Fischlin, Daniel and Eric Porter (eds). 2020. *Playing for Keeps: Improvisation in the Aftermath*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Reviewed by Mike Ford

I requested to review this book in December 2019, blissfully unaware of the series of crises and aftermaths that the year 2020 would bring. Neither the editors nor the contributors of this volume could have imagined how well-timed *Playing for Keeps: Improvisation in the Aftermath* would be in a year roiled by a global pandemic, economic devastation, as well as a tumultuous and long-overdue reckoning with racism and racial inequality. While none of the essays in the collection deal with economic or public health crises, the authors all show how improvisation is a critical tactic for dealing with multiple crises unfolding and lingering at the same time. *Improvisation in the Aftermath* clearly demonstrates that improvisation, both as a musical and a nonmusical practice, provides individuals and communities with ways to resist the violence and disruption caused by world-rending crises, as well as to heal the damage left in their aftermaths. Claudio Ciborra argues that "the power of *bricolage*, improvisation, and hacking is that these activities are highly situated; they exploit, in full, the local context and resources at hand […]. The smart *bricolage* or the good hack, cannot be easily replicated outside the cultural bed from which it has emerged" (2002, 50, italics original). The contributors in this volume each provide a snapshot of a particular improvisatory moment in a particular place; however, when these snapshots are placed over each other, shared patterns and strategies begin to emerge, transcending these local contexts.

The book is part of the Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice (ICASP) series, which aims to advance the notion that musical improvisation is "a crucial model for political, cultural, and ethical dialogue in action—for imagining and creating alternative ways of knowing and being in the world" (iii). This broadening beyond a single improvisational form is a vital part of the burgeoning discipline of critical improvisation studies, as can be seen in the multitude of improvisatory domains with which the contributors to the *Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies* (George Lewis and Benjamin Piekut, eds. 2016) grapple. Indeed, the essays in the current volume all use an improvisatory music as a starting point and then proceed to argue that the musical improvisation can, in one regard or another, be seen as a microcosm of

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the environment in which it is found, by which it is shaped, and which it shapes in turn.

The collection is commendable for its insistence on a broad range of musical practices, geographic areas, and, perhaps most significantly, a diversity of literary genres employed. In addition to academic articles, we also find a poem, a series of drawings, and three interviews. While such a variety of genres is certainly a breath of fresh air, it should be noted that the non-standard genres all pertain to United States topics, with the exception of one on Palestine; and the non-US musical styles and locales receive traditional scholarly treatment. A subsequent book in the series would benefit from a more intersectional approach to non-standard literary and musical genres.

My review groups together essays based on the type of crisis and/or aftermath in which the musical and non-musical improvisations take place. After outlining the editors' introduction and commenting on three alternate-genre chapters, I discuss the three essays that deal with the lasting effects of settler-colonialism (in the Canary Islands, Canada, and Hawai'i respectively). I then turn to four chapters that focus on improvisation in response to more recent violent outbursts: the vandalism of an arts center in South Africa, the Egyptian revolution of 2011, the recurring civil war in Lebanon, and the ongoing Israel-Palestine conflict. The remaining two essays deal with the aftermaths that result from lingering inter-denominational strife in Israel and Northern Ireland.

The editors Daniel Fischlin and Eric Porter lay the foundation for the collection in the volume's introduction, emphasizing several points rehearsed above, including the transferability of the tenets of musical improvisation to non-musical domains, the situatedness of improvisatory response, and the potential utility of improvisation during and following crises: "in the aftermath of chaos and trauma, improvisatory modes of being provide generative alternatives based on risk taking and nonconformity rooted in cocreative connections" (2). However, they also maintain that improvisation is not merely a contingency method, but can reveal underlying factors that contribute to the advent of crises and extend the tail of their aftermaths. The introduction is a masterful summary of the theoretical basis on which the subsequent chapters rest.

In a later chapter, the editors converse with Vijay Iyer about a recent improvisatory project. Iyer's project is the third in a series on the War on Terror and its influence on Black and Brown communities: the first deals with airport security; the second confronts the 24-hour availability of information about the war, made possible by digital technology; the third focuses on veterans, their

experiences, and the ways in which they deal with the traumas that result from serving in the Middle East. Iyer emphasizes the transformative therapeutic effect that improvising in these performances had on the veterans. However, he also points out the underside of improvisation—"the sort of improvisation associated with evil" (89). This admission is one of the very few places in the book where the author acknowledges that improvisation is not always a force for good, the rose-tinted way ICASP often likes to present it. Iyer's project recognizes both the destructive improvisations that lead to and follow the War on Terror and the constructive, co-constructive, and reconstructive potential of improvisation for Black and Brown communities in America.

In her poem, "manifesto," Matana Roberts improvises on the Preamble to the Constitution of the United States. Through embellishment and reinterpretation, key terms from the Preamble (such as "Union" and "Blessings of Liberty") are recontextualized in terms of an updated understanding of "We the people" as "the ever-growing collective mongrel race," in which difference is celebrated and intertwined: "We are improvised, yet we should synchronize to bring the best of ourselves to fore" (28). Throughout the poem, Roberts repeats the refrain:

> *United States of America*
> *United States of Hysteric-a*
> *United States of*
> *America.*

drawing readers' attention to the fact that, while the United States is now plunged into a particularly deep hysteria, the Union has always induced hysteria in some of its people.

In the other artistic chapter, Randy DuBurke presents eight drawings that illustrate Nina Simone's political critique and her contributions to the civil rights movement, another historical moment met with heightened "hysteric-a." In the introduction, the editors note that "the stunning visual imagery evokes both direct acts of violence and the ever-present threat of violence, both state and vigilante, that haunted and inspired civil rights activists" (16). DuBurke depicts this direct violence through dynamic scenes of police clubbing and chokeholds—resonating deeply in the aftermath of a surge in anti-Black police brutality in the United States at the time of writing this review. The artist blends context-specific imagery, personas like Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., and placard slogans like "EVERS DIED for YOU//Join NAACP FOR HIM!" with broader calls to "STOP RACISM NOW" and "WE DEMAND EQUAL RIGHTS NOW" and lamentably omnipresent specters in KKK garb (124). The series of drawings culminates in a rendition of "Mississipi Goddam" (1964), Simone's musical

response to the horrific bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, AL and the deaths of four Black girls in the blast. With the exception of one mournful stance next to photo cut-outs of the four girls, DuBurke depicts Simone in concert—voicing her demands for equal rights and her vehement opposition to state-sanctioned violence against Black bodies.

In his chapter on Afro/Canarian jazz, Mark Lomanno notes the centuries-long state-sanctioned violence perpetuated by colonizers against the autochthonous inhabitants of the Canary Islands, a Spanish territory since the fifteenth century. In addition to physical violence, the Spanish quashed—and continue to quash—Canarians' sense of identification with ancestral and cultural roots on the African continent. Lomanno maintains that the linguistic impositions of settler-colonialism have stripped Afro/Canarians of their ability to articulate their complex identities; he positions musical improvisation as a way to cross the critical divide between the expression of identity and using language as the sonic means to do so. While demonstrating that "Afro/Canarians are filling in the historiographical gaps and breaks, creativity and deconstructively rewriting las Islas's multiple histories, thus re-envisioning their present and future through collaborative sonic performance," some of Lomanno's musical arguments come across as simplistic elisions of musical plurality and cultural plurality (61). However, his meta-argument on the exclusion of the Canary Islands and afrocanariedad from transatlantic *scholarship* due to the hybridity of its many local identities—seen simultaneously as not European enough, not Caribbean enough, not African enough—is convincing and points out an area in dire need of redress.

Just as Lomanno illustrates the reclamation of traditional and ancestral cultural expressions through music in a neglected geographical space, Kate Galloway shows the ways in which Inuit throat singer Tanya Tagaq and her collaborators reclaim perceptions of the First Nations and the Canadian North. Galloway provides thorough discussions of three collaborations, detailing how the artists work together and adapt their disparate musical practices around each other. This is in part to show the importance of partnership and collaboration for the survival of First Nations cultures, but also to clarify, by detailing the innovative engagement with novel musical forms and technologies, that these cultures are not static or primitive, as they are frequently portrayed in settler-colonial media and discourse. Galloway deftly argues that "throat singers, like Tagaq, embrace Indigenous modernity, a process of adaptions where traditional Indigenous practices are revised for contemporary use and community expression" (98). By combining past and present practices, then, Indigenous

musicians can counter oppressive stereotypes, voicing their own identities, rather than having identities imposed on them by settler-colonists.

Kevin Fellezs continues much of the argument of Galloway and Lomanno in his chapter on Hawaiian slack key guitar and its complex history with colonialism. He presents three moments: the first is the early development of the musical practice; the second is a resurgence of slack guitar and its aesthetics of softness and sweetness that played into the tourism industry's essentialization of Hawai'i; and the third outlines the native Hawaiian response to a non-Hawaiian winning a Grammy for Hawaiian music. Fellezs links them to improvisatory musical behavior:

> Each moment involves improvising—not in the sense of performing a completely spontaneous composition or unleashing unrestricted, uninhibited expression but in the sense of adjusting to a momentary finger flub that proves fortuitous (the first moment, with its series of historical happenstance), extemporizing on a melodic line (the second moment, with its active resuscitation of older musical aesthetics), or allowing for another musician's phrasing to dictate the flow or rhythmic emphasis in a given performance (the third movement, in which Hawaiian slack key guitarists become involved with powerful music industry interests). (278)

Fellezs differs from Galloway and Lomanno in viewing improvisation simply as a method for the marginalized to resist oppression and as a means of healing individuals and communities after centuries of colonial domination. Rather, he echoes Iyer, admitting that "on the one hand, musical improvisation can be seen as the acts of agentive subalterns in negotiating, even challenging, hegemonic standards of musical evaluation and aesthetics. […] On the other hand, improvisational skill does not *necessarily* mitigate the downsides of participation with, in the case of Hawai'i, the settler-colonialists' desire to incorporate subaltern communities into their social order […] Improvisation as a methodology and a technology manages to cut both ways" (279, italics original). The three essays on the legacy of colonialism all aptly demonstrate the long aftermaths left behind by centuries of physical violence and nefarious reshapings of Indigenous identities, as well as the ways in which music is used in each of these locales as a way for Indigenous peoples to incorporate past identities into changing presents in order to (co-)create alternative futures.

This broad improvisatory potential holds for more recent violence as well. Stephanie Vos's chapter is a *tour de force* using a film, *The Exhibition of Vandalizim* (2010), as the starting point; and through elegant argument, she theorizes improvisation through ritual, community, and politics to arrive at the conclusion that musical improvisation reflects non-musical improvisation and

the negation of basic recognition of humanity that often necessitates it. The film by Aryan Kaganoff follows Zim Ngqawana and Kyle Shepherd as they improvise on broken instruments and found objects while they make their way through the Zimology Institute, freshly vandalized by scrap metal thieves. Invoking Frederic Rzewski's (1999) notion that improvisation starts with an original "error" to which improvisation responds through "recovery," which in turn becomes the next "error," Vos generates a teleology, per her case study of the Zimology Institute near Johannesburg, that poverty begat desperation begat theft and vandalism begat musical improvisation, etc. However, she invokes another, contradictory construal: improvisation as a healing ritual, in which "the past is invoked to heal the present" (40) (in Rzewski's exegesis, by contrast, the present is invoked to remedy the past). Perhaps it is exactly improvisation's capacity to do both of these things—using the past to heal the present *and* using the present to heal the past—that makes it a valuable practice for dealing with the aftermaths in which both present crises and past calamities have to be processed simultaneously.

Drawing on the practices of ṭarab aesthetics, Darci Sprengel theorizes what she calls an "affective politics" that promotes solidarity through egalitarian encounters with the other. Ṭarab musical culture provides a model for such a politics in that it is driven by "the unique affective interaction between performer and audience in each specific time and place" (163). Sprengel provides a technological, political, and economic history of listening practices in Egypt, highlighting changes, particularly in composer-performer-listener relations, over the past century in order to demonstrate why the improvisations of the Mini Mobile Concerts collective in the aftermath of the 2011 revolution are so innovative. They had to improvise concert logistics in order to avoid both violent state-sanctioned opposition to the use of public spaces for art-making activity (or any other gathering, for that matter) and intra-community neighbor-policing. The collective's approach to musicking is based on the improvisatory interaction between musician and audience member(s) "that ideally resulted in affective transformation" (161). Sprengel's conclusion that "it is not the presence of music that 'reduces wars' but the presence of certain types of *listeners*" is particularly inspiring and makes it clear how musical improvisation has a place not only in the aftermaths of violent conflict, but also before, in that it forces each improvising participant to *hear* the other (181, italics original).

The free improvisation scene in Beirut showcases such an instance of communal listening patterns, as Rana El Kadi's chapter shows. El Kadi provides a fascinating history of musical practices in Lebanon, showing how they have

been influenced by the various political regimes that oversaw (and brutalized) the region from the fifteenth century to the 2010s. The essay focuses on the aftermath of the civil war (1975-1991) and the integration of West and East Beirut, characterized by opposing Muslim and Christian religious and cultural identities, through free improvised music. She argues that Lebanese musicians "use free improvisation to engage with cultural and religious differences, negotiate the lingering violence and uncertainty, engage with collective memory of civil war, and communicate critical alternatives for national politics and intersectarian social relations" (130). By using sonic found objects like audio and video samples from civil-war-era television and radio media, musicians aim to bring free improvisation to a broad audience. However, such improvisations also produce personal benefits to the musicians: El Kadi describes an improvisation by trumpeter Mazen Kerbaj, "duetting" with explosions during Israeli air raids in 2006, and argues that the performance "allowed Kerbaj to psychologically face—and sonically grapple with—some of this childhood demons," and continues that "this demonstrates the role of improvisation in addressing war trauma on the individual level" (145). The tension between community, ensemble-level, and individual experience, however, remains unresolved; El Kadi cautions that, even though free improvisation may involve powerful individual expressions, collective expressions are not always so well-integrated.

In his essay preceding two interviews, Daniel Fischlin reflects on his time in Israel/Palestine, the need for healing, and how improvisation, as a dialogic practice, is a key factor in that process of healing. He recounts his time spent with Al-Mada, a music therapy NGO, and the impact of cocreative, improvisatory musicking that Al-Mada uses to improve the psychological and social conditions of hundreds of destitute Palestinians. He constructs a powerful narrative, interspersed with fragments of interviews, passages from UN reports, and photos of pictures and messages painted on street and state walls. Fischlin's interviewees, Odeh Turjman and Reem Abdul Hadi, talk about the challenges they faced in creating and managing the Al-Mada and outline specific examples —often quite upsetting to read—of Palestinians' trauma, noting how they have been helped by improvisatory music therapy. While Fischlin's understanding of improvisation sometimes comes off as idealistic, he does demonstrate its transformative capabilities:

> The improvised music I hear in Palestine in humble cinder-block buildings has no commodity value, no obvious commercial value—no presence, except for its fleeting appearing in passing encounters. […] such music is fragile and evanescent, but somehow aloft, powerful and resonant in unexpected ways. It expresses a grounded humanity that lies

> at the core of what it means to be in contingent relation to others, respectful of the cocreative impulses at the heart of improvisatory practices can be in the fact of violent, dysfunctional realities. (210)

This chapter presents the most real, harrowing illustration of how musical improvisation is actively deployed as a strategy that truly improves the conditions—mental health, personal identities, and community identity—of those most affected by multiple aftermaths that are constantly reinvigorated by new waves of violent crisis.

The other side of the West Bank barrier is not without internal strife, albeit far less violent than the trans-wall conflict. Moshe Morad describes the tension between the musical preferences, particularly in popular music, of the Ashkenazi Jews (of European descent) and Sephardic Jews (of Arabic descent) in Israel. He focuses on the use of silsulim, a technique characterized by improvised microtonal and durational ornamentation, or "curls." In addition to social and ethnic disparaging of mesulselet ("curled") music, its improvisatory aspects have been a point of othering by the dominant Ashkenazi group; Morad maintains that the "different approach toward improvisation in the Eastern musical world (as being a continuum of composition) versus the Western musical world (as being the opposite of composition), and the traditional high regard for creative improvisation in the East, as opposed to the traditional dismissal of improvisation as 'primitive,' 'untutored,' and 'impulsive,' is mirrored in the mesulselet/Mizraḥi (Eastern) versus non-mesulselet/Ashkenazi (Western) aesthetico-political conflict in Israeli music" (255). Unsurprisingly, this conflict also spills beyond the borders of Israel. While mesulselet was popular in Palestine between the two Intifadas, the music soon came to fall into the liminal space in which is viewed as "the music of the enemy" both by Palestinians, for being too Israeli, and by the dominant Ashkenazi population, for being too Arabic. Yet Morad muses that, perhaps, this music, with its Arabic *and* Jewish components, might serve as a bridge that enhances cultural understanding between the warring sides.

In a rare gambit for improvisation studies, Sara Ramshaw & Paul Stapleton promote the act of strategically *not* listening in certain contexts, such as post-Good-Friday Northern Ireland. They argue that "attentive (non)listening, as an ethical practice that endeavors to both listen and *not* listen to the voices and sounds of the 'other,' may actually be a productive skill to nurture and encourage in a society enduringly beset by division and conflict" (301, italics original). They give a short overview of the improvised music scene in Belfast, noting that it is largely incoherent, but that such a lack of congelation provides the opportunity

for musicians and audiences to listen *for* difference—or not to listen for it—in a society that has been divided by difference. While the theorization of attentive (non)listening is an interesting feature, the application of the concept to either musical or nonmusical improvisation seems, at times, a little thinly drawn out. However, this might only be because this chapter is the last in a collection of very thoroughly theorized and well-argued essays.

It should be noted that some of the chapters in this book make for heavy emotional reading. Extreme examples haunted me for weeks after I put down the book: Fischlin's chapter details the violent traumas of children whose only existence has been in a war zone and Sprengel's notes heinous practices of public sexual violence. An admission of the horrors to come—or better, a trigger warning—in the introduction would better prepare the reader.

This nicety aside, *Improvisation in the Aftermath* is a beacon of hope in times of crisis and will continue to be a reference point as the aftermaths of current crises persist in the years to come. The authors all outline ways in which improvisatory musics—and, more fundamentally, improvisation itself—can help those who suffer through and navigate crises and, afterward, salve the psychological wounds of the survivors. I heartily recommend this remarkable book not only to those interested in improvisatory musical traditions from around the world, but also to anyone who seeks to imagine an alternate way of approaching and dealing with difference, conflict, and the aftermaths of violence. I certainly look forward to seeing further real-world applications of the concepts of listening, dialoguing, and cocreating discussed in this book. Indeed, this volume provides a compelling framework for reshaping violent pasts and volatile presents into better futures through individual and community improvisation.

References

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