the COVID-19 Pandemic

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1080696ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21083/csieci.v14i2.6640>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

University of Guelph College of Arts

ISSN

1712-0624 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Fischlin, D., Risk, L. & Stewart, J. (2021). The Poetics of Engagement: Viral Contagions and the Dream of Liveness. *Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études critiques en improvisation*, 14(2-3), 1–25.  
<https://doi.org/10.21083/csieci.v14i2.6640>

## The Poetics of Engagement: Viral Contagions and the Dream of Liveness

Daniel Fischlin, Laura Risk, and Jesse Stewart

### Note to Volume Two Introduction

*This double issue of Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études critiques en improvisation (CSI-ÉCI) on “Improvisation, Musical Communities, and the COVID-19 Pandemic” is the second of two volumes comprising three special issues in total. Our second volume includes the introduction from the previous issue, slightly altered to reflect new developments in the weeks since we published the first volume, as well as new writing that provides an overview of the contents of this volume specifically. Readers who have read the introduction to volume one and would like to proceed directly to the volume two-specific introduction, “Viral Contagions and the Dream of Liveness,” may do so [by following this link](#). CSI-ÉCI is also pleased to present six general topics book reviews, which can be found immediately following the contents of the special issue.*

### 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, among many others, Bootsie Barnes, Henry Grimes, Jonas Gwangwa, Giuseppe 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 forty-four 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 this volume) 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 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 simulacra 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 this volume, “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 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 volumes, 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 call for proposals, 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 this volume, 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 2: Viral Contagions and the Dream of Liveness**

### ***1. Improvising Creative Responses to the Pandemic: Redux***

We write this introduction to volume two in the throes of the third wave of the pandemic, as a new shutdown begins in Ontario on April 3, 2021, amidst overflowing ICUs full of younger people now intubated or dying from COVID-19 and a provincial government doing little to nothing to support the essential workers whose precarity and vulnerability have made them the epicenter of outbreaks. This shutdown caps the same week in which the trial of Derek Chauvin, the policeman who executed George Floyd, went to court, followed shortly thereafter by the murder of yet another young Black man in Minnesota by police, twenty-year-old Daunte Wright—all these occurring amidst deepening frustrations about a state apparatus whose systemic racism is plain to see, and pandemic responses driven by political expediency rather than the interests of the public commons.

The authors in volume one of these special issues wrote of the multiple, additive precarities of making a life in music, all exacerbated by the pandemic. They described navigating the sounds and silences of the pandemic and improvising new ways of musical being-in-the-world. They also proposed an abundance of potential actions to support musical communities in the future. Their voices, and those in the present volume, are echoed by musicians around the globe, as evidenced by Sammy Stein's recent book *Pause, Play, Repeat: The Real Impact of COVID-19 on Musicians*. Much like these special issues of *Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études critiques en improvisation*, Stein's book "asks musicians [mainly in jazz] about their careers before COVID-19, during the pandemic and how they think it will affect their futures" (6).

In this second volume, artists, presenters, industry personnel, and scholars continue the work of imagining a more equitable and sustainable musical landscape post-pandemic. One year into the pandemic, with tropes of exhaustion vs. resilience circulating like viral contagions in their own right, the voices here suggest something else: the beginnings of a dream of liveness. This is not to say that exhaustion is not present in this volume; it is, in spades, but paired with a determined call to action. Resilience, too, is here, but grounded in the knowledge that celebrating resilience must go hand-in-hand with systemic change. And the dreaming that happens in these pages is tempered by recognition of the voyeurism and biases of social media, where so much music-making occurs at present; the fundamental inequities of present-

day structures for compensating creative labour; and the profound injustices of our society.

In between its many horrors, the pandemic is also an “unprecedented . . . dream ‘event’” (Nielsen). COVID-19 has not only altered our day-to-day lives, sometimes beyond recognition; it has altered our dreams. Tore Nielsen, director of the Dream and Nightmare Laboratory at Université de Montréal, writes of what he terms a “dream surge” during the pandemic: a “global increase in the reporting of vivid, bizarre dreams.” Many of these are of fear, worry, anxiety, anger, and helplessness, but some “involve creative or strange attempts to deal with a COVID-19 problem.” Creative—and strange—attempts to deal with the impact of COVID-19 on musicians and musical communities abound in these pages. With these special issues, we ask: What does it mean to dream of liveness after a year spent navigating the virtual spaces of necrophonics? How do we carve out space for such dreaming? At a time when our worlds have folded in on themselves—when, as Lisa Cay Miller writes in this volume, even time has folded in on itself—how do we imagine ourselves back into the generative proximities of the tone world, and dream ourselves back to liveness?

Saxophonist, composer, and artist Matana Roberts begins this second volume with an open letter—and a powerful call to action—regarding that other pandemic, one that began some four hundred years ago but has received increased attention over the past year in the aftermath of the brutal murders of George Floyd and so many other African Americans by law enforcement. She describes the intergenerational trauma that has resulted from the history of white supremacy and police violence against persons of African descent, and reminds us that race and racism are intimately linked to health in myriad ways. According to a recent study by the National Urban League, Black Americans are three times more likely to contract COVID-19 and twice as likely to die from the disease than their white American counterparts. It is time to “find new ways to organize and strategize,” Roberts writes.

Within the ever-constricting necrophonics of the pandemic, where do we find spaces for expansive creativity? Oneida and Ojibwe interdisciplinary artist Ty Defoe’s contribution to this first section of volume two, “Improvising Creative Responses to the Pandemic,” includes a video of himself dancing on the rooftop of his New York City brownstone. “It was solace,” he says. “I could feel the wind up there.” In an interview with improvising percussive dancer Nic Gareiss, Defoe discusses the ways in which he has worked to Indigenize, decolonize, and queer a variety of spaces, including online digital spaces, during the pandemic. Improvisation is an important strategy in this process. “To me, improvisation is liberation,” he says. “What I have been doing with my art at this time is improvising landing on queering space.”

In a frank and wide-ranging discussion, guitarists Frannie Holder (Dear Criminals, Random Recipe) and Éléonore Pitre (Rosier, Star Académie house band) express a mix of disappointment and relief at the loss of a summer of touring. With the constant “what’s next” of freelance gigging gone, they describe this as a moment to reflect on their lives as musicians and to focus more on the “why” of their work. How can musicians continue to create the soundtrack for other people’s lives, Holder asks, without any breathing space of their own? Both musicians describe the singular experience of performing in person during the pandemic—in Pitre’s case, for a television production, and for Holder, in an experimental concert series for one audience member at a time.

In “Sawdust Collector / Spacious Season,” Barbara Adler reflects on the Vancouver arts collective known as Sawdust Collector, which ceased operations during the pandemic. “We were just too tired to imagine doing it right now, whether face-to-face or livestreamed,” she writes, evoking a sentiment shared by many creative practitioners during this pandemic. Rather

than capitulating to the pressure to be more productive during the forced shutdown, Adler asks what happens when we “think about other artists as members of [our] team, instead of [our] competition.” Can we move beyond exhaustion by allowing ourselves the time to slow down and the space to reimagine creative praxes, and by contributing our energies to the unfinished work of others?

Patricia Nicholson Parker, the founder and director of the New York-based non-profit arts organization Arts for Art, notes that improvisation is central to her work as both an artist and an organizer. She writes, “we have added to the casualties of the pandemic the growing outrage over the continuing immorality of racism and classism, as well as a general degradation of the sacredness of Life itself.” She sees improvisation as a strategy of resistance to that degradation, asserting that we need to “find new ways to keep improvising in ART and LIFE.”

We close this first section with contributions from two members of the Silkroad Ensemble. Cellist Mike Block describes the challenges of moving his music camps online and of continuing to teach—now virtually—pre-professional musicians in a conservatory setting. As a teacher, he feels an obligation to “try to engage with the same problems the students will face” as working musicians, which now include learning to teach and perform online, and finding new ways to generate revenue in the digital realm. He suggests that social media giants such as YouTube and Facebook could help support musicians by allowing audiences to pay for livestreams and other creative content. “The key issue,” Block says, “regardless of the platform, is sustainability . . . the ability [for musicians] to monetize these performances.”

Percussionist Dong-Won Kim, writing from South Korea, notes that the disease has played out very differently there than in North America. He stresses the importance of self-care as “one seed that we can plant and nurture during the pandemic.” Like other contributors to these volumes, he sees the pandemic as an opportunity to rethink many aspects of society, including the arts. This is the time for humanity to “engage in a collective improvisation” and work towards “lasting change for ourselves and for future generations,” he writes.

## ***II. Improvising Economies***

In the second section of this volume, “Improvising Economies,” musicians, scholars, and industry personnel discuss the economic impact of the pandemic on the creative commons. The voices in this section are at times in dissonance with each other. Taken together, however, they remind readers of the significance of the creative commons as a site of resilience, solidarity, and co-creative intersectionality that continues to sustain us during the COVID-19 crisis.

Snarky Puppy front-man Michael League, here interviewed by his brother Panayotis League, offers a frank assessment of the new economic realities for working musicians. He notes that even before the pandemic, digital streaming services such as Spotify had all but eliminated recordings as an income source for musicians. COVID-19 has now decimated their other primary revenue stream: live shows. League’s advice to young musicians starting out: “The upside of digital consumption is that you don’t need a booking agent, manager, or publicist: all you need is a product, PayPal, and a Wi-Fi connection. So, work on your art, and figure out how to get it out there. There’s no other way.”

Hadi Bastani, Anna Linardou, Rojin Sharafi, and Ioannis Tsioulakis—an international group of musician/researchers—highlight the extent to which the pandemic has exacerbated the already precarious position of musicians in a variety of national contexts under neoliberal capitalism. A return to normality after the pandemic would be a boon to those “who were happy with the

previous system”—including “an exploitative music industry”—but not to freelance working musicians. These authors see the pandemic as an opportunity to challenge and dismantle the exploitative systems that surround cultural production and to develop fairer ones.

Juan Calvi writes about the devastating effects of COVID-19 on the Spanish music scene in a text dedicated to Marcelo Peralta, the Argentine multi-instrumentalist, composer, and arranger who died in Madrid in 2020 of the virus. Taking stock of the turn toward digital economies and the surge in social media and audiovisual platforms that took the place of live music, Calvi outlines how music in the time of the pandemic has been commodified in the same way as household, everyday products. For Calvi, digital platforms reproduce imitation in ways that concentrate attention on what is made visible by, for instance, online influencers, themselves shaped by majoritarian trends and habits that they mimic and replicate. What ensues is a logic of viral contagion: that which is most listened to as a function of digital platforming and influencing becomes that which is most recommended on the platform, which, in turn, becomes that which is most consumed. At the same time as the pandemic has created new forms of resistance and cultural creativity, it has also enabled new forms of alienation, control, egoism, and endogamy. Post-pandemic recovery will require a renewed focus on live musicking and renewed forms of engagement between musicians and their publics as relations are rebuilt and reimagined in the aftermath of the crisis.

The multiple perspectives in this section serve as a launching point for potential solutions to the deep-seated economic disparities that have been laid bare, and exacerbated, by the crisis. Jazz pianist Monika Herzig affirms that jazz musicians, adept at improvising and creative problem-solving in uncertain situations, are particularly well-positioned to develop and implement new models of mediatized arts presentation and entrepreneurship during the pandemic—models that are likely to persist in some form after the pandemic has ended. As Herzig writes, “We have an opportunity to create a new mosaic that will foster musical creativity and community. For it to be an effective and sustainable support system, it has to be a communal, institutionally-supported effort.”

Improvising drummer, and founder of the Toronto-based Woodchoppers improv collective, Dave Clark, stresses the need for more equitable methods of sharing the revenue generated by musicians working in the creative commons. After SOCAN (Society of Composers, Authors and Music Publishers of Canada) began offering \$150 for livestream events with a minimum of one hundred audience members, Clark circulated (in May 2020) an open letter to SOCAN arguing that this unfairly excluded many performers and encouraging the organization to lower the audience minimum to fifty. We reprint Clark’s letter as an example of the ways in which improvising musicians have advocated on behalf of one another during the pandemic.

The nature of institutional supports for the creative commons warrants closer critical attention, and many in these volumes call for significant adaptations in how these supports are allocated to local scenes. In much the same way that a small number of disaster capitalists have benefited financially from the pandemic while millions have suffered, a small corporate elite has reaped huge financial gains from the labour of the creative class. Corporate America has benefited from the creative commons in other ways as well: in an essay entitled “Music, Mayhem and Management,” Mike Ford examines the ways in which management consulting firms have co-opted concepts drawn from jazz and improvised music to develop corporate responses to the pandemic.

The benefits of the creative commons to corporate interests are clear. Less clear to many creative practitioners are the benefits that corporations extend to the creative class. Kevin Chan,

Director of Public Policy, Canada for Facebook, describes one mutually advantageous initiative, the #CanadaPerforms series, a partnership between Facebook Canada and the National Arts Centre that presented over seven hundred livestreamed musical performances by Canadian musicians during the pandemic. As laudable as such initiatives may be, we question the extent to which social media and streaming giants have benefited financially from the creative commons while many artists struggle to pay rent. As Mark V. Campbell and Ayşe Barut note in a profile of three DJs who moved online during the pandemic, social media companies enforce considerable restrictions around certain modes of music making on their platforms and, by extension, over certain communities. Hip hop DJs in particular have been scrutinized by many social media outlets for playing copyrighted music as part of their DJ sets. In his contribution to this section, Devon Léger describes two additional online music platforms, Bandcamp and Twitch, that have supported musicians during the pandemic and provided new ways for artists to connect with fans, build community, and monetize their music.

In a piece examining music philanthropy and public policy, Dale Chapman notes that Black jazz and improvising musicians are at a particular disadvantage within the employer-based private healthcare system in the United States. “We cannot ignore that systemic white supremacy has obstructed access in jazz and improvisation communities,” he writes, “where Black musicians (primary contributors to these communities) are made doubly vulnerable, excluded because of their race and because of their employment status as gig workers.” Chapman goes on to discuss the important work that the Jazz Foundation of America is doing during the pandemic, assisting jazz musicians with housing costs, medical expenses, and emergency financial support. He argues for the pandemic as “an especially opportune moment for jazz artists and analogous communities to shift narratives away from localized and targeted solutions to precarious work, and toward organizing on behalf of policies that ensure the universal reach of economic and social security.” Improvising drummer and community organizer Joe Sorbara similarly advocates for the implementation of a Universal Basic Income (UBI) that will “provide everyone with the space to hear and recognise a calling, and . . . ensure that we all have the capacity and support to answer the call.” Without broader supports such as these, he argues, we run the risk of letting the creative commons become the domain of just a privileged few.

### ***III. Improvising Technologies: Redux***

The “Improvising Technologies” section of the present volume complements a section of [volume one](#) that similarly gathers the voices of musicians and arts workers to examine the technological dimensions of improvisation during the pandemic. Jessie Cox and Sam Yulsman describe a new compositional website, Weaving Music II, that intentionally subverts how sound and information are organized on the web. They position their project as an online archaeological site requiring “unpredictable and active archival digging” from listeners. Their goal, in part, is opacity; by gumming up search engines and social media algorithms, they seek to critique the supposed transparency and intimacy of social media and provide the listener with increased agency online.

Pianist/composer/improviser and NOW Society Artistic Director, Lisa Cay Miller, offers a poetic description of the technological challenges associated with a large-scale sequential improvisation project in which thirty-six musicians and two sound engineers collaborated with one another to produce a total of thirty-eight videos of improvised musical performances. “Isolated musicians improvised in their homes in sequence,” she writes. “[F]iles moved from musician to engineer, to the next musician and so on . . . Improvisers created in the present, imagined what might come, and responded to what had occurred.” This tripartite framing—creating in the present, imagining possible futures, and responding to the immediate past—

speaks to the ways in which we all, in our own lives, have been forced to improvise within the altered temporalities of the pandemic.

British improvising guitarist Nathan Moore discusses his own experience with sequentially recorded group improvisations, noting that one of the benefits of this approach is that it slows down the improvisatory interaction. For Moore, the slower pace of exchanging recorded improvisations raises interesting ontological questions about the nature of improvisation. “The ability to respond quickly is a skill that I work on,” he writes, “recognising it as significant for the art of improvisation. Yet is it *necessary* for a good improvisation? Is an improvisation to be judged only (or even predominantly) by the players’ ability to respond quickly?”

Elizabeth McNutt discusses the creative responses of the Texas-based group Bitches Set Traps to the pandemic. Building on the legacy of the pioneering Feminist Improvising Group (which similarly blended the political, personal, and musical), Bitches Set Traps combines musical improvisation with theatrical and comedic elements to challenge gender stereotypes and to comment on current events. In the early months of the pandemic, the group staged a series of collaborative performances over Zoom, addressing pandemic-related themes including the household division of labor, the importance of self-care, beauty standards during quarantine, and social distancing.

We close this section with two contributions that showcase the extent to which artists, presenters, and arts organizations are improvising technological solutions that allow them to maintain and foster community even within the virtual necrophonics of the pandemic. Musician/academics Raymond MacDonald and Ross Birrell discuss the technological challenges—and affordances—of improvising over Zoom with the Glasgow Improvisers Orchestra. Similarly, William Stewart, the Technical Director of Hermann’s Jazz Club in Victoria, Canada, discusses the technological solutions he devised to continue to present jazz concerts online during the pandemic.

#### ***IV. Improvising Acoustic Ecologies at Home and in the World***

The final section of this second volume, “Improvising Acoustic Ecologies at Home and in the World,” explores the varied spaces and places of improvisation, both physical and virtual, during the pandemic. Ben Zucker profiles Chicago’s Experimental Sound Studio (ESS) and its decision to move online with a series of livestreamed performances known as The Quarantine Concerts (TQC). “Given that TQC was associated with ESS, which I thought of as a physical space whose online presence was only an extension,” he writes, “my first inclination was to still think of [TQC] as some sort of *place*.” Zucker’s statement suggests that Michel de Certeau’s famous dictum that “space is a practiced place” (117) can be fruitfully extended to virtual gatherings such as TQC as the pandemic forces musicians to rethink what liveness actually means and how it is practiced under the new constraints.

What happens when a localized improv milieu moves online? François Mouillot documents the impact of the pandemic on the “fractured underground” improvised music scene in Hong Kong, discussing both the challenges and the opportunities associated with the move to livestreamed musical performances. In England, José Dias and Anton Hunter organized an online festival of recorded improvisations via the Manchester-based improvisation collective The Noise Upstairs. Moving their activities online allowed the collective to address gender imbalances head-on: they “imagine[d] a pan-European improv scene beyond national borders, where both men and women had equal opportunities,” and issued performance invitations accordingly.



Brigida Migliore describes the Giannimondo, a weekly “stay-at-home” livestreaming program in the southern Italian city of Salerno. Hosted by local law student and cultural instigator Gianni Fiorito, the Giannimondo usually featured two artists per episode and comprised both interviews and short performances. The show was always unscripted and Migliore explores some of the challenges of this live-to-social-media format: performing for an absent public, the lack of professional equipment for at-home performances, and audio quality issues. She also profiles the most prominent Giannimondo event, an eight-hour marathon concert on May 1, 2020, which included livestreamed performances by over thirty young artists.

This second volume concludes with a pair of peer-reviewed essays that examine different acoustic ecologies associated with pandemic life: one advocates for immersive participation in, and improvisation with, environmental soundscapes, while the other focuses on the sounds of domestic isolation. Glen C. Whitehead discusses the relationships between ecoacoustics and improvised music, arguing that fusing the two has the potential to expand our understanding of humanity’s connection to the natural world and serve as the basis for a generative research and creative practice. Kate Galloway and Rachael Fuller take us back inside our homes, drawing on insights from improvisation studies, multispecies performance, and gastro-musicology to examine the sounds associated with baking sourdough bread. “What is it,” they ask, “about the conditions of sheltering in place, quarantine, and domestic isolation that fosters an experimental space for reconfiguring improvisation and performance to include our foodways?”

The community voicings and essays gathered in this special double issue of *Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études critiques en improvisation* and its [companion volume](#) reveal how the pandemic has impacted improvising musicians; arts organizers and organizations; local, national, and international communities; and researchers. This wide range of improvised creative and pragmatic responses to the pandemic underlines the degree to which improvisatory thinking is tied inextricably to adaptation in times of crisis and in their aftermath. The dream of liveness continues to animate and inspire the creative commons as we improvise new ways to connect with and support one another during the pandemic and in the coming months and years.

## **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. A key outcome to the pandemic had been the manifest need to revise how resource allocation occurs through policies that impact the creative commons at every level of governance.

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 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 remodeling 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 (in volume one) 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 (interviewed by Melody McKiver in volume one), for instance, calls for federal funding bodies to increase support for participatory practices; he notes that powwow artists currently must change how they perform in order to conform to the models of presentation preferred by funders. The same might be echoed by independent performance spaces like Silence in Guelph (see Raczycki, also in volume one), 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 this volume, 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 farming, to law, to making clothing or food, to health care, to struggle against social injustice, to parenting, to anything at all. Our collective ability to recognise and engage inspiration is 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 one 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)

## Acknowledgements

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 third wave of the crisis) and in record time—approximately one year from start to finish. And we note that we published 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 this second volume, a double issue, released a little over one year after we issued the call for papers in April 2020.

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 Álvaro Alcázar, Sam Boer, Erin Felepchuk, Rosalie Fortin-Choquette, Jeannette Hicks, Joe Sorbara, and Alexander Thomson. 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.

The CSI-ÉCI team of Editors, including Frédérique Arroyas, Daniel Fischlin, Ajay Heble, and Kevin McNeilly, offered sanguine steerage through a set of ongoing challenges, including facilitating peer reviews, providing input on structuring the rich materials that came in, and engaging in extensive editorial consultation in support of our decision to include so many diverse voicings and materials. Sincere thanks to all for their energy and time, insight and commitment. Our peer reviewers not only provided incredibly rapid and timely responses but also made remarkable contributions to the specific content of our peer-reviewed essays, following on the journal's ethos to provide constructive uplift and honest critical feedback. Thank you to all those who were called upon and who made the time to do this work so effectively, especially in this historical moment and at a time when this sort of work is increasingly unacknowledged for the important role it plays in shaping academic (and beyond) discourses. Finally, to our authors, media producers, creative practitioners—a heartfelt thank you for engaging with this project and sharing the remarkable range of voicings in these volumes.

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.

Our sincere gratitude, then, goes to all of those across the University of Toronto system who contributed funding to fairly compensate community voices contributors and to support the indispensable research assistant work of Hannah M. Brown: the Department of Arts, Culture and Media at the University of Toronto Scarborough (UTSC), via an Equity and Diversity in the Arts grant; Barry Freeman, Chair of the Department of Arts, Culture and Media (UTSC); Don McLean, Dean of the Faculty of Music, University of Toronto; the University of Toronto’s School of Cities; and the University of Toronto Work Study Program.

At the University of Guelph, this work was supported by the COVID-19 Research Development and Catalyst Fund, the International Institute for Critical Studies in Improvisation (IICSI), the Office of Research, the College of Arts, and the School of English and Theatre Studies. Special thanks to Malcolm Campbell, Vice President Research and Andrew Bailey, Associate Dean of Graduate Studies in the College of Arts, for their unwavering support. We would also note that the University of Guelph is home to the first graduate program of its kind dedicated to the field of Critical Studies in Improvisation and the remarkable students in that program have been a constant source of inspiration, dialogue, and critical engagement. Their input is evident across these two volumes.

At Carleton University, the Office of the Dean of Faculty and Arts and Social Sciences and the Office of the Vice President of Research also contributed generously. To all the institutions and the key people associated with these offices: thank you for making this work possible.

And finally, to our partners, friends, spouses, and family members—work like this takes its toll and we acknowledge your role in supporting us through the life of this project and beyond. As John Coltrane put it, “There is never any end. There are always new sounds to imagine; new feelings to get at. And always, there is the need to keep purifying these feelings and sounds so that we can really see what we’ve discovered in its pure state. So that we can see more and 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.

## Works Cited

- Bland, Archie. “Rolling Stone Seeks ‘Thought Leaders’ Willing to Pay \$2,000 to Write for Them.” *The Guardian*, 23 Jan. 2021, [www.theguardian.com/media/2021/jan/23/rolling-stone-magazine-culture-council-publication](https://www.theguardian.com/media/2021/jan/23/rolling-stone-magazine-culture-council-publication).
- Bortolon-Vettor, Emma. Email to Daniel Fischlin, 23 Jan. 2021.
- Coltrane, John. “Biography.” <https://www.johncoltrane.com/biography>. Accessed 13 Feb. 2021.
- De Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. University of California Press, 1984.



- Denning, Michael. *Noise Uprising: The Audiopolitics of a World Musical Revolution*. Verso, 2015.
- Edgar-Jones, Phil. "We Are in Danger of Losing an Entire Generation of Talent in the Arts—But It Is Not Too Late." *Independent*, 31 Jan. 2021, [www.independent.co.uk/voices/sky-arts-covid-lockdown-theatre-b1795394.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/sky-arts-covid-lockdown-theatre-b1795394.html).
- Fischlin, Daniel, and Eric Porter. *Playing for Keeps: Improvisation in the Aftermath*. Duke UP, 2020.
- Ford, Alun. *Anthony Braxton: Creative Music Continuums*. Small Press United, 1997.
- Galeano, Eduardo. "El derecho al delirio." *Trianarts*, 16 July 2015, [trianarts.com/eduardo-galeano-el-derecho-al-delirio/](http://trianarts.com/eduardo-galeano-el-derecho-al-delirio/).
- Graeber, David. "The Machinery of Hopelessness." *Void Network*, 22 Sep. 2011, [voidnetwork.gr/2011/09/22/the-machinery-of-hopelessness-by-david-graeber/](http://voidnetwork.gr/2011/09/22/the-machinery-of-hopelessness-by-david-graeber/).
- Hogan, Marc. "The Year Live Music Stopped." *Pitchfork*, 18 Dec. 2020, [pitchfork.com/features/article/the-year-live-music-stopped](http://pitchfork.com/features/article/the-year-live-music-stopped).
- "Houston's Hip-Hop Scene Remembers George Floyd." *NPR*, 10 June 2020, [www.npr.org/2020/06/10/874334270/houstons-hip-hop-scene-remembers-george-floyd](http://www.npr.org/2020/06/10/874334270/houstons-hip-hop-scene-remembers-george-floyd).
- Klein, Naomi. *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*. Knopf Canada, 2007.
- Lederach, John Paul, and Angela Jill Lederach. *When Blood and Bones Cry Out: Journeys Through the Soundscape*. Oxford UP, 2011.
- Levasseur, Michel. Email to Laura Risk, 9 June 2020.
- Linares, Annais. Email to Daniel Fischlin, 21 Jan. 2021.
- National Urban League. "State of Black America Unmasked: 2020 Executive Summary." 1 Mar. 2021, <http://sobadev.iamempowered.com/sites/soba.iamempowered.com/files/NUL-SOBA-2020-ES-web.pdf>.
- Nielsen, Tore. "The COVID-19 Pandemic Is Changing Our Dreams." *Scientific American*. 1 Oct. 2020, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-covid-19-pandemic-is-changing-our-dreams/>.
- Parker, William. *Migration of Silence Into and Out Of the Tone World*. Liner notes. Centering 1020–29, 2021.
- Risk, Laura. "Come Together, Right Now, Over a Livestream: The Power of Music During a Pandemic." *The Globe and Mail*, 25 Mar. 2020, [www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-come-together-right-now-over-a-livestream-the-power-of-music-during/](http://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-come-together-right-now-over-a-livestream-the-power-of-music-during/).
- Sainato, Michael. "Billionaires Add \$1tn to Net Worth During Pandemic as their Workers Struggle." *The Guardian*, 15 Jan. 2021, [www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jan/15/billionaires-net-worth-coronavirus-pandemic](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jan/15/billionaires-net-worth-coronavirus-pandemic).

[jeff-bezos-elon-musk](#).

Smith, Stewart. "William Parker Accentuates the "Free" in Free Jazz." *Bandcamp Daily*, 19 Jan. 2021, [daily.bandcamp.com/features/william-parker-migration-of-silence-into-and-out-of-the-tone-world-interview](https://daily.bandcamp.com/features/william-parker-migration-of-silence-into-and-out-of-the-tone-world-interview).

Stein, Sammy. *Pause, Play, Repeat: The Real Impact of COVID-19 on Musicians*. Self-published, 2021.

Yoo, Noah. "Could Spotify's New Discovery Mode Be Considered Payola?" *Pitchfork*, 9 Nov. 2020, [pitchfork.com/thepitch/could-spotifys-new-discovery-mode-be-considered-payola/](https://pitchfork.com/thepitch/could-spotifys-new-discovery-mode-be-considered-payola/).

Zuboff, Shoshana. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. PublicAffairs, 2020.