

**Performed Identities:  
Theorizing in New York City's  
Improvised Music Scene**

by Daniel Blake

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## Abstract

## Performed Identities: Theorizing in New York's Improvised Music Scene

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This research looks at the diverse approaches to musical practice in New York City's improvised music scene. Using the ideas of improvisers living and working in New York, a central aim of this study is to explore the development of a musician's music theory as personal and implicit. Theory is defined here as a subjective and internalized body of knowledge informing the particular choices an individual improviser makes in real time, given an aesthetic landscape consisting of many other theories. The eighteen interviewees were each asked a series of questions pertaining to their experience as contemporary improvisers. From analysis of these interviews, three central topics emerged, which form the basis for the chapters of the dissertation. First, theory is an expression of an individual's identity, and that identity is performed in the act of improvisation. Second, there is a causal link between one's theory and one's musical practice, and this link is often expressed through "extra-musical" metaphors pertaining to the body. Third, the project holds that improvisation is an ethical act, the working out of musical and structural processes in real time, requiring a negotiation between the implicit theories of individual players whose aesthetic beliefs may be quite different from one another.

## Preface

Since moving to New York City in 2006, I have often felt as if my work as a performer and graduate student existed in tension with one another. In approaching this project, I began to wonder if my academic work could expand upon my understanding and awareness of improvised music communities, and of my own goals as a member of New York's improvised music scene. I can recall a particular insight I had into this possibility while travelling on a three-week tour through Germany during the winter of 2010. The conversation amongst the band was free-wheeling, moving from profound musical discussions to topics unsuitable for an academic paper, all flowing within a humorous and human collective exchange. Reflecting on this seemingly mundane everyday experience for a touring musician, I am reminded of the fluid nature of relationships in improvised music, where the line between performing and rehearsing, composing and improvising, and working and socializing are all interdependent and dynamic parts of the creative process.

By taking a closer look at how theories are constructed in improvised music in this paper, I place great importance on the conversations improvisers have with each other. This is why I set out to engage my colleagues in New York's improvised music community in a set of interviews that begin to examine how improvisers know what, when, and with whom to play. These conversations were all lucid and engaging exchanges of ideas, and often challenged my own assumptions of how improvisation works. I sometimes felt compelled in a moment to "improvise" new questions on the spot, thus giving the trajectory of the project many unexpected twists and turns. Unfortunately, some of the wider context of each individual interview has been lost due to the constraint of finding a cogent argument from eighteen interviews, each of which lasted around ninety-minutes. I have tried to preserve the flow of the conversations as much as

possible by offering different viewpoints on theoretical topics facing contemporary improvisers, where I aim to be just one participant in the discussion. This paper was written in the spirit of an improvisation: we find common ground where it can be found while maintaining a mutual respect for difference, borne out of the faith that every improviser is on a unique search for an identity that is most true. This paper documents eighteen perspectives on how this intention unfolds and is made known in the course of performance.

## Acknowledgements

The ideas presented here are almost entirely those of a younger generation of improviser living and working in New York City. I am immensely grateful to the eighteen musicians, each of whom are listed here along with a brief biography and my relationship to each:

Trumpeter **Peter Evans** (b. Brookline, MA, 1981) has been a member of the New York musical community since 2003, having moved to the city after graduating Oberlin Conservatory with a degree in classical trumpet. Peter currently works in a wide variety of areas, including solo performance, chamber orchestras, free improvised settings, electro-acoustic music, jazz and composition.<sup>1</sup> I have collaborated sporadically with Peter since 2006 and was a member of his “Sparks Orchestra” from 2009-2010.

Colombian pianist **Ricardo Gallo** (b. Bogota, Colombia, 1980) has published five albums under his name. He leads different projects that relate aspects of Colombian traditions to contemporary musical expressions, and performs with several improvisational groups.<sup>2</sup> Ricardo holds a Ph.D. in composition from SUNY Stonybrook. I have been a regular member of Ricardo’s New York ensemble “Tierre de Nadie” since 2007, and we also work together in a collaborative trio, TAUOM.

Guitarist **Mary Halvorson** (b. Brookline, MA, 1980) has been active in New York since 2002, following jazz studies at Wesleyan University and the New School. I got to know Mary primarily through this project, and our mutual friendship with violist Jessica Pavone. Since this project, we have begun to collaborate as our schedules allow.

**Jon Irabagon** (b. Chicago, IL, 1979), winner of the 2008 Thelonious Monk International Saxophone Competition, has performed extensively as both a sideman and as a leader in an ever-

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.moreismorerecords.com/peterevans.html>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.ricardogallo.com/site/bio>

expanding range of projects, from the most straight ahead to the most searching.<sup>3</sup> He attended the Manhattan School of Music and earned an artist diploma from the Julliard School. Jon is a regular member of the acclaimed group “Mostly Other People Do the Killing,” and I have had the daunting task of subbing for Jon on several occasions for this project.

Guitarist **Julian Lage** (b. Santa Rosa, CA, 1987) grew up in California and gained pivotal early exposure as a protégé of legendary vibraphonist Gary Burton, recording and touring with Burton on two projects.<sup>4</sup> He now performs in a wide range of contexts including an experimental duo with guitarist Nels Cline, with reknowned violinist Mark O’Connor, and with his own project, The Julian Lage Group, of which I have been a regular member since 2010. Julian has become a close and frequent musical collaborator of mine, and our interview was conducted while on the road!

Saxophonist **Darius Jones** (b. Richmond, VA, 1979) comes from a diverse musical background, which lead him to his unique and soulful approach to music. His repertoire includes compositions and performances in electro-acoustic music, chamber ensembles, contemporary and avant-garde jazz groups, modern dance performances, and multi-media events. Darius graduated from Virginia Commonwealth University with a Bachelors in Jazz Studies, and holds a Master's Degree in Jazz Performance/Composition from New York University in.<sup>5</sup> I have never collaborated with Darius Jones, but have admired his approach to improvisation, and have seen him perform on numerous occasions prior to our interview.

**Adam Kendall** (b. Jericho, NY, 1965) is a videoist and musician living and working in Brooklyn, NY. He treats video as a medium capable of detailed, structured composition and dynamic, improvisational performances. Adam regularly performs and screens pieces solo and

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<sup>3</sup> [http://jonirabagon.com/bio\\_more.html](http://jonirabagon.com/bio_more.html)

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.julianlage.com>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.dariusjonesmusic.com/read.html>

in various collaborations, and he has organized a/v performance series and workshops, including *Rake*.<sup>6</sup> I have never collaborated on a project with Adam, but he has performed several times at “The Defacto Series,” a concert series I co-curated with laptop performer Yoni Niv.

Saxophonist **Steve Lehman** (b. New York City, 1978) works across a broad spectrum of experimental musical idioms. He has written pieces for large orchestra and chamber ensembles, performs regularly with his own groups, and is active as a researcher. Lehman received his B.A. (2000) and M.A. in Composition (2002) from Wesleyan, and is currently a doctoral candidate at Columbia University.<sup>7</sup> I contacted Steve for this project as an admirer of his work, particularly for his 2009 release “Travail, Transformation and Flow” (Psi).

Sound artist **Yoni Niv** (b. Reshevot, Israel, 1976) explores cross-cultural, urban musical practices across a wide variety of artistic mediums. Yoni has been the co-founder and curator of “De Facto Series” and a member of the composer’s collective “First Performance.” Yoni is currently a Ph.D. candidate in composition and theory at New York University.<sup>8</sup> I first met Yoni while pursuing a master’s degree at Brooklyn College, CUNY, and we became frequent collaborators, producing a concert series together and pursuing various electro-acoustic projects.

**Joshue Ott** (b. St. Louis, MO, 1977) is the creative technologist behind iOS apps *Thicket:Classic*, *snowDrift*, and *Falling Stars* as well as the live performance program *superDraw*. He is part Visual Artist/Animator, part Programmer, and spends his time riding the line between these two disciplines.<sup>9</sup> I first met Joshue through Yoni Niv, when the pair performed at Adam Kendall’s *Rake* series in 2008 along with Peter Evans.

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<sup>6</sup> [http://www.hellbender.org/kendall\\_cv.php](http://www.hellbender.org/kendall_cv.php)

<sup>7</sup> [http://pirecordings.com/artist/Steve\\_Lehman](http://pirecordings.com/artist/Steve_Lehman)

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.yoniniv.org/bio.php>

<sup>9</sup> <http://intervalstudios.com>

String instrumentalist **Jessica Pavone** (b. Pelham, NY, 1977) has led numerous bands of her own including “Army of Strangers” and “The Pavones,” writes and records songs for solo viola, and is a composer of chamber music.<sup>10</sup> I met Jessica in 2006 while attending Brooklyn College, where we both earned our master of music degree in composition. We have remained friends since that time, and recently worked together through Anthony Braxton’s “Trillium E” opera project.

Laptop performer **Sam Pluta** (b. Rockville, CT, 1979) works in many facets of electronic music, including improvised and notated performances. He holds a D.M.A. from Columbia University, and is John Plude Chair of Computer Musicianship and Academic Dean at the Walden School.<sup>11</sup> Sam and I met through Peter Evans, with whom Sam performs regularly, and we have begun to collaborate since this project.

Touring, recording, and performing actively in New York City, bassist **Jorge Roeder** (b. Lima, Peru, 1980) is currently part of several projects, including The Julian Lage Group, having received a scholarship from the New England Conservatory of Music upon moving to Boston in 2002. I met Jorge at NEC, and we have been regular collaborators ever since. Jorge appears on two of the three albums I have released as a leader, and we also tour and perform together frequently with The Julian Lage Group.

Baritone saxophonist and bass clarinetist **Josh Sinton** (b. Port Republic, NJ, 1972) has lived in New York since 2003, and has led several groups which feature his unique improvising and composing style, as well as “Ideal Bread” a quartet that focuses on the music of his mentor Steve Lacy. I met Josh while we were both attending the New England Conservatory of Music,

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.jessicapavone.com/bio.htm>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.sampluta.com>

where he was earned his master of music in jazz studies. After moving to New York, we formed the collaborative electro-acoustic ensemble “Blivton” with Yoni Niv in 2006.

Bassist and vocalist **Esperanza Spalding** (b. Portland, OR, 1984) performs in a diverse range of musical situations, most notably in her own most recent project, “Radio Music Society.” She is notable in this group of interviewees for having won particular attention as a jazz musician in the mainstream music industry, particularly for being the recipient of the 2010 Grammy® Award for “best new artist.” I met Esperanza while studying in Boston, and began performing with her in 2012 as a member of the horn section in “Radio Music Society,” her most recent ensemble.

**Sergei Tcherepnin** (b. Falmouth, MA, 1982) is a Brooklyn-based artist who uses performance, composition, and installation to explore the materiality of sound and its physical and psychological effects on the listener. He has performed throughout NYC as an improviser with piano and modular synthesizer, and holds a masters of music degree from Bard College. I met Sergei at a three-week workshop during the summer of 2008, after which we began collaborating regularly. Eventually, we joined with Yoni Niv and Josh Sinton to form a larger electro-acoustic ensemble that was active until disbanding in 2010.

Bassoonist **Katherine Young** (b. Ypsilanti, Michigan, 1980) creates acoustic and electro-acoustic music that uses curious timbres, expressive noises, and kinetic structures to explore the dramatic materiality of sound, constantly shifting ensemble energies, and the tension between the familiar and the strange.<sup>12</sup> She is currently a D.M.A. candidate at Northwestern University, having completed undergraduate studies at Oberlin College and Conservatory, and graduate studies at Wesleyan University. I first met Katherine through our participation in Anthony

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<sup>12</sup> <http://www.katherineyoung.info>

Braxton's "Trillium E" orchestra in 2009, and we have collaborated on concerts occasionally over the years.

In addition to the contributions of the interviewees, this work benefited from the support of City University of New York's Baisley Powell Elebash Fund, an endowment that is dedicated to supporting the scholarly and performative musical culture in New York City. The most important intellectual beacon for this project is my advisor, Professor Stephen Blum, without whom this project could not have happened. I am also indebted to the teachings and writings of Professor Joseph Straus, whose seminars lead me to wonder how specialized topics in music theory can apply to improvised music. Thanks also to Professors Jeffrey Taylor, Robert Dick and David Olan for their insightful comments, and for serving on my dissertation committee. I am grateful for the early support of Professor Salim Washington who urged me to ask the tough questions about identity that eventually became the first chapter of the work. Thanks are due also to my mother, Alecia Blake for proofreading, and for her well-honed eye for rooting out aimless prose. Finally, a special thanks to my wife, Andrea Spirn, who was my great emotional anchor throughout this process, convincing me I am capable of this and much more.

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## Introduction

Many of my greatest lessons as a musician have come from reflecting upon a koan-like phrase uttered by a teacher who spoke in the moment, almost as if the teaching itself was an improvisation. This is one example: Saxophonist Wayne Shorter once asked my teacher, pianist and composer Danilo Pérez, to play “water” at one of their first musical encounters. Upon playing a chord voicing, Shorter rebuked, “No, that’s dirty water...play clean water!”<sup>13</sup> This was a formative experience in Pérez’s tenure with the Wayne Shorter Quartet, one of the most renowned improvising ensembles in recent memory. During my time studying in Pérez’s studio, our discussions about improvisation and harmony led to my enacting a conception of harmony as a visual and alterable entity, an approach Pérez told me he himself learned from his early experiences with Shorter. Conceptualizing harmony as having physical properties - weight, density, color, and so on - led me to develop a network of chord voicings that are flexible, allowing me to be truly interactive within an improvisational context. In another instance, Pérez once stopped me on my way out the door after a rehearsal, imploring me to “get more girls in my sound.” I knew immediately what he meant because of our past conversations about a balanced awareness of sexuality in approaching an improvisation, especially in how I approach dynamics and timbre on my instrument. Living and working in New York City’s improvised music scene, I have noticed that these types of anecdotes point to shared experiences within a musical community. When distilled to their basic elements, stories like these become a kind of vernacular that binds musicians together.<sup>14</sup> My own experience with the metaphor *harmony is color* provides just one example of how I incorporate my lived experience into a broader identity

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<sup>13</sup> Danilo Perez, personal communication with author, April , 2004.

<sup>14</sup> See Douglass Daniels, “Lester Young: Master of Jive,” *American Music* 3 (Autumn, 1985): 313-328 for more historical context on the meaning and usage of vernacular in jazz music.

as a performer.<sup>15</sup> Throughout this paper, I refer to one's identity in the context of improvisation as "performed identity."

As a musician, the possibility of developing a personal sound has always intrigued me. Reflecting on my own identity as an improviser, I am reminded of a basic question that has provoked curiosity since I first decided to pursue music: how can an improviser know what and when to play? I think this perplexing theoretical question continues to intrigue me because the answer cannot be pinned down and made explicit. Knowing what and when to play is contingent upon subjective aesthetic decisions that are made by an individual acting in concert with a group of other individuals in a given moment. These decisions are themselves greatly informed by a unique network of so-called "extra-musical" experiences and circumstances that comprise one's own identity. My enactment of the metaphor *harmony is color* depends upon my particular vision of how harmony can be utilized in an improvisation.

A holistic view of theory forms the foundational topic that runs throughout this work: theory is an expression of identity, and identity is performed, individual, and contingent. In exploring theory as a product of lived experience, I have decided not to focus on notated transcriptions of improvisations or particular performances as represented by recordings. While interesting, this approach skirts the larger question as to what informs a person's aesthetic choices that have great influence over many possible performances. To investigate how theories are developed as an integral part of one's creative voice, I decided to interview other improvisers as part of an ongoing effort to explore theorizing about improvisation in New York from a multiplicity of perspectives. In the course of conducting these interviews, I found the metaphors improvisers use to clearly express theoretical thinking. The interviews allowed improvisers to

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<sup>15</sup> Throughout this dissertation, I will italicize metaphors by either their full designation as in *practice is resonance*, or with shorthand where appropriate, as in *exploration*.

reflect on the complex processes leading up to a particular musical decision, which can be made for many reasons both aesthetic and practical.<sup>16</sup>

### **Defining Terms**

Throughout this paper, terms such as “theory,” “metaphor,” “identity,” and “scene” appear frequently. I adopt these terms in an effort to capture a wide range of ideas and experiences attributable to the interviewees, who despite being in the same age range, can have divergent views as to the issues discussed here. Here I will lay out how I define these concepts, broadly speaking, and will address specific semantic variations as they arise later in the paper.

#### *Theory*

Despite my contention that improvisational theory is unique to an individual, it is also important to set out in broad terms the commonalities in the theories to be explored here. I define theory as a body of knowledge that is dynamic, interdependent, and experimental. Theories are dynamic because they exist as disarticulated “islands of coherence,” streams of knowledge flowing from an improviser's direct lived experience.<sup>17</sup> The term disarticulated is helpful as it reflects the view being adopted here that knowledge exists not as a bounded and

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<sup>16</sup> Beyond the scope of this paper are the wide range of professional factors influencing musical decisions in an improvisation. For example, the situation often arises when an improvised piece must end due to time constraints. Conversely, professional circumstances sometimes dictate players must extend a particular piece beyond what normally would be considered “purely aesthetic.” This paper assumes the maximum degree of agency on the part of the musician.

<sup>17</sup> Marc Perlman, *Unplayed Melodies: Javanese Gamelan and the Genesis of Music Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 17. Perlman defines the term as follows: “Much of what people know and feel is unintegrated, lying in different compartments of the self, where even mutually contradictory beliefs or values can persist...this sort of knowledge, distributed among disconnected or loosely connected cognitive islands of coherence, [is] disarticulated knowledge.”

cohesive body, but as fragmented, piecemeal, and localized. Improvisational theories are interdependent because of the nature of improvised musical performance, which is most successful when musicians can adapt what they know to an aesthetic landscape that is distributed and determined collectively.<sup>18</sup> Finally, I am particularly interested in theories that are experimental, where one becomes aware of alternatives to perceived aesthetic norms in such a way that challenges, expands on, or undermines some aspect of a musical idiom.<sup>19</sup> My sense of theory as an expression of identity forms the intention behind the interviews I conducted between April and August 2011.

### *Metaphor*

I have found that metaphor, defined simply as the conceptual act of seeing “A” as “B,” takes a special importance for improvisational theories. Although I did not ask interviewees specifically about metaphor, this area of inquiry represents a significant philosophical underpinning for the paper as a whole. The interviews affirm what has already been observed: that metaphor operates pervasively in the conceptual systems people develop, not just in

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<sup>18</sup> I will discuss the concept of distributed authorship more completely in chapter 3. Here, I use the word simply to mean that theory, and ultimately meaning, cannot reside in a single mind, but is part of an interconnected network of knowledge shared by many individuals active at a certain time and place.

<sup>19</sup> Stephen Blum, “Modes of Theorizing in Iranian Khorasan”, in *Theorizing the Local: Music, Practice, and Experience in South Asia and Beyond*, ed. Richard Wolf (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 212. I adopt Blum’s notion of theorizing as occurring when, “we make connections among our thoughts and perceptions with some awareness of alternatives that we remember or imagine or explore,” making the connection between “awareness of alternatives...” The use of the term idiom is adopted from Derek Bailey, *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice* (New York: DaCapo Press, 1993). Bailey creates a binary whereby “non-idiomatic improvisation” is viewed as “free of idiomatic commitments”. I see this as a mistake, that “non-idiomatic” is a utopian cultural stance that functions as an idiom unto itself. I consider one’s idiomatic commitments to be the ontic material that forms the basis for theorizing that “awareness of alternatives” to occur.

language but in thought and action.<sup>20</sup> In listening back to the interviews, it became clear to me that the metaphors we choose to use can reveal a lot about our identity, and our theorizing. I am most interested in how one's personal theory gives rise to a generative type of thinking that leads to a range of possible manifestations at the musical surface. In other words, by fostering a conceptual shift, a theory can lead us to intentional and transformative action in a musical performance, which I believe is truly the “stuff” of improvised music.<sup>21</sup> The philosopher Slavoj Žižek refers to the quality of a reality that is "haunted" by metaphor: “once the metaphorical substitution is accomplished, this reality itself is forever haunted by the *spectral real* of the metaphorical content [*italics in original*].”<sup>22</sup> For our purposes, metaphor serves as an expressive backdrop through which we can make connections within and between theories, allowing for a greater understanding of the aesthetic coherence that exists within the New York improvised music scene as a whole. Figure 1 below catalogues the metaphors to be discussed in this paper, along with context drawn from excerpted quotes used in this paper:

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<sup>20</sup> George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 3.

<sup>21</sup> Donald Schön, “Generative Metaphor and Social Policy,” in *Metaphor and Thought* ed. Andrew Ortony (London: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 137-161. Schön argues that fixing social policy is a matter of problem setting, not problem solving: “Problem settings are mediated by the ‘stories’ people tell about troublesome situations...when we examine the problem-setting stories told by the analysts and practitioners of social policy, it becomes apparent that the framing of problems often depends upon metaphors underlying the stories which generate problem setting and set the directions of problem solving.”

<sup>22</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 169.

<b>Metaphor</b>	<b>Example of musical contexts</b>
<i>Musical idiom is a border and/or a pathway</i>	“contending with this “rejection” of a what I saw as a limiting tradition, there seemed to be a list of things not to do--like play “real sounds.” Although I eventually found this position also limiting, it did encourage exploration of a lot of non-traditional sounds.” (Katherine Young)
<i>Practice aims for resonance</i>	“Every horn has [this resonance], and that frequency is connected to you as a player.” (Darius Jones)
<i>Practice is an exploration</i>	“That slow process when you are just experiencing the physicality of chords or intervals, it becomes a part of your language. . . there’s a kind of exploration that goes beyond music theory.” (Ricardo Gallo)
<i>Practice is a meditation</i>	What I practice the most, always have and always will, are long tones. I find it really meditative. . . I love getting the tone out of the viola. . . practicing sounds and how I can use them to create delay patterns.” (Jessica Pavone)
<i>A musical shape is a feeling</i>	“. . . the whole point of practicing those shapes is to have enough experience and familiarity with those sounds. . . what is that unconscious emotional feeling or pull, and you can draw something tangible that wants to be there, and you’re stringing those things along in real time.” (Esperanza Spalding)
<i>A musical instrument is a body/The body is an instrument</i>	“What is your guitar doing to stay upright and together and how can you maximize the work it’s doing” “The body is so 3-dimensional. . . If I release the ankles and feet, I feel as if there is less I have to do.” (Julian Lage)
<i>Improvisers play by throwing objects onto a field</i>	“It’s a way of surprising the audience and yourself, throwing something onto the playing field, changing the flow of the music.” (Sergei Tcherepnin)
<i>Improvisers find common ground in a field</i>	“I think that when you project to the audience that you are able to find common ground with musicians either on the spot like in improvisation. . . that’s when music is doing what it has to do.” (Ricardo Gallo)
<i>Improvisers tell story/a non-linear story</i>	“If you’re soloing on a 32-bar form 5 times. . . you can actively try to make 5 very similar things on that 17th bar or five completely different things. I think those options are good for taking myself out of the linear thing.” (Jon Irabagon)

<i>Musical agreement is a single point on the playing field</i>	“The sameness gives you a point from which you can also depart, and it gives you just a way that you can actually speak to each other through your own difference.” (Sergei Tcherepnin)
<i>Harmony is color</i>	“conceptualizing harmony as having physical properties - weight, density, color, and so on - led me to develop a network of chord voicings that are flexible.” (Daniel Blake)
<i>A composition is a map</i>	“It's exciting because the whole thing is mapped out so it's nice when sometimes you can go off the map. . . so maybe you've gone off the form of that specific section, but you still know that section "B" is going to come next” (Mary Halvorson)
<i>Improvisational form changes organically</i>	“You could say things like when you’re improvising together you’re thinking not only about finding a same beat or a same key, but also texture or form in a sense that those textures are changing <i>organically</i> or together.” (Ricardo Gallo)
<i>A composition is a dense landscape</i>	“. . .you have to hack your way through the jungle with a machete to find your path. . . it’s open, there’s no end to it.” (Peter Evans)
<i>Notation is an area of departure</i>	“Notation is an area of departure, and what I want to get at is within that area, many unexpected things happen even when things are defined.” (Ricardo Gallo)
<i>A composition is an orienting object in space</i>	“I had a visual and sonic experience, something static that is constantly moving, like a junk space. . . like a lucid animal comprised of different movements in space.” (Yoni Niv)

**figure 1.** table of metaphors

### *Identity*

For the purposes of this paper, identity refers to a set of choices one must continually make as an individual. Generally speaking, we are constantly making decisions based on our unique experiences living within a contemporary Western society that prizes individualism in some ways, and conformity in others. The choices we make are not “pure” choices in that they

are contingent upon our own subjective and idiosyncratic understanding of the world.<sup>23</sup> It is this component of individual agency and initiative in performing identity that I feel relates most clearly to the experience of experimental improvisers.<sup>24</sup> In determining what to practice, where to live, and with whom to play, improvisers are making critical choices that have real consequences for their professional and personal lives. These choices represent identity and are not merely epiphenomena of theory; they are expressions of theory.

### *Musical Scene*

In my experience, it is difficult to define a scene strictly in terms of any musical genre, as in the “jazz scene,” simply because musicians who live and work in New York City tend to play many different styles of music for a variety of creative and professional reasons. The scenes I have been involved with tend to be highly fluid and mobile, that is to say people come and go, and the localities where people meet tend to change with relative frequency. I refer to the scene of musicians I interviewed simply as “the New York experimental improvised music scene” to encompass the broadest possible range of idiomatic orientation. I have found that a scene usually comes into existence by collective action rather than by individual initiative, cohering around a shared set of philosophical, aesthetic, and cultural assumptions that may or may not be

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<sup>23</sup> See Slavoj Žižek’s discussion of the Amish rumspringa tradition in *The Parallax View* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 331-332.

<sup>24</sup> It is worth noting that one meaning of the word perform is “to consummate”, and that the etymology of “performed” is derived from the Old French *fornir*, “to provide”, giving the word a latency, pending its activation by the performer who instills meaning in the performance. The understanding of citizenship as having the potential to be performed and defined actively at the local level is a relatively recent development in postcolonial West as hybridity theorist May Joseph, “New Hybrid Identities and Performance,” in *Performing Hybridity*, eds. May Joseph and Jennifer Natalya Fink (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1999), 5, explains: “In the post-Civil Rights era, hybridity emerges as a demonstration of multiple affiliations of cultural citizenship in the United States. It announces its visibility *through the self-conscious, free, and participatory performance* in the formal and informal spheres of the state [italics added].”

explicitly stated, but remain distinct from formal declarations as in an institutional mission statement.<sup>25</sup> A musical scene exists in a complementary relationship to the individual identities of its participants, becoming the social, and often physical, space within which identities are performed.

This paper will discuss a particular iteration of New York's experimental improvisation scene, and makes no claims to any universal set of characteristics governing improvised music in general. The group of improvisers I interviewed all share a specific set of values about musical improvisation that relates to a specific historical movement in art music that developed in New York City since roughly 1970. This scene is can be distinguished from experimental music scenes in other cities, and from more idiomatic scenes in New York, because of a special emphasis placed upon the practice of musical hybridity. The prevalence and power of musical hybridity and genre mobility in New York's experimental scene was first established by the AACM and significantly developed by the "Downtown" scene during the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, and continues to be developed by the current generation of improvisers I interviewed.<sup>26</sup> Some salient characteristics of the experimental scene is a willingness to perform and combine many different musical genres, with particular attention paid to developing new extended techniques, technology, a diverse use of notation, and increasing knowledge of non-Western musical forms. The highly fluid nature of the scene in question is perhaps what attracts such a wide variety of

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<sup>25</sup> Michael Dessen, "Decolonizing Art Music: Scenes from the Late Twentieth Century United States," Ph.D. diss., University of California, San Diego, 2003, 19-21, offers a helpful discussion of the difference between a "scene" and a more explicitly articulated "institutionalized collectives."

<sup>26</sup> The AACM was first organized in Chicago's South Side around 1965, and the "Downtown" scene began during the 1970s. George Lewis discusses the group's influential role in establishing genre mobility and musical hybridity in "Experimental Music in Black and White: The AACM in New York, 1970-1985," *Current Musicology* 71-73 (Spring 2001/2002): 100-157. See Michael Dessen for an account of New York's "Downtown" scene.

musicians to New York City, and is I believe this is why New York has become a focal point not only for idiomatic music such as jazz, but for a much larger experimentalist attitude that transcends any one genre.

### **The Interviews**

I approached the interviews initially with a prepared list of questions. After the first five interviews, I realized that the conversations seemed to always move toward expressions of the same basic question as to how one chooses what, and in which circumstances, to play. Upon realizing this, I abandoned my prepared questions in favor of a more simplified approach, expanding on my initial question: 1) How does an improviser experience their identity in the context of the scene (to be defined in chapter 1)? 2) How can this identity - that unique body of knowledge we identify as a theory - be expressed and embodied by a practice? and 3) How can an improviser communicate an identity in the course of playing with others? Each question forms the topic for the three chapters that comprise this paper.

In choosing the interviewees, I began by focusing on personal friends and colleagues, expanding eventually to include people I know less well.<sup>27</sup> The interviewees represent a cross-section of the multi-cultural population that characterizes the New York scene. Of the eighteen improvisers I interviewed, three were born outside the United States, all moved to New York specifically to pursue creative music, and none of the interviewees were born in New York. Four are women and the rest are men, all aged 25-45. I found a degree of ambivalence among the group to identifying with standard racial categories, which is consistent with their resistance to taxonomies in general. For example, bassist and vocalist Esperanza Spalding notes a cultural

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<sup>27</sup> Because of my familiarity with these individuals, I have opted to use first names for the interviewees throughout this paper.

tendency to categorize, and reflected upon my question of identity as important, but misdirected. As Anthony Braxton once said, “perhaps the categories themselves need to be re-examined.”<sup>28</sup>

Because eleven of the eighteen interviewees were trained in university jazz studies programs, I became interested in how they view the jazz tradition as an antecedent to their current work. Those interviewees are saxophonists Josh Sinton, Jeremy Udden, Jon Irabagon, Darius Jones, and Steve Lehman, bassists Jorge Roeder and Esperanza Spalding (also a vocalist), pianist Ricardo Gallo, guitarists Julian Lage and Mary Halvorson, and trumpeter Peter Evans. Of the seven improvisers who are not trained as jazz musicians, five work primarily with digital or analog electronic media, namely laptop performers Sam Pluta and Yoni Niv, analog synthesizerist Sergei Tcherepnin, and multi-media improvisers Adam Kendall and Joshue Ott. Additionally, Jessica Pavone and Katherine Young were not trained as jazz musicians and play acoustic instruments (viola and bassoon, respectively), regularly incorporating digital and analog processing in their improvisations.

Considering a person's identity as performed, chapter 1 will explore how aesthetic identities are not static, but in fact are a set of choices made with a strong connection to one's lived experience within the scene. This perspective began as a hypothesis of mine, eventually being amplified by the responses in many of the interviews. The notion that identity is performed coheres around a statement made by technologist Sergei Tcherepnin in our interview: “I [think] of improvisation as a multiplicity of histories. Music is the history. . . that we choose to pick from.” Following this interview, I began to question others about those aspects of identity they might “choose to pick from” in a given performance. Considering the fact that all but three of the interviewees have completed at least a bachelor's degree in music, I became

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<sup>28</sup> Anthony Braxton, *Roulette TV*, url: [vimeo.com/44118356](http://vimeo.com/44118356), accessed November 18, 2012.

particularly interested in the importance of education as an antecedent to an improviser's choice of and what and with whom to work with. The interviews brought out the fact that mentor-ship in improvised music now exists within conservatory programs that have traditionally eschewed improvisation as a viable musical practice.<sup>29</sup> Despite this pedagogical migration of improvisation into conservatory programs, due in no small part to the gradual acceptance of Jazz within the post-Romantic concept of “art music”, many interviewees maintain a marked ambivalence toward the ways in which improvisation is taught in school. Other improvisers speak of how they confront gender within the scene, and of New York as a place where one can perform a wide range of possible identities.

After exploring the experiences of improvisers in the New York scene, and how choice factors into performed identity more generally, chapter 2 will look at practicing as the enacting of one's aesthetic choices.<sup>30</sup> I decided to focus the question of practice around a metaphor central to the theory of Darius Jones, who referred in his interview to practice as aiming for resonance. It occurred to me after this interview that many of the improvisers were using language connecting practicing to an embodied knowledge of what “sounds right.” In other words, resonance is just one way of describing the improviser as actively cultivating and exploring the link between body and instrument *qua* body. Thinking of practicing as embodied, the metaphor *practice is resonance* generates a host of other related phrases such as *the practicer*

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<sup>29</sup> Robin Moore “The Decline of Improvisation in Western Art Music: An Interpretation of Change,” *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 23, no. 1 (June, 1992): 61-84, gives a helpful analysis of why improvisation ceased as a viable part of musical training at Europe's notable conservatories.

<sup>30</sup> An example of this given by Žižek's is the “rumspringan paradox”: “. . . a choice is always a meta-choice, a choice of the modality of the choice itself.” In other words, one's ability to choose an identity must be understood within a contingent cultural and historical space that is particular to an individual's lived experience. A true choice requires a personal knowledge of alternative modalities of living, thus explaining why so many Amish teenager's choose to reunite with their communities following rumspringa.

*is an explorer* (Ricardo Gallo), *an instrument is a body* (Julian Lage), *practicing is a meditation* (Jessica Pavone, Katherine Young, Jeremy Udden), and others. Chapter 2 will devote a section that specifically addresses the question of practice as it pertains to performers of electronic instruments, a topic that is dealt with sparsely in the literature.

The third and most complex issue to be discussed here is the ethical aspect of improvisation, which I define as the ways in which individuals convey intention in real time. I asked each improviser about the challenges they face negotiating their own theory within an aesthetic field comprised of approaches that may be quite different from their own. During my interview with Ricardo Gallo, this experience was framed in terms of toleration, where an *improvisation play in a field or landscape* upon which improvisers are tasked with “finding common ground.” Instead of asking the interviewees about toleration as such, I asked questions like “what is the proper role of agreement in improvising, and how important is it for you to agree when you play?” This question seemed to touch on an important paradox of improvised music: In order to play we must share some sense of common purpose, but an overabundance of agreement often leads to a bland performance. The main theoretical solution introduced by the interviewees can be gleaned from the spatial metaphors they use. When *improvisers throw objects onto a field*, an individual can find common ground, but is also confronted with the pitfall of too much agreement. In other words, improvisers view agreement as both a potential unifying energy for an ensemble, and as a pitfall to be avoided.

In order to better understand how improvisers understand and effect change to the playing field, I asked the interviewees about composing. Many improvisers were describing a *composition as an orienting object, a jungle, or a map*, which relates back to the spatial metaphors used to describe an improvisation more generally. The ethic of tolerance serves to

keep improvisers unified around the common purpose of realizing their own individuality within the multiplicity of a group. The ability of a group of musicians to realize a meaningful musical structure collectively in real time, without relinquishing the uniqueness of an individual's identity, is a fundamental contribution of improvisation to a broader experimentalist project that incorporates the musical-cultural histories of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, a history that benefits from a growing body of literature.

### **Review of Literature**

Broadly speaking, learning improvisation is an example of how we actively construct our sense of reality based on a subjective and embodied experience of external phenomena. Lakoff and Johnson's seminal work *Metaphors We Live By* is filled with examples dispensing with the notion that metaphor is confined only to poetic speech, to be differentiated from a more empirical "literal" communication.<sup>31</sup> In fact, metaphor is crucial to our ability to understand and talk about basic aspects of everyday experience. For example, we can share concepts such as "up" and "down" because we all experience verticality as a result of inhabiting a body. Having a sense of verticality leads to Lakoff and Johnson's "orientational metaphors," namely up is more, and its inverse, down is less. This binary informs many basic concepts such as economics (the stock market is down/up today), our psychological and physical well-being (I'm feeling down/up today), and ethics (she put him down, he puts her up on a pedestal).

Verticality is also intrinsic to how we conceptualize pitch and tessitura in Western music, a concept so ingrained as to be assumed universal.<sup>32</sup> Steve Larson and Mark Johnson co-

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<sup>31</sup> George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980; 1993).

<sup>32</sup> There are several fascinating ethnographic studies into musical cultures that do not use verticality as a metaphor for pitch. See Marc Perlman, *Unplayed Melodies*, and Steven Feld,

authored a paper on musical time, pointing out that even central notions of musical experience like movement are metaphorical in nature, and are based on our concept of chronological time. For example, in order to experience *a melody or a chord progression as having motion*, we must experience these *shifting tones as objects* passing by subjective listeners. The important point raised by Larson and Johnson is that a significant source of musical meaning can be found in our ability to perceive music itself as time. This conceptualization allows us to experience time as repeating, flowing, or even stopping. The metaphorical substitution is accomplished in two ways. First, we the subjective listeners are the observers of a passing flow of musical objects, where a musical performance can effectively return us to various earlier points in time and also foreshadow future events. Second, we can be said to experience music by traversing through the musical object, to be moved by it in some way. These two ways of conceiving of the listener can be likened to how improvisers interact with a composition, as we will see in chapter 3.

Confronting the narrative of normalcy is also one of the main motives of the experimental improviser. As the “more is up/less is down” example demonstrates, a powerful effect of metaphorical thinking is the ability to normalize the communication of basic psycho-physical phenomena that in reality are subjectively experienced at the individual. Of the numerous scholarly communities challenging normative tropes in the West, the field of “disabilities studies” is perhaps the most recent.<sup>33</sup> To be sure, one of the central metaphors governing our sense of normalcy is the human body itself, where an experience as seemingly universal as verticality is essentially a non-verbal and highly variegated individual phenomenon. It is when

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“Flow Like a Waterfall: The Metaphors of Kaluli Music Theory”, *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 3 (1981): 22-47.

<sup>33</sup> Joseph Straus is at the forefront of disabilities studies as the field applies to music theory. See *Extraordinary Measures* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011)

this experience is applied to a metaphorical substitution that it becomes a concept, fundamentally altering the way we perceive the world.

The scientific community has undergone a major shift over the last two decades with the emergence of the “embodied cognition” field. Cognitive scientist Francisco Varela, in *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*, describes a process of “enacting” a metaphorical structure that mediates the particular experience of an individual, allowing a single mind to process reality in terms of what is known.<sup>34</sup> This process is actively constructed, and is an important revision in the scientific community to the “cognitivist” perspective that views the mind as representing static phenomena that are “out there.” The language of embodiment is linked to the practice of music in this work, and is also the paradigm used in earlier work by Vijay Iyer, David Borgo, and Newton Armstrong among others.<sup>35</sup> These writings provide analytical and philosophical models for improvised performance that are more holistic, but also assume a degree of normativeness in the way embodiment is referenced. By relying on interviews to provide the content of the arguments contained here, I hope to avoid the “normative trap” into which much scholarly writing about embodiment has fallen.<sup>36</sup> By invoking the

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<sup>34</sup> Francisco Varela, et. al, *Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993).

<sup>35</sup> Vijay Iyer, “Microstructures of Feel, Macrostructures of Sound: Embodied Cognition in West African and African-American Musics,” (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley); David Borgo, *Sync or Swarm: Improvising Music in a Complex Age* (New York: Continuum, 2005); Newton Armstrong, “An Enactive Approach to Digital Musical Instrument Design,” (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2006).

<sup>36</sup> Joseph Straus, “Normalizing the Abnormal: Disability in Music and Music Theory”, *JAMS* 59 (Spring, 2006): 123. Straus’s critique of the literature serves as a cautionary note for all embodiment research: “In all of the experientialist literature...including its recent music-theoretical manifestations, there has been the blithe assumption that we all inhabit the same kind of body, a normatively abled body, and thus all experience our bodies in pretty much the same way...on the contrary, bodies differ, and bodily difference makes a difference. Furthermore, the ways in which people experience and understand their own bodies are historically contingent, varying with time and place.”

metaphors that emerge out of embodied experience, I refer only to the individual experience of a single person quoted in context. Interviewees have had the chance to review their words and the context in which they were used, as their views may have changed in the year that elapsed between the interview and the completion of this work.

There is a growing body of interview-based work on improvisation. I was first inspired to conduct a series of interviews after reading Arthur Taylor's intimate and revelatory *Notes and Tones*, where his insider status within a relatively insular musical scene caused me to consider the value of my own position as an improviser with regard to my scholarly work. David Borgo's work also achieves this intimacy in his study of an improvising trio in which he participated. Borgo deals extensively with notions of embodiment, and begins to develop a framework for analyzing the musical surface of collective improvisation. George Lewis' seminal work on the Association for the Advancement of Creative Music (AACM), the Chicago-based collective of which he is a member, achieves a remarkable balance between interview, historical context, and musical analysis. I hope to build on the themes of hybridity and genre mobility emphasized throughout Lewis' work, and apply them to my own community of improvisers.

The vast majority of studies into improvisational scenes are ethnographic. The decision to look explicitly at metaphor in improvised music stems from David Such's Ph.D. dissertation (1985) and book (1993), which explore through a series of interviews the phrase "out there" and its meaning in the context of the African American experimental improvised music scene in New York during the 1980s.<sup>37</sup> David Such provides an important model for this study in developing a methodology that is responsive to a single metaphor used by members of a particular musical community, whom Such interviews extensively. My work expands upon Such in looking at

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<sup>37</sup> David Such, "Music Metaphor and Values Among Avant-Garde Jazz Musicians Living in New York City," PhD diss., (University of Michigan, 1985).

several interlocking metaphors that take into account a more variegated socio-aesthetic community. Ingrid Monson, Travis Jackson, and Paul Berliner have all conducted ethnographic studies dealing with issues of language, ritual, and transmission (respectively) pertaining specifically to the jazz idiom. Scott Currie's recent dissertation is similar in its ethnographic approach, although he deals more with the collective improvised "avant garde" music represented by the celebrated New York Vision Festival scene. These studies are important in showing that significant analytical work can be done based on the conversation as a primary source rather than on musical transcription. This work will move beyond idiom as a defining feature of the New York scene, a sentiment shared by those I interviewed.

The most important sources of information for this dissertation are the views and experiences of the improvisers I interviewed. Their honest and articulate contributions to this study are invaluable to my effort to position the improviser as a theorist. I consider each person I interviewed to be the creator of a unique theory, a body of knowledge that could easily occupy a book unto itself. I wish to briefly differentiate what is meant by implicit theory with regard to the conventional understanding of theory, as in "a scientific theory." The primary aim of a scientific theory is to account for as broad a range of phenomena as possible by way of hypotheses that can be tested by different individuals working independently. An implicit theory often exists nonverbally, manifesting as patterns of behavior rather than as explicit statements prescribing how to understand phenomena.<sup>38</sup> An implicit theory must be understood as situated within the context of what I call the "field of aesthetic possibilities."<sup>39</sup> How is it that musicians

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<sup>38</sup> Lawrence Zbikowski, *Conceptualizing Music: Cognitive Structure, Theory, and Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) 116.

<sup>39</sup> I borrow the term "field," and our ability to take a "position" in the field from Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

can make sense of the scene, the complex and variegated network of musicians, venues, institutions, and technology that forms the foundation for theorizing.

## Chapter I – Performing Identity in The New York Scene

I have heard many times throughout my years as a performer that improvising is all about “telling a story.” Narrative metaphors are common ways in which improvisers derive meaning from music, as the narrative allows an individual’s identity to emerge in the course of performance.<sup>40</sup> This compelling area of inquiry is one I took up in my discussions with improvisers, where I asked them about how they view their own identities within a larger musical scene. The narrative metaphor *improvising is telling a story* generates allusions to language, which on the surface makes sense, although difficulties persist between relating any narrative meaning of instrumental music to a claim that musical expression exists as a language. In his cross-cultural study, Harold Powers notes that seeing improvisation as a language presumes adherence to an extempore discourse using rhetorical forms and techniques pre-established by a particular tradition.<sup>41</sup> The shortcoming in conceptualizing musical improvisation this way is that the language model belies the experimental instincts of contemporary improvisers to interrogate and restructure the norms of the traditions in which they

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<sup>40</sup> “Telling a story” is one of the oldest metaphors of modern improvised music, dating back to Louis Armstrong, and can be considered a master trope underpinning our cultural claim to musical meaning. A complete treatment of this metaphor with musical analysis can be found in Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz*, and Ingrid Monson, *Saying Something*. For a more focused study on early jazz and the storytelling metaphor, see Brian Harker, “‘Telling a Story’: Louis Armstrong and Coherence in Early Jazz,” *Current Musicology* 63 (1999): 46-83. See Henry Louis Gates’ “semantic relations” in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 48. Samuel Floyd applies this paradigm of semantic value to musical improvisation in “Ring Shout! Literary Studies, Historical Studies, and Black Music Inquiry,” *Black Music Research Journal* 11, no. 2 (Fall, 1991): 265-287. For example, referring to the Call-Response trope evinced in the Duke Ellington orchestra, Floyd, 266 states: “This semantic meaning. . . is not external to the music. . . [but] can account for and intellectualize what black vernacular musicians feel and assume as they nonchalantly claim that when they play they are ‘telling a story’.”

<sup>41</sup> Harold S. Powers, “Language Models and Musical Analysis,” *Ethnomusicology* 24 (1980): 42.

are engaged.<sup>42</sup> George Lewis posits a middle way, where we can understand speaking as recognition of individual identity, where all are encouraged to speak within an egalitarian collective frame, what he calls a central pursuit in Afrological music.<sup>43</sup> In other words, the aesthetic decisions made by improvisers become the subject of a performed narrative that can span many performances, developing over the course of one's career. Vijay Iyer refers to this as an "exploded narrative," which moves the locus of analysis toward a more holistic view of improvisation as a dynamic and transformational process.<sup>44</sup> Performing a narrative in this way is tantamount to identity as discussed in the introduction, where individuals enact choices within a musical scene.

This chapter will look at New York City as a social and aesthetic space within which individuals define and perform their identities as improvisers. The first two sections take a closer look at how the interviewees experience New York City as a musical scene, and how issues of nationality and gender factor into an understanding of one's aesthetic identity. The next two sections deal with *musical idiom as a border and a pathway to creative freedom*, taking jazz as a case study, since most of the interviewees (myself included) have considerable experience studying and performing within this tradition. This section will look closely at the university system and the perceived expectation of conformity it has engendered for many of the

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<sup>42</sup> Joe Morris, *Perpetual Frontier: The Properties of Free Music* (Stony Creek, CT: Riti Publishing, 2012), 32, goes one step further: "Subverting the norm, the accepted, the traditional (or understanding of tradition), seems to be a core reason for the existence of free music. The need to remain current by questioning the status quo... allows free music to be a marker of time in a way that runs in parallel to the usual cultural forces and institutional forces."

<sup>43</sup> George Lewis, *A Power Stronger Than Itself* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), xii.

<sup>44</sup> Vijay Iyer, "Exploding the Narrative in Jazz Improvisation," in *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies*, eds. Robert O'Meally et. al (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 394-403; see also George Lewis, "Improvisation after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives," *Black Music Research Journal* 16 (Spring, 1996): 91-122.

interviewees. The chapter concludes with a look at how technology influences an improviser's conception of their identity in the New York scene.

### **Performing Identities in New York City**

New York City, because of its extraordinary demographic diversity and cultural history as a center for artistic innovation, is in many ways the ideal location to explore experimental improvisation. A scene enables what music critic Ben Ratliff calls, “the endless forms of newness. . . that can arise when people come [together] from different backgrounds.”<sup>45</sup> As Jon's experience shows, newness does not necessarily reside in abandoning musical idiom, or even in the particular content of what is played. Rather, newness emerges from the interaction of distinct identities negotiating and continuously redefining a shared aesthetic space. The collective nature of a musical scene leads to a circular definition that is difficult to pin down: scenes are defined by those musicians who participate in them, just as improvisers develop based on their involvement in a scene. Travis Jackson refers to the New York scene as a “network of networks,” where various types of alliances serve to break a large and heterogeneous collective into more manageable units.<sup>46</sup> These smaller networks coalesce around a number of common experiences shared by individuals, such as aesthetic interests, hometown or university affiliation, neighborhood of residence, and ethnic or religious involvement.

As an egalitarian system that maximizes individual expression within the aggregate, improvisational scenes beget identities that are non-hierarchical, trans-national, and hybrid. As

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<sup>45</sup> Ben Ratliff, “A Trio in Its Infancy, Creating an All-New Sound: Darius Jones, Ryan Sawyer and Shahzad Ismaily at the Stone,” *The New York Times*, July 4, 2012, accessed August 17, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/05/arts/music/darius-jones-ryan-sawyer-and-shahzad-ismaily-at-the-stone.html>.

<sup>46</sup> Jackson, 48.

discussed in the introduction, a scene can often cohere around physical spaces that function as a central hub for rehearsing and performing. The Douglass Street Music Collective (DSMC) is one example that serves as a performance and rehearsal space for its members and their various projects. Located in Brooklyn's Gowanus neighborhood, the DSMC is a cooperative directorship run by fifteen independent bandleaders whose musical interests range from "jazz to classical and free improvisation to world music, and all the spaces in between."<sup>47</sup> This statement affirms an eclecticism that can serve as a backdrop for the present-day contemporary music scene as a whole. The DSMC does not have an aesthetic agenda, but is simply a space, a blank slate that is defined by its members. Performances can be staged by members for their own groups, or for a musician who might be friends with a standing member. The Douglass Street Collective is unique among New York City spaces in that its function changes fluidly according to the needs of a given member at a given time. I have been an active member of the Douglass Street scene since November 2010. As an improvising saxophonist involved in several scenes, a rehearsal and performance space that is free of any over-arching stylistic agenda can serve me as a centralized venue for many different types of projects.

It is within spaces such as the DSMC that I have been able to refine my own aesthetic identity. The most crucial aspect of my involvement in a scene is the ability to explore my involvement and interest in various musical idioms. I must confront assumptions about "what sounds right," an embodied knowledge that is greatly informed by experience playing within the jazz tradition. Growing up as a young saxophonist in New Jersey, my aesthetic interests were shaped by early experiences going to late night jam sessions where older musicians would

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<sup>47</sup> "About the Douglass Street Collective," The Douglass Street Music Collective website, accessed August 28, 2012, <http://www.295douglass.org>.

critique me either verbally or non-verbally directly through musical signals.<sup>48</sup> I approached the interviews as a way to gauge how others see their identities as evolving within a scene, and how improvisation can allow one to venture beyond the perceived borders of their own idiomatic training.

The individuals I interviewed are at a point in their musical lives where the idiom they first learned as students is becoming part of a larger fabric of aesthetic possibilities. I found it beneficial to focus on a generation of musicians that are out of school, but still at a relatively early stage in the development of their own theories. This is the case for composer and laptop performer Yoni Niv, who after completing his early education in Haifa in guitar performance, recalls moving to New York as representing an opportunity to forge a new identity within a wide open space of creative possibilities. In our interview, he cited a feeling of anonymity that he experienced initially as positive after moving to New York from Israel in 2005:

Coming here was an amazing experience. At first I was anonymous. Anonymity was a blessing for me. I felt like I could really be what I want. Somehow quickly I found myself in a position of being very active artistically which was not the case in Israel where I felt very disconnected, very isolated. In the army I was dreaming about music but not realizing it. In music school they bombarded us with knowledge, things you should know, and it sort of blocked me. . . [whereas] here very quickly I found people I could talk to, collaborate on musical ideas, and realize music.

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<sup>48</sup> One powerful and not-so-subtle example of this is the time when a rhythm section consisting of older musicians simply stopped playing during my solo one night, thereby informing me that my solo had gone on too long, and was now being forcibly concluded. I can cite the potency of this single moment, and the embarrassment I felt, as fomenting a decisive change in how I think about proportions and structure in my own improvisations.

Yoni's move to New York allowed him to fully reshape his aesthetic identity as “laptop performer,” a performance practice that is still relatively new, but is amply recognized as a legitimate artistic pursuit in New York City. The expansiveness of the scene creates flexibility in how improvisers can determine their own identities against *musical idiom as a border*. Improvisers I interviewed view improvisation as a means to cross the border of idiom, exploring their assumptions about “what sounds right” in the process.

To say someone performs a hybrid identity is to say that person is in dialogue with their personal history and to the larger aesthetic possibilities known to the individual within a scene. As saxophonist Jon Irabagon told me in his interview, “The search is on,” for our place in the scene. The search brings improvisers up against the known borders of their own idiom where they can experiment with the boundaries of what they know. Katherine Young began as a bassoonist learning the traditional orchestral repertoire, ultimately experiencing the border of her own training in orchestral performance as a limiting factor in her overall creative development:

Eventually I realized that I wasn't cut out for [the orchestral world]. I found it limiting and frustrating, and I wasn't interested in the type of work it required of me. Plus as a bassoonist, a lot of the repertoire was pretty uninspiring, so I figured I should just make something of my own! At first, contending with this “rejection” of a what I saw as a limiting tradition, there seemed to be a list of things not to do--like play “real sounds.” Although I eventually found this position also limiting, it did encourage exploration of a lot of non-traditional sounds.

By dealing directly with the tenuous pull between idiom and her own experimental intentions, Katherine is able to ultimately transcend idiom in devising her own practice, as we will see in the

next chapter. Katherine's experience with the orchestral tradition demonstrates the flexibility an improviser brings to their identity through the aesthetic choices they make. Pianist Ricardo Gallo experienced a similar inclination toward pushing against the borders of idiom:

I guess it has to do with going inside a musical situation or a musical context and then wanting to go out. The first time I heard [jazz music] in Colombia I really liked it, and it's not part of the culture really. It's not like here where you grow up with it, even if you're not aware of it you do grow up with. For a long time I was really jazz-headed [laughs], thinking of jazz as a genre and something to pursue, and of course at the same time I heard some Colombian musicians doing jazz and Colombian music. But then here [in New York], by listening to many musicians and by listening to music that goes beyond that border, I became interested. . . in the possibility of blurring the definition of jazz, and living in that area, that “no-man's land.”

For Ricardo, crossing the border geographically to New York City coincides with his crossing *musical idiom as a border*. He does not entirely eschew the idiom whose borders he is crossing; Ricardo's knowledge of the Colombian and Jazz musical traditions is no less important to his musical identity. Rather, the very notion of idiom as a linear historical narrative can be deconstructed in the course of performance. By moving deliberately into the “no-man's land,” improvisers can benefit from a degree of anonymity, or at least can experience more control in how they define themselves against the expectations of a musical idiom.

The interviews revealed much about how improvisers reclaim individual agency within an idiom such as jazz, as can be in how gender is experienced within the scene. I was particularly interested in gender as an aspect of identity for female improvisers, particularly since the women

I interviewed all play predominantly instrumental music, a mode of expression that is dominated by a male-centric perspectives.<sup>49</sup> For example, mastery over an instrument is often associated with masculinity and virility, a trope dating back to the European concept of the virtuoso. This concept has shaped our collective perception of those musicians who practice improvisation. To explore how this gendered assumption of essentially masculine virtuosity operates in today's scene, I asked female improvisers how they experience gender in their own developing identities. Violist and bassist Jessica Pavone sees the male-centric paradigm as an unwelcome regulation of her own aesthetic possibilities, and she seeks to redress this imbalance in her music:

I don't feel like I need to be able to take a ripping solo. I used to feel like I need to try everything because that would make me a more well-rounded instrumentalist. I'm not interested in being a well-rounded instrumentalist. There's this jock side to playing music. Like a runner who is training for a marathon, they need to do certain things so their body is in shape. Traditional jazz is one of the "jockiest" forms of music in some ways. I don't necessarily want my music to be about chops and dexterity and blowing people away with my super-human abilities on my instrument.

Jessica "performs" gender through the intentionality she brings to the idea of solo improvisation.

Her work spans a wide stylistic gamut from composed vignettes for electro-acoustic improvisers

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<sup>49</sup>For a more detailed account of how gender constructs have played into historiography of improvised music, see Andrew Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge Press, 1989) p. 85; Ingrid Monson, "The Problem With White Hipness: Race Gender and Cultural Conceptions in Jazz Historical Discourse," *JAMS* 48, no. 3 (Autumn, 1995): 396-422; Robert Walser, ed. "Jazz and Gender During the War Years," in *Keeping Time: Readings in Jazz History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 111-120; Krin Gabbard, "Signifyin(g) the Phallus: Mo' Better Blues and Representations of the Jazz Trumpet," in Krin Gabbard, ed., *Representing Jazz* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 104-130.

to solo pieces for amplified viola, most recently including lyrics. Like many aspects of identity, gender emerged several times throughout my interview with Jessica, giving me the sense that gender is thoroughly integrated into many aspects of her performed identity. Her interpreting a solo as “jock” is one example of this, and in the next chapter we will explore how her practice emerges out of the desire to seek an alternative to this gendered norm.

As a young woman, simply choosing to play an instrument such as the guitar will carry a set of gendered assumptions that are not applied to men. Having moved to New York in 2002, guitarist Mary Halvorson has lived in New York quite some time, and is at the forefront of a new generation of young women active New York’s improvised music scene. She wryly notes her own experience being the object of gendered stereotypes prevalent in the jazz tradition, even as she recognizes her own success in gaining legitimacy within a male-dominated scene:

I feel like when I was younger there was that basic assumption that I can’t play just because I don’t look like a “jazz guitar player,” whatever that looks like . . . I guess I don’t have that look [*laughs*]! Since I’ve become an adult, I don’t really feel like people assume I’m a folk singer as much anymore. I work with so many women now which is great. . . I also see more younger women starting. If I could be a teacher or role model to younger women who wanted to start jazz guitar that would be really exciting for me because I didn’t have that growing up . . . It’s hard to say for sure, but it’s possible I do get opportunities on occasion at least partially because of [being a woman]. It’s like affirmative action. I actually don’t like that idea, it makes me somewhat uncomfortable . . . In an ideal world things would be decided solely on the basis of one’s music. But of course things are always more complicated than that.

At this point, Mary enjoys fairly unequivocal acceptance as a contemporary jazz artist. She is regularly included in panel discussions, receives favorable press coverage, representation in major festivals, and plays consistently with older musicians in New York's "Downtown" scene. Despite her ambivalence about the role affirmative action discourse has on her success, Mary also notes an encouraging rise in the involvement of women in experimental improvised music. Katherine Young echoes this view, and notes the overall positive impact she experiences as a result of the greater involvement of women in improvised music:

There's a great community [of female improvisers] here in New York... This community of female colleagues and friends making music in New York was a big draw for me when I decided to move here... And it seems that younger musicians have a pretty healthy perspective on gender issues. Also, the more experiences I have, the better I understand how to maneuver various tricky social-professional interactions in ways that feel good to me and to brush off sexist comments. In terms of getting asked to join bands or work with people, the fact is the bassoon is a weird instrument that people don't often think to bring into their band, so. . .

This last comment reminds us that gender is but one of many factors in a diverse web, including such seemingly mundane factors as "player of bassoon, a 'weird instrument'." The web of antecedents informing an improviser's aesthetic choices forms the backbone for one's theory, that body of knowledge I am referring to in this chapter as synonymous with performed identity. One powerful antecedent for many of the interviewees is the university system, particularly jazz studies programs. Universities have come to signify both *a border and a pathway* to creative

opportunities for the improvisers I interviewed, adding another layer of cultural mediation to the discussion of identity in improvised music scenes.

### **Impact of Jazz and Universities on the Scene**

The jazz tradition begs further consideration, if only because no other musical idiom holds such sway over our cultural perceptions as to how improvisation is practiced in the West. The jazz tradition, aside from being associated with a particular iteration of improvising as telling a story, has in recent years been subjected to polemical and narrative tropes that hardly pertain to the improvisers I interviewed, many of who nevertheless received training in a “jazz studies” program.<sup>50</sup> I asked the interviewees to speak to their perceptions of “jazz studies” and how they perceive the borders of this tradition with respect to their own identities. One poignant critique emerged from my interview with saxophonist Josh Sinton, a member of the Douglass Street Music Collective, who directly engaged the commonly cited metaphor in Jazz that improvising is like “learning a language”:

Jazz is the foundation of my musical training. I am not an exponent of this tradition. I don't think music is a language, just practically speaking we have separate words for music and language. There is no equivalent to "chair" in music. There are no concrete referents.

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<sup>50</sup> American exceptionalism is a persistent theme in lionizing the heroes of the “story of jazz” in *Jazz*, DVD, directed by Ken Burns (PBS Home Video, 2001). See the poignant critique of the film’s narrative in George Lipsitz, *Footsteps in the Dark: The Hidden Histories of Popular Music* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 79-106. For a more complete breakdown of the narrative trope that is embedded in *Jazz*, see Scott Deveaux, “Deconstructing the Jazz Tradition,” *Black American Literature Forum* 25, no. 3 (Autumn, 1991): 525-560.

Josh is critiquing the notion that music can have syntactical or grammatical universality.<sup>51</sup> He proposes an alternative understanding of semantics that lie in the way he implements intentionality behind a musical gesture:

Some of [my] songs are about learning to express love for [people I wish to forgive] through a barrage of noise. I'm not worried about what particular form [the noise] takes. I try and stay open to the possibilities [of expressing an intention], keeping in mind that certain possibilities require preparation. But, if I make a sound and I have a very specific intent when I'm making that sound, it puts so much more dynamic energy and momentum into that sound.

Intentionality, the particular affective charge accompanying a musical utterance in a given moment, is the true language of improvisation for Josh. There may be many manifestations of a particular feeling as is the case with “love expressed through a barrage of noise.” Josh also pointed out in our interview how a connection can be made between the “scream of love” and aspects of the Jazz tradition, invoking artists like Pharoah Sanders and John Coltrane, among others.<sup>52</sup> By revising music as a language to mean “the personal expression of feeling through sound,” Josh theorizes an extension to an idiomatic border without eschewing the tradition.

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<sup>51</sup> Two influential proponents of the language metaphor are Fred Lerdahl and Ray Jackendoff, *A Generative Theory of Tonal Music* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983), and Leonard Meyer, *Emotion and Meaning in Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961).

<sup>52</sup> See John Litweiler, *The Freedom Principle: Jazz After 1958* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1990). The invocation of “noise” also calls to mind Jacques Attali, *Bruits* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1977), 54-55, who says, “Un bruit est une sonorité qui gêne l'écoute d'un message en cours d'émission...le bruit a toujours été ressenti comme destruction, désordre, salissure, pollution, agression contre le code qui structure les messages...mais comme la mort n'est qu'un excès de vie, le bruit a toujours été perçu aussi comme source d'exaltation, forme de drogue, capable de guérir des piqures de tarentule...” (“Noise is a sound that interferes with listening to messages being sent ... noise has always been perceived as destruction, disorder, dirt, pollution, aggression against the code governs the messages ... but as death is only an excess of

Bassist and vocalist Esperanza Spalding approaches this same border in viewing a musical “shape” as capturing a feeling in a conversation:

The best thing would be once you learn [a phrase] you never play it again, because it’s just to have access to that color or that feeling . . . should you want to use something like that. What would be even better is if you never used it . . . so now you have a feel for what that missing link in that point in time when you want to use it, like when you learn a really good word to describe a certain feeling: until you know that perfect word it comes to that part in a conversation and you’re using other words to get around [the feeling].

Like Josh, Esperanza theorizes a conception of a *musical conversation of feeling*, a more personalized and intuition-based expression than what is generally understood by proponents of *music is a language*. Both Josh and Esperanza perceive a greater significance in basing an improvisation on one’s intuitive understanding of affect than on any particular syntactically appropriate use of idiomatic phrases, as defined earlier. In other words, an improvisation can restructure the way in which an idiomatic concept can be used, thereby exploding the perceived idiomatic border outward, toward a territory that is somewhat unknown. Without doing away with an idiomatic commitment, improvisers like Josh and Esperanza propose an alternative understanding to *music is a language*. Instead of viewing an idiomatic phrase necessarily as part of a syntactically cohesive musical rhetoric, improvisers can express identity simply in how idiomatic phrases are truncated, augmented, or otherwise altered in the course of an improvisation. The *conversation of feeling* is but one example raised in the interviews of

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life, noise has always been seen also as a source of excitement, a drug able to cure tarantula bites. . .)

improvisers exercising agency over the prevailing assumptions of idiomatic practice without entirely eschewing the idiom.

The ways in which improvisers employ new concepts of narrative are tied to a larger process of real time decisions of what and when to play, a process that evolves over a long span of time spent rehearsing and performing. This is why improvisers tend to see their work as a series of connected improvisations rather than in terms of an idealized definitive performance to which one aspires.<sup>53</sup> In functioning as a social and aesthetic space within which an individual performs identity, a musical scene forms the backdrop for what I define as a theory. The development of a unique identity within the scene is a topic I spent considerable time on with interviewees. The topic of narrative and one's identity arose repeatedly in each interview, often being mentioned in response to questions with a seemingly oblique relationship to the topic of musical scenes. For example, in asking saxophonist Jon Irabagon about how he approaches improvising over standard song forms, he discussed how his practice is meaningful to developing a personal identity within the scene. For Jon, musical identity is framed in what he describes as "personality-based music." Jon related to me how his own sense of personality contributes to an understanding of narrative in an improvised solo as non-linear:

Everyone, because of their personality, has their own way of playing music, and we all need to chip away and figure out what that is. People are always talking about how *improvising is telling a story*. The traditional way that people tell stories is very linear. I like a form that is fluid, that is almost optional. If you're soloing on a 32-bar form 5 times, then the 17th bar happens five times, so you can actively try to make 5 very similar things on that 17th bar or five completely

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<sup>53</sup> Iyer, 395.

different things. I think those options are good for taking myself out of the linear thing.

In this way, Jon's "story" is told not necessarily through a single solo, but in the particular way his music represents a gradual "chipping away" at a musical identity over a long period of study, practice, and performing. For Jon, subverting linearity represents his having a real authorial stake in the narrative of an improvisation, and his comment offers one possible way to realize this intention. Jon's statement reminds us that improvisers are tasked with forging an awareness of alternatives to prevailing playing techniques in the scene, a central function served by theorizing.

### **Universities, Jazz, and Whiteness**

Among other questions I asked the interviewees pertaining to their identity within the New York scene, the importance of one's university training has a special importance for this generation of improvisers. As a doctoral student who maintains an active performance career, I have personally experienced academia as both holding back and as propelling forward my own creative development. Although I have made professional sacrifices in order to complete my degree, which can at times have only a peripheral relationship to my identity in New York's improvised music scene, my scholarly efforts have also given me the opportunity to reflect upon who I truly want to be as a musician. I approached this study with curiosity regarding how other improvisers view their own experiences being educated in university settings, an experience shared to some degree by everyone I interviewed. Although universities offer greater access to mentors than in the past, the interviewees remain skeptical of academia. This skepticism is due in part to the tendency for institutions to codify knowledge into explicit categories for consumption by large numbers of students. Although this description is hyperbolic and

reductionist, it remains indicative of the view held by many improvisers, that school transmits knowledge in a way that is somewhat at odds with actual improvised music scenes. The apparent tension between improvisers and the explicit taxonomies promoted by university pedagogies raises an important epistemological gap. Esperanza Spalding articulates this gap in her metaphor of *school is a ladder*:

School . . . hmm . . . it's like quantifying every element of something. There is a whole, there is an objective we are all going for, so then school breaks down every element of that . . . you can get up each rung of that ladder until you know enough about each subject so that you've arrived at the whole. You know how to do a triple bypass now! The tricky thing about music is there are so many unknown variables that apply to creating meaningful music that studying the quantifiable "ladder rungs" can bring you close to it, but that wasn't how I experienced it in school.

By seeing *school as a ladder*, Esperanza points to the Cartesian notion as to a "whole" that is an objective truth, approachable through the accrual of conceptual knowledge. Fransisco Varela points to a "Cartesian anxiety" arising from our realization that the existence of a "whole" is itself another concept, yet another a rung on the ladder.<sup>54</sup> Many musicians experience some sort of anxiety as part of the school experience as they search for a balanced intellectual environment in which to begin forming their own identities, described earlier by Jon as "personality." Peter Evans points to universities as having a homogenizing effect on scenes in their promoting a fairly uniform skill set:

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<sup>54</sup> Fransisco Varela, et. al, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 141-142.

The first really academic generation, (Herbie Hancock, Bobby Hutcherson, Freddie Hubbard)...what's interesting about those guys is they all went to [different] schools... a more localized training, combined with their own self-taught thing, combined with the New York thing, which maybe added up to a really interesting knowledge, and an interesting academic thing. Obviously the trend of the last 20 to 30 years is that everyone goes to the same schools and studies with the same teachers, which is clearly not a good thing for the music overall, it's producing less and less weirdos, or the same kinds of weirdos which is equally depressing.

Peter himself was educated at Oberlin Conservatory, and has an eclectic musical training that informs his own musical voice. He frequently performs contemporary notated music with ICE (International Contemporary Ensemble) and has extensive training in European music, but is also a highly regarded improviser in a scene of New York players that perform regularly with European improvisers such as Evan Parker, Peter Brotzman, and Paul Lytton, among others. Peter was able to balance the training he received at Oberlin with the crosscurrents of his own aesthetic interests.

The views of improvisers regarding this shift within the scene are not uniformly negative. Saxophonist Steve Lehman points out the opportunities created by increased access to master teachers who reside at particular institutions. Whereas in earlier decades one would have to be lucky enough to be hired by a mentor like drummer Art Blakey, now far more students can have the opportunity to access this knowledge:

It would have been great to play in Art Blakey's band, or play in [drummer] Roy Haynes' band. . . I never really had anything like that. Being in grad. school,

thankfully, provided me with a different way to interact with some of these musicians and learn from them. Getting to study with [saxophonist] Jackie McClean for six years [at the Hartt School], that was really profound for me. Looking at the landscape now, time has moved so fast, that is getting to be like a point of distinction, just that I got to study with someone like that puts me in a kind of minority group, in a way. I'm sure there will be another evolution five years down the road. You can imagine all the guys at the New School when [drummer] Jimmy Cobb was there. It is something very special, very different from playing in their bands, but it might be equally as meaningful. And that goes for all these people, like Braxton, and George Lewis, and Tristan Murail, all those guys. It's another kind of experience, another opportunity that can help your growth as a musician.

I am reminded of my own good luck in getting to study with the late saxophonist and composer Steve Lacy for the brief two-year period he taught at the New England Conservatory before succumbing to cancer in 2004. It is doubtful I would have had such a focused and unencumbered opportunity to be around one of my heroes without the environment provided by a university system. Furthermore, the scene established around Lacy as a mentor helped to foster fruitful creative relationships from which I benefit to this day. However, I cannot make a claim to greater access to teachers without acknowledging the gross inequality and implicit racism that persists within the university system as a whole. It is also doubtful I would have been able to attend New England Conservatory without financial assistance from my family. The untenable rise in university tuition, and the economics of music education is beyond the scope of this paper. In short, universities represent a powerful symbol of economic and social mobility in Western

culture that has offered improvised music and musicians a degree of cultural status in a white-dominated cultural hierarchy, albeit at a steep price of admission. Jon describes what he sees as an imperative for improvisers to stand firmly behind an identity, and to treat skeptically the explicit “ladder rungs” alluded to by Esperanza:

The jazz school thing is pretty new, and no one knows quite what to make of it, really. . . it’s cool that there is a rise of really proficient players in the world now, but the version of jazz being taught in schools is really just one version. So it’s really up to each individual person to find out what their internal music is. The proliferation of jazz schools is not necessarily supporting that fully, but that’s not necessarily their function. Their function is to have you be able to play [Charlie Parker’s] “Blues for Alice” in 12 keys and solo over it...it’s really up to the student to take that knowledge and do whatever they’re going to do out of it.

The central ambivalence toward university improvisation programs centers around the perceived regulation of the scene by institutions that are imbued with whiteness. Whiteness as representing a sort of aesthetic blandness is a topic that came up in several interviews in connection with one’s efforts to avoid being labelled dismissively as a “white conservatory-trained jazz musician.” Saxophonist Jeremy Udden shares his experience in releasing his American folk music-inspired project *Plainville*:

I hope the bottom line is it’s just good music, but every time something is written about the band, they talk about how there is a banjo and a pump organ, and it combines these elements. There is a lot of Brooklyn bands that are playing with these elements (e.g. Becca Stevens, Petr Cancura, etc.). It’s more interesting for them to write about than “white conservatory-trained jazz musician makes

record.” It’s more interesting for them to say that, “kid from Plainville moves to Brooklyn and makes a fancy record that incorporates all these things”. . . that I’ve learned about the game.

By emphasizing the unusual aspects of his music in relation to a typical jazz ensemble - unique instrumentation, the overt reference to folk idioms, and his own small-town upbringing - Jeremy is engaging whiteness as a label that has emerged in part from the prevalence of university improvisation programs. The label “white conservatory-trained jazz musician” evokes a present-day stereotype of privilege, someone with a story we have all heard before. Josh Sinton describes this label bluntly:

I am another middle-class white male who happens to have a couple of earrings in his left ear. I stand up there on the stage with this crazy piece of tubing strapped to my chest. Of course, 9 out of 10 people across the globe are going to look at me and say [*points*] “Jazz.” I know that. . . I understand that. There is a lot of me. The bulk of the people doing what we do, we are generic, and it’s been that way since at least the 1970s: white middle class males playing antiquated instruments. I am not exotic, and therefore I don’t immediately present an interesting story to people.

Whiteness is the cultural backdrop that cultural critics have come to observe, and critique, as a stereotyped normalcy. In fact, this normalcy represents a type of blandness that is antithetical to the highly individualistic work of the improvisers, regardless of race, whom I interviewed. In his groundbreaking article “White,” Richard Dyer states, “white is not anything really, not an identity, not a particularising quality, because it is everything - white is no colour because it is all colours.” Whiteness is itself a racial category that does not see itself as such, leading to a

reflexive folding back upon a set of cultural and aesthetic norms. Jeremy and Josh both expressed an acute awareness of this construct as it pertains to their identities within the scene.

In their comments, Josh and Jeremy express a perceived link between whiteness and blandness in improvised music, a view that I find to be prevalent in the age of proliferating university jazz studies programs. Their comments also echo a larger trend in Western art music where whiteness, symbolized by the university system as a dominant status in the Western cultural power hierarchy, is becoming decentered.<sup>55</sup> The interviewees repeatedly emphasized the need for diversity in their music, both in the way they approach playing with others, and in the way they perceive their own identities. Saxophonist Darius Jones, a native of Richmond, Virginia, who moved to New York City in 2005, notes this in his conception of what it means to be African American:

My African American experience is not Black per se. It's Black, White, Phillipino, Jamaican, Southern. It's so diverse. . . Female, male. . . why I believe in individuality is because when the environment is diverse you have to be an individual. You can't depend on these social norms and cliques. We all fall into these pitfalls, and I think if you are a musician and you've never played with a black musician you should be ashamed of yourself. If you're a black musician and you've never played with a white musician you should be ashamed of yourself. I want to see diversity, a musician who is interested in making the most human music based on individuality.

Darius points to "these social norms and cliques" as the true subject of inquiry, something to be redressed in the types of decisions we can make as musicians. Race is another antecedent that is

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<sup>55</sup> Michael Dessen, 15-16.

part of the symbolic dialogue between one's developing theory and the choices that result from it. The "social norms and cliques" Darius describes often crystallize in scenes as a set of assumed practices. For example, Mary Halvorson observes a "generic free space" in the way many improvisations are structured rhythmically and harmonically:

Sometimes you'll be in this space which is a sort of generic free improvisation space and then these magical moments will happen. For me it's hard for it to not sound like generic stylistic free improvisation when there is rarely a strong rhythmic thing happening, and there aren't many specific harmonic structures in place. I guess "atonal" and "rubato" as the default can sometimes become boring to me, depending on the situation, of course. I like the challenge of bringing in contrasting elements and creating spontaneous rhythmic or harmonic structures with people.

Mary's critique poses a clear alternative to the generic free space: to simply introduce the harmonic and rhythmic material that will redress the "generic" musical space, what for Mary sounds like an undefined rhythmic and harmonic texture, a musical structure devoid of particular color or time. Josh points out a similar blandness in the instrumentation of many groups he hears on the scene:

It baffles me to this day, we seem to be living in a time where most of our contemporaries, they all want their bands to have two tenor players who sound almost exactly alike, they all want everyone to sound the same way...yet these are the same people who idolize the Miles Davis group . . . [John] Coltrane was there to provide contrast!

Improvisers like Josh and Mary are engaged in an ongoing evaluative process, an effort to survey the topology of the scene and to find that area that requires attention. Redressing some deficiency in a scene leads to an awareness of one's potential to become an agent of change. Recognizing what is lacking in a scene leads to one's decision to find and implement clear alternatives, which is precisely the point of theorizing. In this search for alternatives, improvisers are realizing their ability to effect change to the scene, enacting an identity that is not necessarily beholden to what Darius calls "social norms and cliques." Identity is expressed by one's aesthetic choices, which in turn are acts of theorizing. We now factor in technology as an influential factor in determining one's identity during the present era of rapid technological proliferation.

### **Digital Instruments and Performed Identities**

Digital and analog instruments have become integral to real time improvisation, thanks to miraculous advancements in computer processing speeds that allow improvisers to record, sample, alter, and play back sounds on the fly. The advent of electronic performance instruments creates a much different calculus for how improvisers understand their identities within the scene. In a way, it is easier to implement change upon the scene when the field of possibilities is so uncharted, as it certainly is for live processing in improvised music. However, the job of designing an interface suitable for performance is anything but straightforward. This is in part due to the infinitely wider array of material choices before a digital performer. Yoni Niv describes finding his own voice within the scene as a "reverse engineering," realizing the significance of his aesthetic choices a posteriori:

It's very difficult to find home. What is that place that you start with? I just don't think it exists. By reverse engineering [I'm] sort of building it. I used to have a

comfortable relationship with the role of “laptop performer.” I create environments for myself to play with other people. Those environments are adjustable and flexible as much as people using instruments in flexible ways. With time, I wanted a situation in which not everything could happen, to constrain the possibilities. . . to be able to not just go everywhere, but to say, “I need not to be part of this energy.”

The technologists I interviewed perform regularly with acoustic musicians, making the challenge one of finding an identity within an ensemble that is flexible. As Yoni points out, one who utilizes technology must often choose what not to do, setting up parameters for their instrument that will place them on par with an acoustic improviser. Sam Pluta reflects on the initial disparity residing in his needing input from others in order to play:

I have to play with other people. That's one thing that is a little different than, say, a trumpet player. I can't really make sounds without someone else being involved. If I'm doing live processing, I'm taking the person's signal and doing something with that. . . [so] there's an element of mimicking. The key for me is to set up a system where I can mimic them very closely by being right behind them. But then I don't want to do that all the time. If I delay it more than eight seconds, I'd say it's no longer “their's.” Now it's mine. By creating different delay setups, I create different levels of interactivity that make it so that they are either playing with this copy of themselves or they are playing with something that happened in the past.

Sam's “eight second rule” is a clear aesthetic decision that allows him to articulate a line between mimicking the material of others, and offering a novel musical utterance. In so doing,

Sam avoids an important pitfall in electro-acoustic music, the ease with which laptop performers can mimic, and process, the material performed by others. Performing an identity can be difficult when one is confined only to reflecting that which has already been played. It is for this reason that technologists I interviewed prioritize being able to perform novel musical utterances, considering the relative ease of mimesis. In designing the popular multi-media app Thicket, visual improviser Joshue Ott partnered with composer Morgan Packard to create an interactive program where users improvise movements on the touchscreen of an iPad to create a novel audio-visual piece. Joshue describes his role in the process:

The music for the original Thicket is very minimal, very electronic, and not everyone likes that...the visuals have this advantage of being new: It's easier for me to make something no one has ever seen before than it is for Morgan to compose something no one has ever heard before.

For electronic performers, identity is often realized through instrument design, and the desire to find newness. Joshue's experience is one example of how building an instrument is akin to building an identity. Analog synthesizerist Sergei Tcherepnin discusses improvising with acoustic musicians finding a "ground" and exploring from that point of unity. He recalled a performance we gave together a few years ago:

The process of going back to improvisations is figuring out how to get over something being set in stone. Say we are "talking" back and forth with instruments. . . it is about knowing how to communicate so that we recognize that our instruments do completely different things, but we can find a sameness of a language. I can imagine one improvisation this moment when you were doing these high harmonics, and I was wavering between this sine wave filter with a

frequency modulation, and we were two instruments with this ground and we can just do this thing together.

I remember the experience of newness in this moment as one where I could explore my identity anew, simply because I was offered a new context to conceive of myself through Sergei's improvising style. This experience signified for me an opportunity to examine my own identity as a "jazz saxophonist," entering a broader sonic world outside of my own assumed boundaries.

Idiom remains the aesthetic backdrop, but also becomes a border that can be interrogated and crossed freely. The moments when an improviser perceives the boundaries to their known aesthetic possibilities are crucial to the transformative potential of group improvisation.

Considering theory as an expression of identity, and of identity as an ongoing internal investigation, the individual emerges as an agent of change, precisely because of this ability to reflection upon what could be different. Mary exemplifies this tendency by noting the lack of rhythmic and harmonic definition, as does Jon in his challenge to linearly "telling a story" in an improvised solo. Individuality within the aggregate implies a reflective understanding of one's own community, and a simultaneous desire to maintain free passage across the borders of this "playing field." A theory is an identity because a person enacts choices about who one wants to be within a scene, the space in which our aesthetic identities are performed. Putting a theory into practice involves the development of musical techniques that are responsive to this experimental impulse. The remainder of this dissertation will take a closer look at the delicate balance between "commonality in multiplicity" on the one hand, and "individuality within the aggregate"

on the other.<sup>56</sup> The significance of theory lies in an individual's potential to articulate a clear set of aesthetic intentions, which are largely shaped and cultivated through practice.

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<sup>56</sup> This phrase is originally by Samuel Floyd, as quoted in George Lewis, *A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 511.

## Chapter 2: The practicing body

It seems a foregone conclusion that in order to be a musician, one must practice. After an extended period of practicing, we might presume to possess a practice. In the case of a musical tradition, the practice is relatively simple to define, while certainly anything but simple to accomplish. One must develop a body of knowledge and experience on an instrument commensurate with the expectations, the “language,” of an idiom. These expectations can be inferred and made explicit by a practitioner through working with teachers and colleagues, attending performances, university study, and so on. But what is the nature of practicing for the experimental improviser as defined in chapter 1? Stephen Turner describes practices partly as causal structures that are combinations of individual habits on the one hand, and historical behaviors that extend beyond the individual on the other.<sup>57</sup> This bipartite conception of practice implies a degree of separation between the historical knowledge associated with an idiom, and the personal habits developed at the individual level. In other words, we possess a certain amount of choice regarding the degree to which the practical habits we develop coincide with our own historical knowledge. It is with this notion in mind that I approached the question of practicing in the interviews: how is it that an improviser can discover alternatives to their involvement in a musical idiom, and in what way does can these theoretical choices be put into practice? Theory becomes a “body of knowledge” allowing one to enact those alternatives, known intimately to an individual.

This chapter is divided into three sections that discuss different perspectives on embodied knowledge, which for these interviewees is extremely important to the development of an effective improvisational practice. The first section deals *with practice as aiming for*

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<sup>57</sup> Stephen Turner, *The Social Theory of Practices: Tradition, Tacit Knowledge, and Presuppositions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 15.

*resonance*, where the improviser a felt sense of “what sounds right,” leading to the development of a personal approach to playing an instrument. Second, the improviser takes this sympathetic sense of playing and knowing and begins an exploration, where *practice becomes an exploration*. Finally, the chapter will devote a section specifically to the concerns of technologists, and how practicing with digital and analog electronic instruments creates various challenges and new possibilities for resonance and exploration.

### **Resonance: Practicing Through Physicality**

Perhaps no metaphor expresses the intimacy of the implicit musical theory as *the body is an instrument* and its inverse, *the instrument is a body*. The physical body, a center of individual experience, was a recurring theme raised in the interviews. The interviewees described in a variety of ways how embodied knowledge is important to developing an improvisational voice, where the body is conceived as itself part of a larger musical-expressive apparatus. While the notion of total body involvement in the act of making music comes as no surprise to anyone who has ever played an instrument, the breadth of approaches to developing embodied knowledge offered here was surprising. This chapter will frame practicing in the context of the generative metaphor *the body is an instrument*, which pervades the interviews.

The importance of embodied experience is often overlooked in music theory discourses. This is beginning to change due to recent research supporting the notion that the mind exists beyond that which is “brain-bound.” Rather, an individual's understanding of phenomena depends upon a dynamic and embedded system of interaction between the physical body, mental

apparatus, and a larger psycho-social environment that is distributed across many individuals.<sup>58</sup> It is the body that receives the stimuli that are perceived and cognized by the mind, which is why experience can be said to be embodied. The embodied perspective allows for an understanding of musical sounds based on our capacity for what Andrew Mead calls “kinesthetic empathy.” This type of embodied understanding of others’ experience allows us to understand musical sound as based on physicality.<sup>59</sup> By knowing that, for example, “this piano sound is Ricardo,” one’s ability to understand and respond to the phenomenal experience of others takes on special importance for the structural cohesion of improvised music.<sup>60</sup> This manifests not as a prescriptive set of behaviors, but as a network of aesthetic possibilities, certain of which are personal timbre, multi-instrumentalism, particular harmonic strategies, and knowledge of various idioms.

A sympathetic resonance between one’s own body and an instrument implies a type of flow between two bodies that many improvisers aim for when practicing. Saxophonist Jeremy Udden reflects upon the beginning of practice as a calibration between body and instrument:

Playing an instrument is an unnatural act, and we spend years to make it into as natural an act as possible. It’s sort of like meditating in the morning. It’s just the

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<sup>58</sup> Esther Thelen, “Grounded In the World: Developmental Origins of the Embodied Mind,” *Infancy* 1, no. 1 (2000): 5. Thelen offers a good definition of the embodied cognition perspective: “From this point of view, cognition depends on the kinds of experiences that come from having a body with particular perceptual and motor capabilities that are inseparably linked and that together form the matrix within which reasoning, memory, emotion, language, and all other aspects of mental life are embedded.” See also Andy Clark, *Supersizing the Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>59</sup> Andrew Mead, “Bodily Hearing: Physiological Metaphors and Musical Understanding,” *Journal of Music Theory* 43, 1 (Spring, 1999): 3.

<sup>60</sup> Vijay Iyer, “Microstructures of Feel, Macrostructures of Sound: Embodied Cognition in West African and African-American Musics,” 77.

physical act of playing, the literal buzz of the reed and vibration of the horn. It makes me feel better, like exercise does for some people. There's always that first five minutes where it doesn't feel as good and it's going to take a while to get back to that place where everything is *humming* again...

From the outset of practice, Jeremy maintains a sense of spontaneity, where “practice as humming,” suggests the human voice, a related form of resonating between body and instrument where one loses the distinction between player and that which is played.<sup>61</sup> Resonance is described as an embodied awareness because it is felt in the body as an awareness that can be connected to the way in which one practices.

Physical size or comportment is one of the most obvious ways in which we form identities based around the body. Resonance can develop around a sonic identity that is connected to one's physicality, as saxophonist Darius Jones explains:

I think you have to exploit your physical weaknesses and strengths. Say there is a musician who doesn't have the physical strength to sound like Sonny Rollins or Tony Malaby, who are both extremely huge people, and have a very powerful thing...then you exploit the fact that you can't do that. You make your thing so fragile that it's a style in and of itself...

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<sup>61</sup> To describe a flow state involving an instrument, we can invoke Heidegger's “present-at-hand” and “ready-to-hand”, where a tool progresses from its state as an object foreign to the body (present-at-hand) into one that is engaged in a seamless flow of active, part of the subjects embodied experience (ready-to-hand): “The peculiarity of what is proximally ready-to-hand is that, it must, as it were, withdraw in order to be ready-to-hand quite authentically. That with which our everyday dealings proximally dwell is not the tools themselves. On the contrary, that with which we concern ourselves primarily is the work.” See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper, 1962), 99.

In other words, a player can and should practice in a way most appropriate to their physical compartment. Darius identifies his own sound as powerful, a product of his own physicality, but adds that he pays particular attention to portraying “smart power,” consciously diversifying his approach to tone production to include the widest possible dynamic range. The natural sonic attributes that come with one’s physical size can be subject to intervention, an insight into how an awareness of physicality can be incorporated into practice. In the case of a player who possesses more “fragile” physical attributes, Darius imagines a series of concrete steps toward refining that fragility:

The first thing is air, you take the horn and you don’t force anything, you just blow, and don’t press anything down, or just play low Bb [the lowest written note on all saxophones], paying attention to how the horn resonates or doesn’t resonate. Then you wanna push yourself, see how far you can push that actual tone until it starts to break up. For some people that will be a lot of work, and for some people that will be less. That’s a natural process, and you will start to tailor your [choice of mouthpiece and reed]. Every horn has [this resonance], and that frequency is connected to you as a player.

The dialogue between body and instrument requires a moment of decision-making, where an individual understands their sonic capabilities and begins to experiment with the simple act of tone production. Embodied knowledge in this case leads to one’s having an awareness of sonic identity, which becomes the subject of practice.

Guitarist Julian Lage likens his instrument to a “tensegrity model” in that the instrument is dependent upon tension to maintain its structure.<sup>62</sup> The challenge of sound production for Julian becomes one of calibrating the body’s tension to fit that of the instrument’s capabilities:

[Like the guitar], the body is dependent on tensional balance. There is a often a big premium put on being ‘relaxed’, but in the presence of an instrument that depends on an immense amount of tension just to stay put. To students I try to express this: What is your guitar doing to stay upright and together and how can you maximize the work it’s doing? For example, the lower string is thicker so you can do less work... so the mechanism is driving how you do what you do.

One of Julian’s central insights is his redressing the “premium on being relaxed”, a normative expectation often projected onto performers. Julian’s notion of “tensional balance” between bodies leads to an interesting exploratory practice. He details a concrete approach to sound production based on kinesthetic awareness:

I study what happens between the stimulus of picking up the guitar and the response to play it, the inhibition between stimulus and response. I would consider playing and see what comes into play, knees lock, back tenses, my range of vision is narrow, my breathing is shortened, I just notice this stuff and wait until I restore equilibrium in the body and within the environment. The body is so 3-dimensional that if someone pulls your foot, you’ll have a feeling in your hand.

If there is a deficiency in awareness, there is a tendency to compensate with

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<sup>62</sup> The use of the word tension should be placed in its proper context. Tensegrity is a term coined by Buckminster Fuller that describes a structure whose form emerges out of the presence of discrete components compressed inside a net of tension. See R. Buckminster Fuller, “Synergetics: Explorations,” in the *Geometry of Thinking* (New York: MacMillan, 1975), and “Tensegrity” in *Portfolio and Art News Annual* 4 (1961): 112–127, 144, 148.

physical or mental effort. If I release the ankles and feet, I feel as if there is less I have to do...

Julian's sense of the *body as a tensegrity model* strengthens his efforts to produce a balanced and efficient tone on the guitar. This stability in tone production represents an equilibrium that becomes the foundation for an exploratory practice.

Exploring the relationship between body and instrument can lead one to transform their practice based on a holistic conception of the body, especially for those improvisers who experience bodily differences or injury. Returning to Jeremy Udden:

Since I've had physical problems playing, stress will create some of my performance injuries. It's completely practical because it's what my body will allow me to do. If I'm feeling stressed, I've learned that my hands will hurt. That relates to the way I practice.

Jeremy's view highlights how embodied experience can direct one's decisions of what should be practiced. Avoiding injury is not only an exercise in self-preservation, but also becomes an antecedent to Jeremy's choosing what to practice. Jeremy gives the example of avoiding over-preparation in terms of embodiment:

I try to keep my practicing as playful as possible, as close to the act of improvisation as possible. I tend to be enchanted by a certain level of spontaneity. If I hear a player where it sounds worked out, I feel it...it will make my hands hurt. I think it's representing music being right or wrong. That's why I like this exploratory sort of vibe.

As in Julian's tensegrity model, spontaneity for Jeremy occurs through a dialogue between *body as instrument* and *instrument as body*, where "what sounds right" depends on the physical

sensations that are experienced during the act of music making. A more spontaneous practice corresponds to what Jeremy describes as “enchantment,” which he describes as a greater sense of equilibrium and focus within the body. This is resonance, the feeling of sympathy with one’s instrument that is intertwined with the knowledge of what “sounds right.” It is from this point of body-instrument flow that an individual can begin to see *practice as an exploration*, developing new improvisational habits from this place of resonance.

### **Practice as Exploration**

What is the nature of one’s active involvement in practicing once the particular feeling of resonance has been established? Resonance is an acoustical concept that can be extended to one’s ability to know in the body what “sounds right.” This is certainly the case in Darius’ presentation of developing an individual saxophone sound. By invoking the point at which a sound starts “breaking up” into composite overtone content, Darius introduces the concept of threshold. Approaching the threshold where a note breaks up into its overtones, one can physically explore what in our bodies can move, tense, or relax in order to *explore* this threshold. I am describing an awareness of the threshold between the body and the instrumental body, that larger body of expression we try to incorporate as “ready-at-hand” through practice. Steve Lehman views thresholds as dependent on individual perception, a subjective experience that stokes his curiosity:

The threshold of when something sounds like a unified sound object or a single note and when it sounds like a collection of individual sounds, trying to manipulate that threshold to create really meaningful music. How much does a tempo need to change to be perceived by a listener that something is changing? I see myself doing the same strategies with rhythm, really looking at perceptual

thresholds, and just thinking about thresholds in general in terms of how I work with rhythm. When I'm trying to sort through these things, I use myself as the ultimate listener, sort of letting go after that.

Thresholds exist as transitional points between rhythmic and harmonic processes around which Steve organizes his practice. We can extend the concept of threshold to the body as "ultimate listener" and an instrument *qua* body, as discussed above. The metaphor *practice is an exploration* becomes a dialogue between an individual subjectivity and the larger conceptual, physical, and social worlds within which the individual is embedded.

I asked each improviser several questions about how they practice, and heard repeated iterations of *practice is an exploration*. Thinking of practice as an exploration generates a way of thinking whereby one can explore uncharted areas and can hope to further explore that which may be already familiar. For an example of the former, we can consider the refinement of an extended technique that an individual experiences as "sounding right," which is the case with bassoonist Katherine Young's practice of multiphonics. After leaving the European orchestral idiom, Katherine began to systematically experiment with multiphonics, a process she described to me:

[Multiphonics resonate] and you can feel it in your body and also in the horn, the way they open up and suddenly you have a huge vertical spectrum in which to play and to move around within the sounds. My improvisational focus wasn't chord changes or [harmony] based, it was very physical. I would often just stick to a limited fingering pattern, and try to find out all the ways you could manipulate the sounds without hardly moving your hands. This approach based on subtle manipulations of unstable sounds felt good physically to me, and fit

with my aesthetic interest in timbre. So that became one of my main techniques, sort of planting myself in a position on the instrument, which I almost came to think of as locations, exploring that location as much as I could...

Katherine conceives of the *instrument as having locations that can be explored*. Within these locations, the player can plant oneself in a particular position. The instrument itself becomes a body to be known as thoroughly as one's own. As Julian indicates, both bodies are unique structures that have coherence and can be known through a person's intuitive sense of what sounds and feels right.

Alternatively, the exploration can generate an evolution in an individual's relationship to idiomatic concepts such as functional harmony. Katherine organizes multiphonic fingerings into "vertical spaces" that represent an alternative mode of practicing more conventional Western tonal patterns. Playing multiphonics as part of her warm-up presents numerous challenges, both technical and aesthetic:

[multiphonics are] not always easy to control, so these sounds don't often lend themselves to fast rhythmic changes... Manipulations with your embouchure or throat do not change as quickly and cleanly as fingering changes. So then this element of drone often comes in, not moving quickly or linearly so you're sort of hanging out in this "vertical space." Then the challenge becomes finding rhythmic structures or melodic fragments that are idiomatic to these unstable sounds and manipulations, and how I could accumulate [the fragments].

The accumulation of melodic and rhythmic structures using multiphonic fingerings is for Katherine a reclaiming of basic musical principles such as harmony. In Katherine's case the

structures are derived internally from a unique sound world that is rooted in her original aesthetic position in reaction to conventional melody and harmony.

The conceptual lens of exploration allows the player to treat their instrument as uncharted, unknown, and therefore a source of new aesthetic possibilities. This exploration requires a knowledge of the particular strengths and limitations of one's own body. Violist and bassist Jessica Pavone describes her struggle with back injury as a defining moment in her transition to a more personal approach to practicing. Jessica has shifted her efforts toward discovering a personal "palette of sounds" that connect seamlessly to a long tone practice:

What I practice the most, always have and always will, are long tones. I find it really meditative. . . I love getting the tone out of the viola. I want to focus on getting the tone, not necessarily arpeggios and scales, the building blocks of tonal music. So practicing sounds and how I can use them to create delay patterns...not just creating ambient pieces but creating songs. Rather than using an eighth-note scale, my palette is just sounds. Put a metronome on 60, play half notes, dotted half notes, try to keep the bow connected. Then I practice poly-rhythms up to nine and back down. It grounds me, sinks me in because for me this is really physical, I've had so many aches and pains, so I [must] focus on breathing and relaxing. . .

It is interesting how both Jeremy and Jessica cite painful physical experiences as connected to their eschewing conventional scale and arpeggio practice.

As Jessica's experience shows, *practice is exploration* can lead to a player's expanding upon conventional musical materials, referred to commonly as "fundamentals." The results of

this exploration might take shape around a novel “sound palette” as in Jessica’s most recent solo pieces.

The concept of exploration in practice need not always imply extended techniques. Pianist Ricardo Gallo also demonstrates an exploratory practice that remains within the construct of tonality. Here he recounts re-discovering central tenets of tonal harmony:

I spend time practicing music in an exploratory way. That slow process when you are just experiencing the physicality of chords or intervals, it becomes a part of your language. . . there’s a kind of exploration that goes beyond music theory. For instance you can have a C major 7 chord and you can learn various voicings, or you can learn a progression and know how it sounds and recognize it orally. I never had someone teach me that, it was something that I went through by myself.

A “C major 7” chord can have many different qualities depending on what intervals you’re using, how close or open, if you’re using 4ths, 5ths, 6ths, or 7ths.

Ricardo’s reference to the “physicality” of harmony is an example of how embodiment can effect one’s conception of particular musical phenomena. Ricardo practices by creating intervallic and rhythmic systems “on-the-spot,” learning and exploring the particular physicality of the system as part of the improvisational structure. This practice of theorizing in real-time on an instrument is part of Ricardo’s way of reclaiming such a well-worn musical object as the major seventh chord:

There are a lot of processes that are a result of a self-taught practice...the same way you would go through a pre-compositional process and set something up, I will create those pre-compositional processes but on the spot aurally...for

instance a harmonic system combining certain intervals, you can write it down but I just memorize them. . .

Ricardo's comment demonstrates how theorizing can occur in real time, and he imagines how embodied knowledge can be harnessed to generate new material.

Mary Halvorson articulates a similar approach to dealing with tonal harmony. Rather than attempting to build a repertoire of songs to be played in performance, she looks to song forms simply as material to be re-contextualized in new improvised situations:

If I take a song like "Reflections," I'll take one chord (E7b5 for example) and do everything I possibly can with that chord. I'll think of eight million voicings, I'll create different arpeggios for it, then I'll do that on the next chord in the song and work on voice leading the two chords back and forth. I feel like that really helps me improve more than if I just read through the whole song in one go, because I'm trying to hone in on individual elements and really absorb these chord voicings. The ultimate point for me is not to be able to play the song "Reflections" but to extract harmonic ideas from it and place them in another context, almost like if you are cutting up all the chords and kind of shuffling them around. . . I like the idea of keeping harmonic and rhythmic ideas in freer improvisational settings. It's not like I have an exact idea of what I want. But being able to hear it and recognize it and access that language whether it's in a strict way or a more abstract way.

For both Mary and Ricardo, tonal harmony is itself a structure to be explored in novel ways. I have also cultivated an approach to harmony out of an effort to foster a more active role as a saxophonist to determine the direction of an improvisation. Like Ricardo, I see conventional

harmonies not as static entities, but as structures with many possible iterations. For me, the metaphor *harmony is color* generates a wide range of chord-root relationships that preserve the basic feeling of a chord while allowing me considerable freedom in shading its color, whether as a single entity or as part of a larger progression. Like Mary, I will often place a specific harmony pulled from a specific song form into a completely different context. In this way, harmony becomes a sonic palette that I can draw from when making decisions on how best to interact in a given situation.

The *practice is an exploration* metaphor generates both concrete musical materials as evinced in the previous discussion on harmony, as well as an embodied knowledge of what “sounds right.” The latter type of knowledge shapes the intentional actions of an improviser, a facet of one's theory that becomes more important in performance. Here lies the intersection between explicit and implicit knowledge, where many people can learn the same musical utterance, but only an individual can know exactly when to play it. Esperanza Spalding evokes this link between explicit knowledge and intuition in her *musical phrase is a feeling* metaphor. She discussed with me a practice that involves the learning of specific “shapes” as played by others, part of a constant search for more content. Her ultimate goal is to transcend the shape as an explicit musical phrase, as in her statements partially reproduced and expanded from chapter 1:

The context of practicing is the study of language that doesn't bear fruit until you perform. Every stage of practice is a step toward evolving a way I ultimately want to practice. A lot of soloing is intuitive and you're listening for what is next, and you might not have the right vocabulary to put there, so the whole point of practicing those shapes is to have enough experience and familiarity with those

sounds in composition, solo, or lyrics (to me they are all related), what is that unconscious emotional feeling or pull, and you can draw something tangible that wants to be there, and you're stringing those things along in real time.

Esperanza practices explicit musical phrases in order to learn the intuitive feeling that only she can connect with it. The "unconscious emotional feeling" manifests as an aesthetic decision in performance, one that is grounded in both a concrete musical idea and an embodied knowing. The idea of a shape takes on a different form for Jon Irabagon, a saxophonist whose theory directly confronts the perceived expectation of linearity in an improvised solo. His rigorous method of improvisation is part of what he calls a "hyper-awareness" of the Jazz tradition. Jon describes his *mind as a computer screen* that must keep track of the materials used to construct a long-form improvisation:

When I practice I go through the process of making myself remember. I record myself, listen back, and try to see if any motifs escape after I establish them, like if I don't bring them back. For me it's important to be able to recall those ideas because I don't want to play anything that I'm just "throwing off." Everything I play I want to have meaning behind it, and this is one way to bring that out. That's why I like the extended playing, because there is a lot of responsibility in it. When you have a chance to play for an hour straight with these sorts of parameters, you have to remember what happened in minute 14. I like that challenge, and also if I can be in minute 46, I potentially will be in a completely different world, so I like taking a stamp from minute 14 and putting it in minute 46 exactly how it appeared in minute 14. It's like this weird alternate reality, it just appears out of nowhere. If my mind is like a computer screen, when they

form, either I see the staff with those notes on it, or I give it a name like “lick A” or “Marianne” or something like that, if the lick or motif has some kind of shape to some other thing not musical, it might be easier to remember that other way [not as on a staff].

Jon calls to mind a double-voiced discourse where he is engaged with a specific improvisational language while simultaneously commenting on the normative expectations of its use.<sup>63</sup> He explores the possibilities of the narrative to include his motivic “alternate reality,” where shapes are elemental building blocks of a real time exploration.

### **The Practicing Technologist**

The final part of this discussion into practices will concern the relatively new field of digital and analog electronic instruments, and the challenges faced by players seeking to build an exploratory and aesthetically original practice. Consider the work of video artist Adam Kendall. Trained as a jazz saxophonist, Adam has constructed a theory of video performance based around the idea that a visual gesture is a musical motive. He outlined his motivic approach to visual improvisation to me:

Because I come from a musical background, my underlying aesthetic is based on the same kinds of abstractions. . . there is the concept that I am building a motif through a series of events, such as color manipulations or visual distortions, and there is the same sense of ideas evolving over time, resulting in phrasing and form. A visual motif is made up of a series of individual and concurrent events, similar to how a melodic motif is made up of pitch and tonal events. . . There's a

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<sup>63</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel” in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 259- 396.

large vocabulary a video motif can be made from - Events of light, color, distortions, saturation, blurs, feedback. . . There is also rhythm. It can be metrical, or can be the natural rhythm of events simply following one another, almost like the rhythm of spoken language.

The completeness with which Adam has analyzed the concept of a musical motif in relation to the construction of digital instruments is typical of many technologists with whom I have worked. There is a difference in how digital performers approach improvisation because of the fact that they must build their instrument. Adam's particular approach to instrument building is one that facilitates his concept of the musical motive as it pertains to multi-media audio-visual improvisation. The motive can be seen as a metaphor because Adam treats the building of visual imagery using a musical concept. Because he most often performs using a MIDI keyboard controller, Adam is literally executing rhythmic and even melodic figures, thus allowing him to remain within the realm of musical performance while the digital instrument renders the visual transformation according to the parameters he has set.<sup>64</sup> Adam's experience building his visual setup demonstrates the foundational task that scholar Newton Armstrong calls "enactive, embodied performative capabilities."<sup>65</sup> A player of a conventional instrument will, depending on their level of skill and awareness, immediately ascertain that instrument's sonic potential based on historical precedent. The improvisers surveyed thus far have described various ways of interrogating this precedent, and developing practices that explore the boundaries of what is known idiomatically. In this sense, the instrument ontologically precedes an individual's

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<sup>64</sup> Intra-domain mapping is described by Perlman, 33, as "less spectacular and hence easily overlooked. It can be hard for us to recognize that intra-musical analogies are analogies at all. Yet from a cognitive point of view, analogical reasoning can be used equally well. . ."

<sup>65</sup> Newton Armstrong, "An Enactive Approach to Digital Musical Instrument Design," (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2006), 82-83.

employing it as a tool for creative expression. A trumpet is associated with particular historical practices. This history can be learned and explored in various ways by a musician, the subject of the chapter thus far. For the technologist, however, the “instrument” does not reside ontologically in the laptop or oscillator, but in the particular parameters that are patched or coded by the player. The player is therefore tasked with linking the instrument to his own mind/body experience. By this I mean that the tool of creative expression comes into being because of the player’s intentional act of bringing it into existence.

Israeli-born technologist Yoni Niv’s work traverses between sound installation, conventional score-based composition, and interactive electro-acoustic music. Yoni points to a particular problem facing technologists: how to create an instrument that reflects one’s identity. This involves navigating what Yoni calls the “band of relationships”:

At first I was very concerned with integrating, how to develop performance practices and build an instrument so that I could be on equal grounds, have the same expressive powers as my peers. I designed tools in which many different things could happen. With time, I wanted a situation in which not everything could happen, to constrain the possibilities, to have control over the situation while making decisions on the fly. I cannot control other people doing stuff I’m not doing, but by having a narrow band of relationships I can control what I’m doing, to say “no” to certain musical situations.

In building a digital or analog instrument, the improviser stakes out aesthetic positions that fundamentally shape future performative decisions. Laptop performer Sam Pluta frames this crucial difference between digital and acoustic performers in terms of a player’s access to what they know in real-time:

If I'm a trumpet player or a violin player, anything I can do, I can do at anytime, so a violinist can just sit down, and they can play a really fast scale, they can play *sul ponticello*, they can play over-pressure, and they can very fluidly move between them because they have this pretty simple analog system that allows them to achieve anything they can do right in their hands. Computers on the other hand can do so much as instruments, however unless you have a system set up where you can move between ideas that you do, like if I'm playing and I don't have my granular synthesis patch setup and I'm like, "ah shit! I really want to play my granular synthesis patch!" I'll look at the computer for a little while...stop the program I'm running. . . it's slow! There's nothing like that in the violin...it doesn't mean you have to do everything you can do all the time, nor does it mean that good music is virtuosity, but it does mean you have the choice to do those things.

The disconnect between practicing and execution necessitates the building of an instrument that facilitates an embodied, real-time flow of activity. Newton Armstrong describes this disconnect with real-world decision-making as "proportional to the amount of attention consumed by the objects that populate the virtual world."<sup>66</sup> This means that the digital instrument needs to be as intuitive as possible for a player to execute what they know, what is resonant to them. Sam describes his solution to this problem, a system of discrete "modules" - a term borrowed from analog synthesis. These digital modules are sound objects that Sam combines into an aggregate "matrix" system:

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<sup>66</sup> Newton Armstrong, 33.

In a digital system, things are either “on” or “off.” On and off is not really that interesting but if you have tons of on and off, then that can be interesting. My argument would be that digital systems haven't been convincing as performance systems. . . because if you have a digital system with one module, really you have one state you can be in. If you put two of those together, then you have a square of the information...in my system there's something like 30 modules, so there's far more information than just one module.

Sam is concerned not with complexity for its own sake, but with allowing for greater flexibility in making moment-by-moment decisions, something acoustic players can control with much greater ease.

Analog synthesizer player Sergei Tcherepnin also refers to working with “shapes,” although the word has a different connotation than it does for Esperanza. For Sergei, a shape is simply an “audible gesture” understandable by more than one player, but not necessarily part of an explicit musical language. He articulates an exploratory approach that establishes control over these gestures through the building of patches:

[Bassist] Adam Linson was interested in doing things that didn't have a constant pulse, but also wasn't a drone. That is a really simple way of approaching playing, but causes me to figure out a patch that has maximal flexibility in terms of how a gesture can have audible shapes. The analog synthesizer has to do with pre-patching, so there is a certain amount of composition that goes into preparing for an improvisation [emphasis mine]. I have to set up my parameters. Every module on the synthesizer is extremely versatile, so I can use the keyboard as a regular keyboard with oscillators, or I can use it to change the pulse, or to get

different levels of frequency modulation. . . sometimes I'm specific that I want to have 3 sine waves, and I want to work with beating and ear tones, other times I want to use white noise or pink noise and work with 12 bands of EQ, and sometimes I want to do both. . .

By treating the keyboard with greater flexibility, a single patch can yield many surprising results, which is perhaps why Sergei often resists reconfiguring a patch without significant forethought. His sense of a "shape" represents the recognition of an aesthetic agreement, a distributed knowledge that will be discussed in the next chapter. In terms of his own practice, Sergei's comment points directly to the compositional element in building a patch, which he calls "preparing for an improvisation." The preparation is distinct from the way an acoustic musician practices because the preparation does not involve learning how to interact with an instrument in an embodied flow, as Sergei describes:

When setting up a patch for improvising [performatively] with Adam, I would figure out a way to stop quickly, and then start with something else quickly, and really change as fast as I need to, or as fast as he can change with the bass. So it's a matter of figuring out how to match this rate of change, or possible rate of change. It's also about about performing actual gestures and shapes that could be from one split second, to ten seconds, to maybe a minute [in length].

Sergei's preparation for an improvisation is a reflective and painstaking implementation of parameters that are resonant with his aesthetic preferences. These parameters are then incorporated into a performance, as they would be with any other instrument.

The intersection between the electronic and acoustic sound worlds lies in one's ability to perform theories in real-time. Temporality carries a particular challenge to improvisers who are

creating a musical structure in real-time. There is a reflection that often occurs where gradual additions are made to one's theory after encountering some degree of resistance in the course of performance. Visual improviser Joshue Ott is the designer of the popular application Thicket for iPhone and iPad. He performs with Superdraw, an animation program that he designed for visual-sonic collaborations, but also envisions solo animation improvisations. He described to me the challenge and resulting progress that grew out of his difficulty in a performance clearing the screen:

The process of making the software has almost been like an improvisation in many ways...I would never have been able to think of all those things at once. The process of designing it came really from performing with it...I would want to do something and be unable to do that thing. . .Very early on I would be drawing, and there would be no way for me to clear the screen. I'd have this drawing sitting on the screen and to get that drawing off the screen I would have to draw over that drawing until it went away. So I thought of ways that I would like to clear the screen, deciding what key to assign the "clear thing" to. It's got to be something I can remember easily, that's really obvious and separate from everything else. There's all these nuances to clearing the screen, like if I hit the "escape" key I don't want it to suddenly go blank, I want it to gradually clear the screen. . . the ability for everything to be smooth or harsh depending on my whim as an improviser.

The addition of the "clear screen" function is part of Joshue's process of resonance and exploration. The desire to clear the screen at a particular moment, and for this action to take a specific shape is a product of the resistance Joshue encountered in performance. Then there is

his subsequent exploration into this aesthetic preference, representing Joshue's effort to maintain control over performative transitions:

I want to have complete control over how you get from one state to another. You have a white square on a black screen. I press this escape button...how does that happen, does the square just disappear? There are hundreds of ways you can get from the square to a black screen. One way is to have the color of the square fade slowly from white to black...another way of clearing the screen is the square expands and gets so large that it disappears. Everything needs to have the possibility of being animated. I made this universal animation time knob, a property that can be controlled in a variety of ways. The knob represents how long something will take to happen.

This brings us full circle from the reflective decision to implement a screen clearing function after a perceived shortcoming in a performance, to the initial decision to use a keystroke, and again to further reflection on the action's subtleties and subsequent refinement into the knob function. Due to his training as a visual artist, Joshue is unique in this group of improvisers for his reliance on the language of animation in describing his work. In a sense, Joshue's practice approaches a metonymic relationship to the music he works with. In other words, the animation is the music, reflected directly and singularly in the course of performance.

Much like learning the topography of New York City, every individual will learn the streets differently and some will be entirely unaware of neighborhoods that for others are known very intimately. It is virtually impossible for all individuals to know such a complex landscape with equal thoroughness. However, everyone will have an entirely thorough knowledge of some aspect of the landscape. This knowledge is gained not only through studying a map, as helpful

as that is, but through a process of exploration, or actually experiencing the walk. The metaphor *practice is an exploration* falls under what Lakoff and Johnson would call “orientational metaphor,” as it expresses the body as oriented in some sort of spatial landscape. The frequency with which some version of this metaphor was raised in interviews points to a particular aspect of spontaneity in improvisational practice that concerns how improvisers become familiar with that which is unknown.

Following the metaphor a step further, part of exploring is accepting the possibility that we may get lost, or encounter the unfamiliar. This brings us to the role of group dynamics in shaping an improvisation. What happens when an individual “wanders” into the aesthetic territory of another, and how is it possible for one person to adjust their own implicit theory to accommodate that of another? Furthermore, is it possible for a collectivity to make explicit some aesthetic agreement that is the result of many individual theories being brought together of many rehearsals and performances? These questions pose the central challenge to the success of group improvisation, a collective practice that requires tolerance amidst the pervasive differences inherent in musical scenes.

### Chapter 3: Collective Improvisation and Tolerance

Much of the work improvisers do involves balancing their own implicit understanding of what “sounds right” with an aesthetic environment that is more collectively determined.

Ultimately, musicians realize the fruits of their labor through collaboration, where individuals cultivate a shared musical discourse based around mutually understood sonic symbols. At the same time, improvisers retain their individuality through the intentional decisions they must constantly make in choosing what and when to play in the course of an improvisation. This is what George Lewis describes as, “commonality in multiplicity, and individuality within the aggregate.”<sup>67</sup> By asking improvisers about the nature of their collaborations, I set out to investigate how this unique synthesis of individuality within a collectivity can be established. I asked the interviewees questions about the agreements, implicit or explicit, that they make when playing with others, and also about how they conceive of composing for their own groups.

The discussion to follow is divided into two sections, each of which delves into how the interviewees regard the fundamentally collective nature of experimental improvised music. The chapter begins with agreement as a mediator of the different intentions that can arise when distinct voices come together to create an improvised musical piece. Tolerance emerged from the interviews as a necessary ethical foundation from which agreement can be established within a collective, where true tolerance is the recognition of difference and does not equate agreement with conformity. The next section builds on the agreement/difference paradigm of collective improvisation to discuss the several perspectives on what it means to compose for improvisers. The view of composition to be explored here is different from the conventional notion of

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<sup>67</sup> Samuel Floyd, quoted in George Lewis, 511.

authorship that is rooted in what Lydia Goehr calls the “work concept.” Improviser-composers are more interested in guiding the decisional process of a performance than in determining the totality of its content.<sup>68</sup> The result is a composition that is collectively created, referred to by the interviewees with metaphors such as *composition is a map, an area, or an orienting object*. With tolerance as a foundation for agreement within a group, and agreement functioning as the starting point for a group exploration of compositional structures, we have a working model for how improvisers can engage in collective theorizing, a manifestation of commonality in multiplicity and individuality in the aggregate.

### **Improvising, Agreement, and Tolerance**

Tolerance featured prominently in my interview with pianist Ricardo Gallo, and there was a broader feeling in the other interviews that the discovery and cultivation of aesthetic agreement within an ensemble is an important task for improvisers. Tolerance is the ethical position that allows such an agreement to emerge. Ricardo is explicit in pointing out a distinction between his conception of tolerance and that of political discourse:

To me, doing music in an improvisatory way has to do with tolerance. I learned myself to let go of many things and just let people be themselves, and at the same time expect that to happen with what I am doing. In your relationships with people, either friendships or personal relationships or with your family, you are always trying to figure out who you are and also put that into terms with people. Sometimes you find that there can be big differences with people that are close.

That becomes the struggle: to assert yourself but also be tolerant of other ways of

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<sup>68</sup> Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 123.

thinking. I find myself often comparing politics and music. [Politics] does not work as music because there is not this sense of tolerance. Effective music tries to find that tolerance.

After our interview, I became interested in how this ethic can facilitate coherence in the real time structuring of improvised music. I began to see fundamental differences in how tolerance is understood in improvised music compared with the neoliberal understanding of the word.

Tolerance is defined in the Oxford Dictionary as a quality where one “allows the existence of opinions or behavior that one disagrees with.” This is rooted in the Lockean notion of “the duty of toleration” where we passively allow that which is really disagreeable to us, in an effort to maintain a civil society free from irreconcilable conflict.<sup>69</sup> This conception of tolerance has had lasting effects on Western societies, namely in our present day segregation of civil society into separate public and private spheres. We maintain a cultural claim to neutrality until we are asked to compromise this separation between public and private, at which point conflict ensues. For example, this can be seen to manifest in the contentious discourses surrounding issues such as marriage equality, or the persistent debates that arise over teaching evolution and intelligent design. In other words, we tolerate different identities (sexual orientation, religious belief, etc.) so long as they exist outside the normative practices of the public sphere, “out of sight, out of mind.” The Foucauldian critique of this view problematizes the notion of a neutral public space as itself a contingent cultural position promulgated and enforced by societal institutions whose main interest is to maintain power.<sup>70</sup> In other words, tolerance exists “to

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<sup>69</sup> John Locke, “A Letter Concerning Toleration,” in *Treatise of Civil Government and A Letter Concerning Toleration*, ed. Charles L. Sherman (New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1937), 167-224.

<sup>70</sup> Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

check an attitude or condition of disapproval, disdain, or revulsion . . . incorporating and regulating the presence of a threatening Other within.”<sup>71</sup> We can passively tolerate that difference exists in the private lives of others, while resting assured that normative cultural practices, that imagined space of neutrality - a neutrality characterized by white power - will be enforced in the public sphere.

In problematizing the cultural belief in neutrality, contemporary scholars have begun to reclaim tolerance as an ethic that is activated and practiced by individuals and communities. Anna Elisabetta Galeotti offers a view of tolerance based on recognition, defined as “the acceptance [of cultural differences] within the range of normal viable options and alternatives of society.”<sup>72</sup> Recognition involves an active acknowledgement of difference, an ideological space within which one can experience identity as contingent and enacted, as Žižek puts it, “not in spite of our differences, but *on account of* our differences. [*emphasis in original*]”<sup>73</sup> Georgina Born understands musical creation as mediating difference, allowing for the possibility of an aesthetic space that allows for dialogue across borders of nationality, race, and idiom.<sup>74</sup> Consider a recent review of a trio performance by saxophonist Darius Jones, drummer Ryan Sawyer, and multi-instrumentalist Shahzad Ismaily that was published recently in *The New York Times* by music critic Ben Ratliff (*Arts*, July 4, 2012). The review focuses on the different stylistic backgrounds of the three musicians as a significant factor in the success of the performance. Ratliff gives considerable space to Ismaily, a self-taught composer and performer who plays many instruments in a single performance, and who evokes “the spirit of touching those instruments

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 86.

<sup>72</sup> Anna Elisabetta Galeotti, *Tolerance as Recognition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 194-195.

<sup>73</sup> Slavoj Žižek, “Tolerance as an Ideological Category,” *Critical Inquiry* 34, no. 4 (2008): 666.

<sup>74</sup> Georgina Born, “On Musical Mediation, Ontology, Technology, and Creativity,” *Twentieth-Century Music* 2, no. 1 (2005): 11.

for the first time.” Ratliff seems to revel in the novelty of the musicians’ sense of abandoning an “absolutist idiomatic approach” he finds to be prevalent in much free improvisation. He regards the path the performers took as one that felt “absolutely moment to moment.” The review ultimately claims that the performance transcended its usual role as a vehicle for personal expression, fostering the invention of spontaneous structures that transcend the particular idiomatic involvements of the individuals. All of this confirms what has already been said, that individual identities are predicated upon and enacted out of our differences, and society's claim to inclusiveness goes only as far as it is able to truly recognize difference, as Ratliff notes in the review. It is this properly ethical feature of choosing to recognize the identities of others in the context of improvised performance that operates symbolically in the domain of collective improvisation.

Improvisation works most effectively when tolerance is present because improvisers recognize the importance of difference in creating an engaging musical collaboration. The awareness of aesthetic differences fosters a collective agreement, metaphorically referred to by Ricardo as *finding common ground*. This take on agreement depends upon tolerance as recognition, and is a powerful reason why improvisers come together in the first place:

For me, it’s a matter of projecting some sense of common understanding to the audience. I think that that’s the most important thing about this, and the reason why doing music this way could still be relevant. I don’t think it’s just for personal fulfillment, for personal satisfaction like “oh, that sounded cool.” I think that when you project to the audience that you are able to find common ground with musicians either on the spot like in improvisation or because you brought this piece together. . . I think that’s when music is doing what it has to do. Of

course you then could put that common ground into musical elements. You could say things like when you're improvising together you're thinking not only about finding a same beat or a same key, but also texture or form in a sense that those *textures are changing organically* or together.

Ricardo begins to outline how agreement can manifest as musical phenomena, which likely will change in each performance. He is unequivocal in naming common ground as the driving force behind the musical surface, a metaphor that intersects with *musical form is an organism*, a master trope in music theory since the 1800s.<sup>75</sup> The formal development can occur organically, by collective action, or by an explicit act of composition that shapes the way players navigate the common ground, even reconfiguring the playing field itself as we will see. Regardless, the type of agreement to which Ricardo is referring is of a general nature, as the particularities of a musical performance do indeed change. In fact, improvisers tend to view an over-emphasis on a group's propensity for agreement as problematic. Peter Evans describes this phenomenon in greater detail:

I think agreement is more important with common goals in the music rather than in specific things that are happening. You can relate [those magical moments of coming together] to more general issues. You don't want people to be too agreeable. . . especially with the details of the way the music unfolds. That's what makes the improvised part interesting, that there are differences in how people hear stuff and the decisions they make. If you play with a certain configuration of people a lot you can do certain things on a dime, and actually that becomes an

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<sup>75</sup> Michael Spitzer, *Metaphor and Musical Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 279-342.

obstacle. It makes the music too predictable, which is not why we're doing music in the first place.

Having an implicit potential for agreement to occur creates a social space that engages individuals within the collective. Peter's comment points to how an obstacle of over-agreement is encountered when the agreement itself becomes too explicit. On the other hand, a collective awareness of aesthetic overlap between different theories is a crucial foundation upon which a collective improvisational style is built. Ideally, musicians gather around the common ground either in the course of performance, or through verbal discussion between performances and rehearsals.

Sergei Tcherepnin's theory expands upon this spatial notion of common ground, where an *improvising ensemble is occupying a playing field*, and where *the agreement is a single point on the field* from which the performance can depart:

The sameness gives you a point from which you can also depart, and it gives you just a way that you can actually speak to each other through your own difference. . . it's a sameness that's not a sameness because we're different, but it gives you a playing field so you can make varying degrees of difference. I don't always start an improvisation by playing the same thing as the other person, but the possibility for that blending is definitely a point of recognizeability, like you can recognize that these two people are playing together, which might not be so recognizable if it's just two people doing their own thing. I think it's important to have those moments, like these people are working together. It's natural for a group of people to try to find these points where they are understanding where their ground is, even if it's just for a moment within a piece.

In order to articulate the point of departure, players must at least be aware of the *agreement as a point on the field* before they can further explore the field itself. As players develop an awareness of the point from which the agreement originates, the improvisation can represent a play of intentionality, where *musical utterances are objects on a field*. These objects are “placed” by individual players onto the field in the course of a performance, and may lie outside Sergei's point of agreement. He describes these moments as accidents, those moments that remove one from the sometimes seductive safety of agreement:

Accidents are when somebody does something that is completely out of whack with the flow of the improvisation. It's a way of surprising the audience and yourself, throwing something onto the playing field, changing the flow of the music. Personally my habit is a certain lulling through the seduction of listening. It feels like breaking new ground when something completely rips that apart, and it's almost like you can do anything. When improvising, it has to do with talking about it with the group. It has to do with textures, which comes back to the materiality of sound. . . It's not like everyone has to play in unison, it's understanding how to find these moments.

Viewing the *improvisation as a flow*, Sergei highlights the agreement as a series of sonic events that can be interrupted by individual action, where a group can “break new ground.” Sometimes it is preferable to return consistently to the point of departure, giving the performance a formal sense of return within a mercurial landscape.<sup>76</sup> Other times, Sergei values the breaking of new ground, that unexpected surprise that pulls a performance out of the habit of lulling. This

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<sup>76</sup> Larson and Johnson refer to this as part of the *music is a moving landscape*, where repetition traces the same trajectory of motion again: “The experience of tracing the same musical path over again is so powerful that it can actually make you feel as though you are experiencing the same time over again.”

decision is more collective than individual. Peter Evans a hypothetical scenario that illustrates the point:

Let's say there is a trio improvising, two string players and a saxophone player is doing some really high delicate multiphonics, and string players join in, doing Sclesi-type stuff. Certain players find those sounds very interesting and pleasurable to sustain, or to hit together. Then the question is, "Do we all agree that that is something that is cool that happened, but we're not going to do it forever, or are we going to keep coming back to it." It can get really personal but you can actually talk about it. If you are working in an *ad hoc* situation with improvisers who you don't know on a personal level, that can be really tricky because then you end up with these disagreements: "Fred wants to keep playing this high sparkly shimmery stuff, he wants me to go there with him over and over." Sometimes you go there anyway just to help the music along! So it is a social thing in the music of trying to figure it out. . .

These types of decisions form a large part of the ethical, intention-based vocabulary of an improviser. Players sometimes develop strong values around issues of creating differences in an ensemble, as Josh Sinton expresses:

It baffles me to this day, we seem to be living in a time where most of our contemporaries, they all want their bands to have 2 tenor players who sound almost exactly alike, they all want everyone to sound the same way. If I'm doing a free form improvisation and I feel everyone is being really polite...I may just step forward and do something stupid and juvenile!

Gestures like this so completely express one's difference in a given moment, that a collective may be jostled into recognizing alternative courses for the performance. Josh's point shows how true tolerance can sometimes involve the forceful injection of difference onto the playing field. Without difference, there is no need for recognition, leaving only an agreement that manifests as an aesthetic homogeneity as discussed in chapter 1. True tolerance fosters a diversity rooted in the individual capacity for taking transformative action within a collective of like-minded peers, each honoring their own subjective understanding of this ethical principle.

Whether we speak of our potential for agreement or difference, improvisers often conceive of themselves as occupying a shifting role in the improvisational playing field. The relationship of an individual to a shared aesthetic space can shift, sometimes existing inside the agreement and sometimes pushing against it, a mutability highlighted in Sergei, Peter, and Josh's comments. Julian Lage refers to this shifting of roles within an ensemble as one of "engagement." He notes a certain degree of motivic and rhythmic tension that is crucial to improvisers establishing and maintaining an engagement:

It's a conundrum because on the one hand I want people to feel connected and for us to play the same shit, but on the other hand music is your opportunity to not agree with someone and be okay. I think you have to explore the nature of engagement, what that truly means. One definition is to think of it as *agreement [is mimesis]*. . . I play a 4 against 3 figure and they do it too, and I guess we're engaged, but to be honest, I don't love that. I think the reason I don't love it is because it's almost like you let the air out of the balloon. . . there's no more tension. It's not a strong engagement. There also [are] times when I engage by standing my ground. They [my band mates] almost give up on me like when they

go into space and the jet packs fall off... and then they get more engaged with themselves because they were not relying on my part. . . like they trust my part enough that they can commit to their own shit, individually and together. Those are the moments when I feel engagement and tension are great, when people feel supported enough to be themselves. I think musically that's very important to always be appealing to yourself, even when someone is doing the most stimulating thing and you can so easily jump on their ship.

For Julian, looking for more subtle ways of theorizing about agreement raises the importance of individual intention. Improvisers must be firm in a decision to enact a particular intention in a given moment of improvising. The spatial metaphor is developed further here, where *agreement* is metaphorized as *standing one's ground*. Julian's sense of engagement raises the fact that improvisers often know only after they begun playing whether a musical utterance is part of the common ground known to the collective, or if it is breaking new ground in the playing field. Improvisers learn to adapt musical gestures *a posteriori*, as Katherine Young explains:

I will make a decision and try to execute that decision for a while and consider the impact it does or does not have on the overall music. Maybe it's a trill. I hear what everyone else does. Is what I did working? Maybe I initially conceived of it in a rhythmic role, but given what else is happening, maybe it become a melodic voice or a shading of somebody else's melodic voice, or part of a noise-scape? If we find something that seems to allow for what everyone is doing to work together, [then it's a question of] evolving that particular moment.

Katherine will only know after the fact whether the trill is a melodic voice or a background structure, which is to say that without attempting the trill, Katherine would not be exercising her intention to explore the borders around a shared aesthetic space and therefore not truly engaging.

Engagement captures the active nature of tolerance as the recognition of difference, where the formal implications of a gesture are shaped within a real-time interplay of individual intentions. Darius Jones discusses this aspect of real time musical structure in describing his collaboration with pianist Matthew Shipp:

When [Matthew Shipp and I] are doing what we do, I am thinking about the fact that he is moving extremely fast, in the sense that his ideas are moving extremely rapidly. He's playing a piano so sometimes he'll have one idea going in one hand, and then another hand he'll have another idea, so I'm constantly having to consciously be aware of that. Then sometimes he'll combine these two into one thing and so I'm having to be very fast with my choices, but I'm also having to make good decisions in that moment. Then there are times when he's playing background and I have to know when those moments are immediately. And the same thing, if I'm playing background and he's going to start to blow I have to know that he's heard what I'm doing as background. Understanding that I'm on the top and he's on the bottom, or no one is on top and we're just combining ideas.

The formal structure becomes a by-product of the coincident intentional actions being taken moment-by-moment by individual players. As the structure evolves, the contours of the playing field itself can change due to the individual actions of the players, made possible by an overarching ethic of tolerance within the group.

How are we to be sure that another player knows of our intention to play background, or that we wish to be heard as a soloist in a given moment? These gestures are representations of intentions, the true “language” of improvised music. In this way, we can summarize what is being put forward with the metaphor: *musical form is a social organism* that expands and contracts within a musical landscape or playing field. An expansion occurs when individuals push upon the boundaries of what is known, resulting in a compelling musical surface. Joshue Ott recounts this in particular detail in a description of a performance with flutist and composer Robert Dick:

We were kind of finding each other in this thing and we got to this point when I did something that was a little bit more erratic and he made some corresponding sound with his flute that corresponded with that. We got to this one-upmanship where I would do something even more erratic and he would escalate his sound and get a little louder and little louder, and it became almost like a competition to see who could one-up. And we were in it together and we kind of at that moment were focused on each other. And until then the visuals I was making were completely black and white, and I had filled the screen and everything was vibrating and jittery and I very suddenly introduced color, tons of random colors all over the screen and the audience gasped, and it so awesome it was such an amazing moment as a performer to know that they had been there with me that entire time, they were following, they were really paying attention and they were really in that with us. It was amazing!

As this example shows, each successive decision can be looked upon as a formal feature of a musical (in this case a multi-media) surface. Players are realizing their own separate vision for a

musical structure in the context of an expanding agreement, the ground that is collectively known. We now turn to how improvisers further cultivate the playing field by creating compositional structures. These compositions are founded upon the agreement that is collectively defined, making the compositions themselves expressions of an aggregate aesthetic field of possibilities.

### **Composition, and the Shaping of the Playing Field**

Most of the interviewees view a composition as complete only through the mediation of the performers. A composition as we are exploring that idea here derives its meaning from the sonic and experiential realities of many subjectivities. This is why I Piekut's description of a composition for improvisers as having "distributed authorship." Conceiving of a composition as having a de-centralized authorship presents an ontological shift away from the romantic ideal of the "musical work" that views a composition as an enduring musical product represented by a score, usually with a single author.<sup>77</sup> In viewing a composition as residing ultimately in the collective ethical-social space that is an improvising ensemble, we can explore the many facets of how compositions impact the playing field in myriad ways.

Broadly speaking, a composition represents a vehicle for exploring common ground in a way that is more explicitly determined than has been discussed thus far. A composition usually results from the initiative of a single improviser who is aware of the different identities in an ensemble. I argue that every improviser who undertakes the task of organizing and articulating an aesthetic vision for a group of improvisers is indeed a composer. This designation allows us a

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<sup>77</sup> Benjamin Piekut, *Experimentalism Otherwise: The New York Avant-Garde and Its Limits* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 57, introduces the term "distributed authorship" as occurring when, "the conception, meaning, and sound-world of a given composition is shared across multiple subjectivities."

point from which to consider the complexities of distributed authorship; the author of a composition and those who set out to perform it are inseparable from the very beginning of the process. Consider the comments of Ricardo Gallo, who points to his *notated pieces as areas of departure*:

I think improvisation is a compositional process. *Notation is an area of departure*, and what I want to get at is within that area, many unexpected things happen even when things are defined. For me it's just a way to transmit a specific idea either very simple or very elaborate with overlaid information, setting up a musical discourse. It has to do with musicians finding common ground. I also like to create situations in which musicians have to listen to the composition in order to know what is coming next instead of relying on cues, actually listening to create the situation in the piece so [the form] is always part of the creative process.

Where Sergei's *point of departure* expresses an aesthetic agreement from within a group of individuals, Ricardo's *compositions are an area of departure* on the field. By setting up a musical discourse that will influence the performance in ways not entirely known ahead of time, Ricardo's role as a composer is to guide the ensemble to this area, from which the ensemble can depart either collectively or by individual initiative, usually a combination of both.

Ricardo's conception of a composition remains within the spatial *musical playing field* metaphor, an aesthetic landscape that is fundamentally shaped by the collective efforts of an ensemble. Despite the significant role Ricardo plays as composer in shaping the playing field for a performance of one of his pieces, the authorship of that composition remains distributed based on the fact that no individual subjectivity can completely know the entire playing field. Mary

Halvorson alludes to this in her description of a *composition as a map* that is colored, explored, perhaps evaded, and ultimately returned to in an improvised performance. She describes the importance of adhering to the overall map as a macrocosmic form:

The compositional element to me is the structure of the song and the point of the piece, and *the improvisations are coloring* the piece but the piece needs to be there. I want [the improvisation] to either be bridging two sections, or elaborating on the written material, or making the composition and improvisational section make sense together, so it's a part of something.

This situation played out in a particular performance when the performers decided in the moment to veer “off the map”:

I had something written and it was a 16-bar form and the trumpet played over it and I said the alto will join and the trumpet drops out and alto finishes, and then at some point we cue to move on. So that was the form. But then at the gig when the alto started playing everyone in the band dropped out and suddenly it was just solo alto and we just eventually cued into the next part. . . if that feels right to do, then that's great. It's exciting because the whole thing is mapped out so it's nice when sometimes you can go off the map. . . so maybe you've gone off the form of that specific section, but you still know that section "B" is going to come next, so you can veer off, but you still are in this overall structure and the composition still has to get played until the end. Maybe that's what separates [playing a composition] from free improvisation, that these improvisations are serving the composition. I would hope that the improvisations are different than if you're just playing free.

The composition is realized when the destinations are reached in a way that is satisfactory to the players involved. The players must “fill in” the map during the performance, connecting the explicitly notated sections with improvisations that are attentive to their understanding of the rhythmic and melodic implications of the overall discourse of the piece. However, the composition does not necessarily govern how these improvisations are to progress beyond a general expectation for players to eventually return to the map after veering off. In other words, the collectivity of individual players is tasked with creating coherence in a performance. This coherence is contingent upon the aesthetic agreement of the group as discussed earlier, which has the potential to transform the content of a piece from one performance to the next.

If an improvisation functions to connect points in a *composition as a map*, that improvisation must remain coherent within the “area” charted out by the composer, insofar as the players understand that area. The interviewees indicated that sometimes it can become necessary to further structure the improvisations in a piece through verbal instructions. Jessica Pavone, who works frequently with Mary, recalls a composition for her group *The 13th Assembly* where she felt the need to make such a directive to Mary. The instruction was based on Jessica’s knowledge of Mary’s playing style, allowing her to create a clear aesthetic boundary for the specific improvisation in question:

When I'm writing a piece and there's an open section, it's always somehow based on some elements of the music, it's not just “do whatever you want”. If there is a little bit of the “do whatever you want,” I will explain. There's a piece that I wrote for *The 13th Assembly*. I've been playing with them for awhile, and I know their playing really well and there's this one part where I instruct Mary to improvise. And I know Mary's improvising style really well, and I know

sometimes she can be really aggressive and freak out. So I wrote improvise, but improvise based on the material before you, don't freak out. It's not that I'm telling her how to improvise, but I'm at least giving her a parameter, so if she decided to do a freak out that's not what I want from you!

Instead of simply directing Mary to play a certain way, Jessica sets a boundary for that section of the composition around an area of the known aesthetic agreement between her and Mary. Mary remembers this situation similarly:

[*laughs*] Yeah, I remember that! Well, the part I was improvising on was almost over a vamp. It was a very specific kind of two-bar little thing and then I was supposed to improvise, and then it sort of continued on in the same feeling after I was done. So I actually completely understood that instruction because she just kind of meant she wanted it to stay in that vibe. She didn't want me to crank up the distortion and play all this atonal stuff and bring it into a different space and go out of time. She just wanted me to say something within the confines of that specific harmonic structure and that two-bar form. Just because we've known each other for so long, we don't need to talk about things that much.

There are many small moments improvisers experience like the “don't freak out” instruction where compositional intent must be negotiated with the playing style of the improvisers who are to realize the structure. I can remember one instance working with Yoni Niv where I was struggling with a particular moment in rehearsal. It seemed to me that the agreement was centered around a common tone, and that I was agreeing by finding the right note and playing with everyone else according to my own instincts. This proved not to be the best response, as Yoni indicated in his directive for me to engage in “timbral listening.” It turned out

that the aesthetic of Yoni's piece had more to do with the timbral unity of the group rather than a particular pitch. Yoni recalled this moment in our interview:

Some people you feel like you don't need to say anything, some people you need to say more. Sometimes you have to work on a very practical level (what type of multiphonics)... We had a discussion about "timbral listening" and you didn't understand that so much, but we worked with Josh's prayer bowl and that opened up a realization of what I [was] talking about...

In this case, my attention could be redirected to the timbral changes of Josh's prepared saxophone techniques, better establishing the ground for Yoni's instructions.

Timbral listening demonstrates how it is possible to bring others to an awareness of a specific part of the playing field through a compositional act that is distinct from score-making. This awareness can definitively shape decisions individuals make within a composition. The instructions themselves can also be refined into a framework for entirely collaborative compositions. Katherine Young reflects on this process in her work with violist Amy Cimini:

We gave ourselves flexible but meaningful structures, and therefore we didn't feel compelled to generate something "new" every time. . . once you've played with someone for awhile, it's hard to call it improvising. . . maybe it's not notated music, but you have so many things you do together that you find materials about which you say, "that's really good, and we almost always like how that sounds."

The instructions are agreed upon, becoming the foundation for Katherine and Amy's compositional technique. Each non-notated composition has a clear set of parameters based on the duo's known common ground. Katherine describes how they shaped a single composition

“Two Foxes” out of this collectively determined set of instructions that emerged from playing together over an extended period of time:

We have one that we call “Two Foxes”. . . it starts with a multiphonic that has a particular beat in it, like it’ll pop in a certain rhythmic way, and then Amy comes in with a fast [sings fast rhythmic phrase] and next thing you know we’re in this quick changing [texture] finding different phasing and rhythmic patterns, all of which spring from the beating pattern in that first multiphonic. So the focus of that piece is rapid high-energy rhythmic patterns. We were interested developing a piece that would bring our focus more to rhythm as opposed to other parameters. I had been thinking for a while about wanting to work with the beats of this multiphonic as a rhythmic base. And this is common for us - we both bring things from our own practice, and we see what we can do together with them.

The composition “Two Foxes” brings together a mixture of explicit instructions - the multiphonics, fast rhythmic patterns, and a general form for the piece - combined with a flexibility that allows each player to fulfill the expectations of the composition differently at each performance.

Sam Pluta recounts a similar type of approach to composing collaboratively with the collective electro-acoustic ensemble *Glissando Bin Laden*. The diversity of approaches represented in this group, Sam says, makes the reality of composing a longer process. He notes the experience of building discrete programs for these compositions as integral to his developing the module system he currently uses:

Somebody would come in with an idea, like one time [violinist Caroline Mallonée] came in with this tune, using all these just intonation things. I would

listen to it, record it, try to figure out what I could do with it. The next week I'd have an idea of what we could do with the tune. I like shit that moves really fast, and [violinist Jim Altieri] likes shit that moves really slow, so you have the just intonation slow moving world and the fast moving noise world. Then somebody would say, "why don't we add this kind of processing." Then I would go away and program for a week. The music is truly collaborative. It's such a clash of two worlds. . . noise music with just intonation drones. What it did is create layers of tuning. I generally did not know what tuning system [Jim and Caroline] were in or what notes they were using. I wanted to create my own sound world on top of that. The result was this music that is very integrated but also has these two elements that are fighting against each other all the time to make something interesting.

For both Sam and Katherine, the composition itself emerges from a collective effort that in turn emerged from a more general agreement. As both examples show, this way of working requires frequent rehearsals, and typically takes a long time to develop as Sam's experience with programming new modules each week. However, it is sometimes the only feasible way to build repertoire for unusual instrumentations, particularly with electro-acoustic ensembles where individuals often work at vastly different paces.

For improvisers who wish to realize a more detailed set of parameters, acts of composition must entail more elaborate notational and conceptual instructions while avoiding an overly-deterministic notation that might do more harm than good to the overall performance.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Josh Sinton notes that part of the collaborative ethos of the New York scene has created a "minimal rehearsal" etiquette observed by many improvisers. This may seem to be a sacrifice, but actually plays to the strength of improvisers to cultivate their own craft independently,

This is precisely the nature of Peter Evans' work with his self-described "jungle pieces," where a *composition is a dense landscape*. The landscape is meant to have material density so that there are many ways it can be traversed in performance. Contrary to the *map* or *area of departure* where major structural decisions are made collectively or by individual improvisers, Peter explains the jungle as a static environment - relative to the earlier models we explored - that players must contend with:

Something I've been trying to explore in my music is to build these environments for people to live in that are so saturated in detail that you have to hack your way through the jungle with a machete to find your path. It's confusing. It's thick, saturated, you might come across interesting characters or animals along the way, and it's open, there's no end to it. [In] my little arrangement of "All The Things You Are" . . . there's many many ways you can approach it, and they all fit on top of one another. It can be like a normal tune with a steady quarter note, and then there's all these tempo fluctuations. Then there's the harmonies, lifted right out of the song (that's the thing that keeps it together), and then there's this really byzantine melody. What I like about it is it forces me to question my own criteria for what is a successful performance. I don't even know sometimes! I want to be able to have that same feeling of being lost in a jungle, I don't want to feel like I'm flying over the jungle in a helicopter. Part of the reason I'm writing this stuff is for people to take risks with [it]. I used to write things independently and it sounded like a mess. Now it's more streamlined and I'm learning how to simplify

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bringing their individuality to the compositional environment. Josh states, "I don't understand people writing for jazz trained musicians, who are improvisers, a ten-page piece. I'm not saying they are not capable of it, but that's not playing to their strengths."

the notation so that you can see how your part fits in with the other part even if it doesn't seem like it does.

Navigating the jungle requires a vigorous and potentially confusing exploration on the part of each player. Realizing these saturation pieces also demands that players learn how to get lost and find their way back to their path, an experience that is unique for each individual. Peter recounts a specific instance where percussionist Jim Black did this in rehearsal, purposely derailing the piece in order to learn the limits of his understanding of the composition's landscape:

We were rehearsing my little arrangement of "All the Things You Are" with all the tempo changes which is a little hard to keep track of. It was Jim's first time really playing the chart. We started playing it and there are all these different ways people can layer these different tempos on top of one another. After a certain amount of rotations it started to get worse. And I'm playing and I'm like, "How is it getting worse? It's kind of falling apart!" You'd figure it would start to lock up after like 15 rotations. . .so then it kind of falls apart and we all start laughing, and Jim said, "I was purposely trying to get myself off." He was just playing these hits in totally random places out of tempo and not looking at the music so he could find his way back! It's really creative but also really professional because he's played a lot of different kinds of hard music and he also knows that I'm asking him for a certain degree of freedom and creativity. So [he was] trying to spin [himself] around in circles and see if [he] can find the door. It's fascinating!

The jungle forces a player to grapple with concrete musical materials throughout a performance, exerting a global influence over the decisions made by a musician. This orientation supersedes a player's subjective notion of how to shape the composition, but the responsibility to create and maintain the environment remains firmly with the collective.

Every composer writing for improvisers must relinquish a degree of authority over how the structure of piece will be realized, which is why I describe these compositions as having distributed authorship. Improvisers related to compositions metaphorically as some sort of landscape, and view the act of composition as in some way shaping the landscape. The effort to orient a group around some area of aesthetic possibilities is in itself a compositional act, even while the ultimate realization of the structure is left to the performers. Improvisers view the issue of orientation differently. Steve Lehman related to me his view that we tend to be either fixed *allocentrically* upon a fixed point of reference (as in North/South/East/West), or localized *egocentrically* relative to our own particular position (to my left, in front of me).<sup>79</sup> Peter's saturation "jungle" pieces demand of performers an orientation fixed upon the *compositional structures as dense landscapes*, which exert a greater degree of regulation over certain intentions a performer might have. This facet is made clear by Peter's anecdote about Jim Black getting lost, and the need to remain aware of the rhythmic and harmonic structure throughout a performance. Contrast this with Ricardo's "areas of departure," which while requiring a certain degree of fixity of orientation, view the structure of a *piece as an organism* that results from the common ground discoverable in the course of performance. As with Mary's *map compositions*, players are tasked with connecting the composed aspects of the piece, and may choose to "veer off the map" so long as the composition is played to its completion. Steve Lehman discussed

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<sup>79</sup> Barry Blesser and Linda-Ruth Salter, *Spaces Speak, Are You Listening?: Experiencing Aural Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 49.

with me the orientational distinction, and the impact this perspective has in his work composing for improvisers:

It seemed to connect to a line in the sand I make in terms of improvised music. To me, that paradigm of egocentric spatial orientation connects to open improvisation where there is no or very little structural framework of any kind in the form of an improvisation. It seemed to me *a propos* of improvising in a way where you are just using your intuition and reacting to what you hear and trying to communicate with everyone but it's all oriented around your own perception, versus a mode of improvisation where all of that is still going on but there is also a responsibility to maintain, respect, and uphold a kind of musical form and to think of it as opportunity as opposed to a limitation to have that integrated into a musical improvisation. I like to work with an implicit understanding, or agreement in terms of musical priorities, what people tend to privilege within a musical space. This tends to translate into the realm of musical performance. You make the circle of musicians smaller by talking about improvising musicians who are capable of integrating a compositional structure and being cognizant of their place in time inside a musical structure while improvising. The more internalized you have a structure, the better equipped you are to deal with any surprise. And anything that constitutes the unexpected is not disorienting as much as it has the potential to be something revelatory. Anyone who is an improviser dealing with predefined structures always is trying to internalize the structures as much as they can so that the sky is the limit in terms of individual and group decisions.

Steve's *composition is an orienting structure* metaphor arises out of his analysis of the scene, and a belief that an improvisation can become more significant through the act of maintaining and upholding a compositional structure throughout a performance. Players are tasked with enacting this structure with the goal of generating a musical discourse that is every bit as spontaneous as any other improvisation. The allocentric perspective holds that a compositional structure exists independently of any one person's individual theory, just as our notion of north and south are fixed concepts regardless of our particular position. Taking the metaphor a step further, performing an *allocentric composition* requires that one not betray particular parameters delineated in the piece at a whim, just as one cannot simply assert that, "north will always be to my left." Steve Lehman's composition "Allocentric" is a piece that outlines the rhythmic and harmonic parameters of the overall performance with considerable specificity. He detailed how the piece functions to me:

In "Allocentric," the harmonies are based off the harmonic series of four or five different pitches, rounded to the nearest quarter-tone. An improvisational framework known by the players, there is written notated chordal information, chord symbol notation, and an associated scale of harmonics 8-16. I've already done a lot...this composition was a way to extend and reinforce that work.

Rhythmically it is dealing with creating a perceptual ambiguity, working at creating a rhythmic threshold working with different bar lengths, for example a bar of 4/4 that gets divided in different ways, for example a bar of 4/4 divided into five parts and grouped into 2+2+1, so two long pulses and one short one, and that could last two bars. The next bar could be the same bar of 4/4, but divided into seven parts, subdivided into 2+2+2+1, and so on. You have something that

resembles, depending on how fast it is, a bell pattern that is accelerating and decelerating, but the bar length always stay the same. Working with Tyshawn [Sorey] and Vijay [Iyer], my experience is that those guys internalize the compositional structures more quickly than I do! Tyshawn is very unusual in the speed with which he is able to internalize very involved musical structures, so he has a responsibility to use the speed with which he internalizes those structures to really push the music forward and find something that's meaningful and unique every time we play but also be aware of the kind of framework that will allow both Vijay and I to be in the best position to be creative as well. . . there is an ongoing combination of musical information being communicated via notation, oral practice, and performative cues.

Although the collective retains its role in realizing the composition, the structure itself orients the players toward the thresholds that Steve explores in much of his work. As is clear from his comments, compositional structures serve not to dictate the precise course of a performance, but to orient the ensemble around a particular area of the playing field that can be specified, learned, and explored by the players in a variety of ways.

Compositional structures conceived with improvisers in mind can often be expressed through means other than rhythmic or harmonic processes, as is the case with Yoni Niv's notion of "timbral listening." His composition "Tenri (2009)" exclusively uses verbal instructions to communicate a complex "sound object" that requires a perspective I think intersects nicely with Steve's allocentric paradigm. In relying on a verbal description of this abstract object, Yoni demands of the improvising ensemble a particular attention to the timbral aspects of group interplay:

I was very interested in finding axes, and in notions of space. I had a visual and sonic experience, something static that is constantly moving, like a junk space, a mobile that is a sonic object that is like a lucid animal comprised of different movements in space...its limits are very lucid, so that sometimes you hear more of it, a matter of resolutions of speeds. Form is shaped by the speeds by which the elements that constitute the object are moving. It's not exactly like the lens of a camera. I'm interested at what point you lose the point of the observer, at what point you're immersed in the experience so you see the thing in its entirety. I'm interested in the threshold between [the observer and the immersion]. I was interested [not only] in seeing if I could shape this among us, if I could talk to people I trust and they might understand what I say, this very abstract notion of what constitutes a sound object, but if a group of improvisers could shape this experience. I could have a reduction to one pitch, not exactly one pitch but "home" so that if people think they were lost they can stick to some knowledge that is out there.

I see Yoni's description of "losing the point of the observer" as symbolizing the subjectivity of an individual improviser. Yoni articulates a sonic structure that remains contingent upon the subjective awareness of each individual, but is also defined by one's finding a point of immersion where their subjectivity is subsumed by the collectively realized object.

Yoni's compositional initiative fully embraces the nature of individual subjectivities in a group as a creative force in realizing a collective aesthetic ground. By fully depending on this ground to realize a compositional vision, we are left wondering,

“Whose piece is it really?” This question is one of many that improvised music poses to a creative culture founded on the work-concept as an ideal that must be reconciled with a more distributed notion of authorship, particularly as we march forward in the present age of globalized sharing of information.

## Conclusion

In choosing a multi-perspectival approach for this discussion, my primary aim has been to open a more inclusive definition for music theory as a creative and improvisatory individual and collaborative act. In the scholarly community today, I perceive an understanding of musical meaning founded upon a scientific notion of theory. This understanding goes virtually unquestioned, assuming the post-Romantic ideal of music as a text to be a literal truth.<sup>80</sup> This perspective has effectively monopolized the word theory to characterize a relatively narrow, though wonderful, experience of musical expression. A more inclusive understanding of theorizing must develop analytical paradigms for implicit theories such as those explored in this paper. A theory is a body of knowledge that is a dynamic expression of one's identity. This is exemplified when we consider how the body itself is the source of much of our knowledge, the perceptual tool that allows us as musicians and listeners to know "what sounds right." It is through embodied knowledge that individuals can find their way to a convincing voice within an aesthetic and social space that is collectively defined. Despite the extraordinary developments of improvised musical practices since 1950, and the increasing acceptance of non-notated musical forms in the cultural mainstream, there is a relative paucity of scholarly inquiry into improvisational theories. This dissertation seeks to move toward redressing the imbalance.

With the approach taken here, I have tried to show how improvisers experiment with and enact individual identities in the course of performance. Experimentalism emerges from the view of reality as contingent, where one's identity is subject to revision, based upon one's lived experience. I see the development of experimental improvisational practices therefore as an outgrowth of one's changing relationship to the collectively defined social and aesthetic spaces I

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<sup>80</sup> I refer the reader once again to Goehr, 1992 for context.

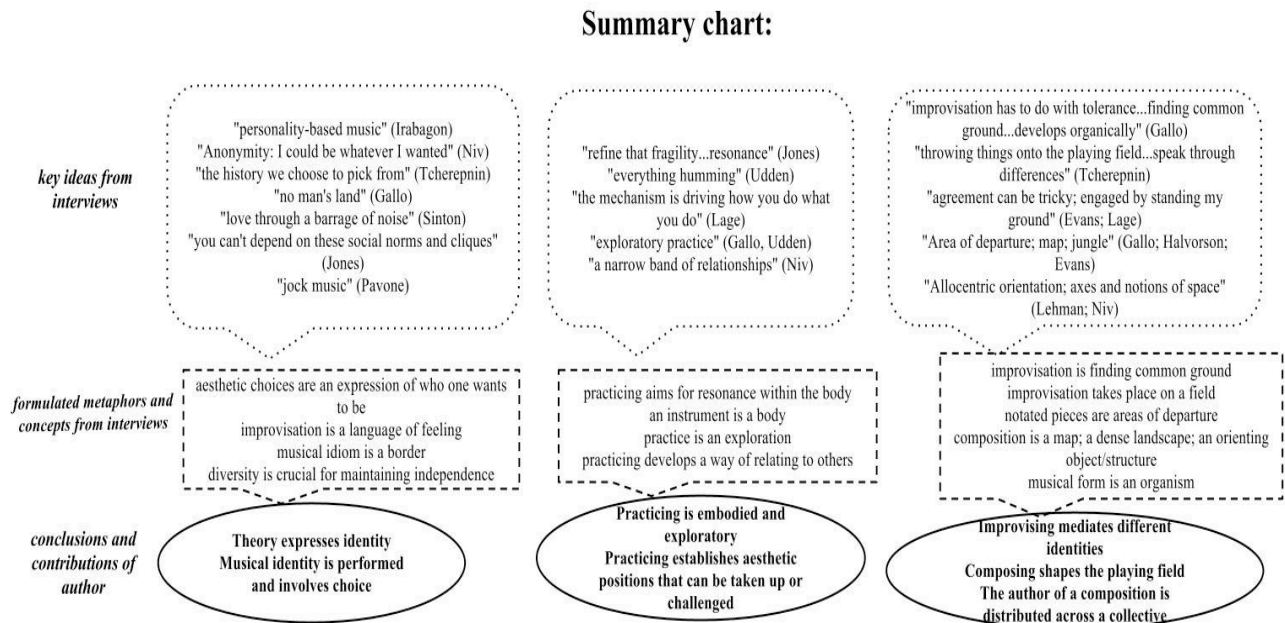
have defined as musical scenes. Chapter 1 looked at New York's improvised music scene as a macro scene, a network of networks within which improvisers perform their identity. The way musical improvisation is practiced by those interviewed for this paper involves a symbolic play of musical decisions that represent individual identities, as Sergei Tcherepnin puts it, "the history we choose to pick from." Chapter 2 addressed these choices as they begin to coalesce around a practice, allowing an individual improviser to obtain a degree of independence and agency as a performer. Chapter 3 looked at the ethics of improvisation as governing how improvisers choose what and when to play, and how they understand a composition to function within a scene. Metaphor takes on a particular importance here, where the playing field is a space where improvisers find common ground, but also stand their ground to create an expressive contrast within a group. *Compositions further shape the playing field*, offering an *area of departure*, a *map*, or an *orienting object*. The effort to find agreement but also to tolerate and give voice to difference is perhaps the best summary of what I learned from the interviews, an expression of that ideal balance between "commonality in multiplicity" and "individuality within the aggregate." I have tried to reflect this balance in the format for the discussion itself, emphasizing quotes tied together by my own views and commentary.

One of the main struggles I encountered in writing this dissertation was to find a satisfying voice as both narrator and participant. This is an apt reflection of the problem of performed identity explored in chapter 1, where individuals struggle to find alternatives to "social norms and cliques" while retaining a legitimacy in the scene, as expressed through their shared experiences in the scene. As a member of the improvised music community in New York, I have a personal stake in this conversation, although as a scholar I know that the work would not be as strong were it only to represent my own personal views. A major aspect of my

authorial voice became one of “orchestrating” those views as expressed by my colleagues. In grouping the statements into categories, I have tried to lay out what I feel are three major questions confronting most improvisers whose aim it is to challenge or expand upon the border of musical idiom through acts of theorizing. The notion of border extends to a structural problem one might find in reading this: what is the line between my own views and those of the improvisers? This remains a lingering issue in this study, and is one I hope to clarify with the “summary chart” below. Every chapter topic is an extrapolation from topics and metaphors that in turn were formulated from the “raw data”, or statements made by improvisers in the interviews. The way I have interpreted the interviews falls into three main categories, summarized from top to bottom in the table below: 1) metaphors and concepts that are reproduced directly from the interviews, 2) metaphors and concepts formulated by me to summarize points made in the conversations, and 3) my own positions that group together ideas from the interviews, infused with my own personal views.

The chart presented in figure two details the three general topics I chose, and how they relate to the ideas of the interviewees. The center row of the chart represents the interpretive bridge where I formulated metaphors and topics based on the statements made in the interviews. I have included key phrases used by improvisers in the top row, which while not an exhaustive list, gives some idea of how I grouped the statements into broader concepts. I believe that the efficiency of grouping several related statements under a single metaphor or topic allows each individual theory to be expressed more clearly. Although I encountered metaphors less frequently than expected in the first two chapters, interviewees used metaphor extensively throughout chapter 3. Reflecting upon this, metaphor seems to be employed by improvisers with increasing frequency as a situation becomes more complex. It is a complex undertaking to

define how a composition truly functions when authorship is distributed. It is equally difficult to describe one's experience with the ethics of group interaction without metaphor.



**Figure 2.** Concluding chart

Pictorially, the above chart remains incomplete. My own concepts greatly influenced the types of questions I asked, and the statements made in the interviews influenced the formulation of the concepts themselves, which consequently evolved over the course of the eighteen conversations. For example, I approached the interviews initially believing that improvisation is about interaction between different voices, a belief that was greatly expanded to include mediation of differences. This expansion came after I learned Ricardo Gallo's views on tolerance and improvisation as finding common ground. The concept further evolved after hearing Steve Lehman's paradigmatic conceptualization of allocentric and egocentric improvisation, and again with Sergei Tcherepnin's notion of the playing field. With each successive interview, I re-formulated the question as to how an individual experiences interaction in a performance, incurring a different kind of response, and thus a further evolution

in the concept itself. In maintaining a constant relationship between my own assertions and those of the interviewees, I have tried to embed my authorial voice within my voice as a participant, in a sense continuing the interview onto the page. It is my hope that this discussion can proceed in future work, and perhaps offer some ideas for further research.

There are many areas of study that I can see emerging from this preliminary look at theorizing and identity in experimental improvisation. First, this study invites a more complete look at the scene itself, taking into account more voices and exploring in more detail the topic of borders in theoretical discourse. This would require further interviews with a more varied sample of participants based on personal background, aesthetic interests, and education. At stake here is the articulation of a music scene that, as I observe it, is increasingly rejecting musical taxonomies in favor of a more global and borderless practice of communication and collaboration. Second, greater attention can be paid in future work to developing new methods of transcription and analysis of specific performances as manifestations of an individual theory, particularly to gain a more precise elaboration of the collective agreement explored in chapter 3. In de-emphasizing concrete musical examples, I was more interested here in capturing the causal thinking behind a network of possible musical utterances, but remain interested in future work in bridging the gap between a theory and its implications for a musical surface. Among the many paradigms worth exploring is recent research into pitch and temporal spatial models and applications of family resemblance to a range of performances, looking for coherence and developing a new criteria for evaluating performance practices. Finally, future studies could look at composition in light of distributed authorship, exploring contemporary methods of disseminating musical information other than conventional notation. For example, the instructions-based approach employed by several improvisers is evidence of a compelling

intersection between collective knowledge and an individual desire to shape the field. A more detailed study of this inter-subjectivity could focus solely on how these types of compositions are executed step by step, combining interviews with transcriptions and score examples to better illuminate the “individual emerging from the [collective] aggregate.” These are just some of the ways in which improvisational theory continues to open new questions into musical meaning, a discussion that has only begun to unfold with this work.

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