“WITH NO OUTCOME IN MIND”:
IMPROVISATION AND IMPROVISATIONAL
POETICS IN
20TH CENTURY NORTH AMERICAN POETRY

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ABSTRACT

Using an interdisciplinary methodology drawn from musicology, poetics, cultural theory and the branch of musical improvisation known as "free improvisation," this dissertation defines and categorizes improvisation and improvisational practices in 20th Century North American poetry and poetics. Beginning with the contention that improvisation is an under-articulated concept in the field of Contemporary Poetics, the dissertation proceeds to categorically define the most iconic and successful improvisational strategies in North American poetry. Under the rubric of "idiomatic poetic improvisation," I examine the improvisational strategies in the work of Jack Kerouac, Kenneth Rexroth, Kenneth Patchen, Amiri Baraka and Nathaniel Mackey. Under "non-idiomatic improvisation," I discuss the following writers: David Antin, Lyn Hejinian, Steve Benson, William Carlos Williams and Andrew Levy. Steve McCaffery, Jackson Mac Low and the Four Horsemen's approach to performed poetic improvisation also falls under this second category. I also discuss scoring strategies used by performing poetic improvisers.
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CHAPTER 1: THE FIELD OF WRITER IMPROVISERS

This dissertation examines conceptualizations of improvisation in 20th Century North American poetry and poetics. The writers in the field of "poetic improvisers" use improvisation as a generative poetic device. For these writers, even though their work covers a wide range of practices, poetic improvisation occurs in two major scenarios, which are 1) page-based improvisation and 2) performed improvisation. "Performed improvisation," in which the writer performs an improvisation in front of an audience, is the most common scenario for improvisation in general since improvisation is fundamentally linked to real time. Especially in the case of practices that emphasize improvisation as the purpose of the practice, for example, jazz music, improvisation is simultaneously the purpose of the activity and the means through which the activity exists. In poetic improvisation, performed improvisation encompasses a range of improvisational strategies for generating poetic language in real time. Conversely, the "page-based improvisation" scenario refers to improvisation that manifests itself in and through printed texts, such as the poem. Printed poems have less dependence on improvisation because print is, by its nature, static and arrests the time of writing (but not the time of reading) in solid form. In calling printed texts static I refer only to the print medium itself rather than to any reading or interpretive practices associated with texts. For example, a copy of Lyn Hejinian's My Life, in itself, is a static object, yet the reading of My Life invokes a productive reader
who makes meaning. However, in examining poetic improvisation through these two scenarios, the primary concern that appears is the question of time. The question of how performing poets such as Steve McCaffery, the Four Horsemen, David Antin and Steve Benson use improvisation is relatively clear in that performed poetic improvisation inhabits real time because performed improvisational poetry, as I define it, unfolds in real time in front of the audience. However, a major concern of performed improvisational poetry is in relation to how the improvisers conceive of poetry and poetic language as material for improvisation. Out of this arises the question of how do performers apply a poetics of improvisation to their work?

Within both of the scenarios I outline, improvisation is fundamentally linked to real time; however, the question of how improvisation manifests itself on the page in the case of the printed poem is inherently more difficult. For example, how do writers such as Gertrude Stein, William Carlos Williams, Jack Kerouac, Amiri Baraka, Andrew Levy and Lyn Hejinian understand improvisational time with regards to print?

At the base of the aesthetic improvisational practices I discuss in my dissertation is the fact that improvisation is a common everyday process inherent to having a telephone conversation or making a meal out of whatever one finds left over in the refrigerator. There is nothing particularly special about improvisation in itself in that human beings rely on improvisation to conduct their daily lives. This differs from an act of improvisation, which enables the area of aesthetic improvisation or the use of improvisation to create art such as jazz or
dance. As fundamental to human existence, improvisation is not in itself unique or special, but, rather, what is being improvised requires consideration more than the act of improvisation itself. In “A Topography of Improvisation,” Philip Alperson points out that “improvisation is essential to our ability to learn to walk, to acquire language, to express oneself in a bodily gesture, to develop skills of attention and appreciation, to build social skills, and to elaborate our understanding of our own selves” (273). Investigating the question of what is being improvised leads to a material practice of improvisation that takes into account the nature of improvisation with regards to how it handles its materials.

My discussion and development of the field of poetic improvisation and my methods for detecting and theorizing improvisation’s relationship to the written and performed word, are informed by poetics and literary theory and by musicology, the musical areas of free jazz, free improvisation, jazz, and the writing of musicians working in those areas, and cultural theory, including the work of Alain Badiou and Henri Léfèbvre. The particular writers I discuss exemplify what I view as the most iconic, definitive and successful uses of improvisational poetic strategies. Gertrude Stein, for example, in “Composition as Explanation,” creates a foundational concept for writerly improvisation with her notion of the continuous present, the constant "beginning happening" or "beginning again and again" that occurs in the immediacy of the present moment of writing. Stein's text *Tender Buttons* inscribes improvisational time into the text via repetition, but also represents improvisation figuratively by gathering the mundane objects of the everyday into the text and using the mundane as the
building blocks for her disjunctive syntax which attempts to demonstrate the workings and operations of syntax itself. William Carlos Williams’s *Kora in Hell: Improvisations* is similar to *Tender Buttons* in its attention to the everyday as content and its use of prose as a central means of inscribing improvisatory time into the printed poem, but its subject matter expands beyond objects of language and objects in the world to perceptual events taking place during the real time of the composition of the poem, before the poem becomes print. From the Beat poets, I concentrate on Jack Kerouac and Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones. Even though within the Beat writers there are many improvisers including Jack Kerouac, Clark Coolidge, Allen Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Kenneth Rexroth. Kerouac, however, best exemplifies the improvisational poetics best known amongst the Beat writers. His particular engagement with improvisation is complex in that he uses improvisation in both the performative and the symbolic mode towards moving his writing closer to the condition of jazz music's impulsive spontaneity. But also, improvisation, specifically jazz improvisation, links Kerouac to African-American culture metonymically via the figure of the black "Beat" American as a model for Kerouac's own marginality. Amiri Baraka is important for how he uses poetry to negotiate between cultures; Baraka sees his poetics as an extension of both black and white culture because of his position as an African-American individual and because of the influence writers such as Pound, Zukofsky and Duncan have had on his writing. Kerouac and Baraka also make interesting foils for each other in that both engage with cultural practices from both white and black American culture, but I make the case that Kerouac's
engagement with black culture is largely appropriative whereas Baraka's engagement with white culture both critiques and revises white culture while participating in it through the genre of poetry. Brion Gysin is another Beat writer important to my discussion; his permutation poems, contained in his book *Brion Gysin Let the Mice In*, read as exhaustive catalogues of all combinatorial possibilities within a finite set of words from which the performing improviser could draw upon as improvisatory material. I am also drawn to Gysin for his collaboration with American saxophonist Steve Lacy. Lacy, an exponent of the American jazz tradition, uses his favourite American poets as compositional material in the traditional musical sense, which is to say that he "sets" poetry to music, effectively shifting poetry into the framework of song lyrics. Lacy also transmutes poetic structures and forms in-and-of themselves into strategies for improvisation and composition. Among the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, David Antin and Steve Benson engage with improvisation as a performance practice; David Antin's talk poems and Steve Benson's improvisations with a tape recorder involve a speech-based approach to improvisational performance. Their approach, being speech-based, generally does not deviate from the rhetorical communicative function of language; Antin's talk poems, for example, largely manifest themselves as impromptu lectures on subjects in which he is expertly versed. Speech, then, functions *qua* speech, but emphasizes improvisational techniques of organizing such talk poems in real time. Connecting L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writing—which Antin and Benson represent—with speech seems a haphazard move since L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writing tends to be read
through Robert Grenier's proclamation "I HATE SPEECH." This particular contention comes from what Jeff Derksen describes as the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets response to the American "crisis in meaning" that manifested itself in government representations of the events of the Vietnam War to the American public. L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E's response is to draw on the traditions of American modernism and Russian Formalism, among others, to create a linguistically dense and "difficult" poetry that resists easy "communicative" readings. I call Antin and Benson's work in poetic improvisation speech-based due to the fact that their basic linguistic improvisational material consists of words and phrases one would find in conventional verbal communication as opposed to the work of sound poets such as Steve McCaffery and the poetry performance ensemble The Four Horsemen, who improvise using a wide range of vocal sounds including pops, buzzes, singing, fricatives and screams to move vocal improvisation out of the symbolic realm into the real time realm of the libidinal. Jackson Mac Low, as well as being an improvising performer, is interesting for his combination of conventional musical scoring techniques with strategies for improvisatory performance. Similar to the jazz "head chart," or musical notation of the chords and melody of a tune, Mac Low's compositions are not so much compositions as repositories for improvisational strategies for live performance. The same can be said for the scoring techniques of McCaffery and the Horsemen, who rely almost exclusively on a visual scoring system that attempts to graph sound qualities and types onto the page through non-standard visual symbols. Improvisation in this case manifests itself as an act of performance,
intercepted by the audience and the act of reading on the part of the performer, whose act of reading the score is essentially a real time interpretation of the sounds the score suggests.

Improvisation: Where does the time go? Improvisation and the Continuum of Poetry

Smith and Dean point out that most definitions of improvisation:

. . . stress [improvisation’s] exploitation of the present moment and the concomitant excitement and fluidity this generates. Improvisers rarely commence with a detailed awareness of what will happen . . . the improviser engages with process and change rather than permanence . . . Improvisation is concerned with process rather than products; it is social rather than solipsistic. (25)

Improvisation occurs in the present moment, or in real time and is temporal in that the improvisational moment must end when the time to improvise is over, whatever or whomever may determine this endpoint. Verbal conversations, for example, take place in a finite moment in time and involve responding to questions and making statements on the fly. In this scenario, the improvisation ends when the conversation ends, an ending determined by any number of factors, which may include boredom, the exhaustion of a conversation topic, or the arrival of a bus which one conversant must board, therefore concluding conversation. In jazz, improvisation is framed by the tradition of playing solos that take place between the opening and closing statement of the theme or “tune;” the improviser bases his/her improvisation on the harmonic chord structure of the tune and makes real time decisions about what notes to play according to the harmonic structure. The result is that although the
improvisation maintains references to the pre-established harmonic structure, the details of what to play change from improvisation to improvisation. When the player feels satisfied a musical point has been made, he/she concludes the improvisation and either passes the soloist baton to another musician in the group or will reiterate the melody towards arriving at the ending of the tune. Improvisation takes place in real time, meaning that as the particular process using improvisation ends, the improvisation itself disappears into the continuum of improvisational time.

Improvisation has a much different function in print-based media than in music, having a phone conversation, driving a car, the Four Horsemen’s sound poetry, or any real time improvisation. In writing that proposes to be improvised, such as William Carlos Wiliams’s Kora in Hell: Improvisations, the moment of improvisation disappears, leaving the reader with the result of an improvisation: the printed poem. The printed poem is also not a "recording" of a moment of writing in that recordings are always of an improvisation. A recording itself—a medium of distribution married to a particular format, such as a cassette—is not improvised. Further, an improvised solo can take place in both the presence or absence of a recording device. The recording device itself has nothing to do with the instrument and the musician powering the instrument but merely reproduces the sound produced during a finite moment in the past. Print-based poetry, on the other hand, cannot exist without writing; writing both produces and reproduces itself in a visual medium. Improvisation in the print-based poem creates tension between media: the static medium of print and the dynamic
medium of performance.\(^1\) By "static," I mean the material contains no dynamic energy in and of itself. The 14 lines of Shakespeare’s sonnet 114, for example, remain unchangingly on the page from one reading to the next. I am here attempting to point to the brute material fact of print as a set of marks inscribed with ink on a piece of paper or other flat, two-dimensional material. This is not to say, however, that a poem does not change ideologically for either the reader or the writer, but rather I am pointing to print as the material interface between reader and writer, as compared to, for example, the medium of musical sound. A printed poem requires dynamic readerly energy and engagement in order for it to move off the page into the consciousness of the reader; improvisation in this situation is applied to the act of reading, but on the part of the writing, the energy that created the poem does not exist in print. For improvised poetry, then, we must look into the continuum of poetry and the process of writing that occurs before the poem becomes finalized in print and examine the poem with an improvisational poetics in mind, i.e. we read the poem keeping in mind that something has been improvised, imagining that moment to exist even though it has passed in normal time.

A “continuum” of poetry theoretically would exist outside of ordinary time in the past. Jason Barker describes "ordinary time" as a "socially-inscribed homogeneous time" ordered by the clock and the calendar (75). Ordinary time is  

\(^1\) My sense of the word “performance” and “performativity” is informed by J.L. Austin, but in the case of this dissertation, "performance" also refers to a literal performance of an improviser in front of an audience. All senses of the word, however, emphasize a kind of real time activity. In the Austinian sense, which I discuss in more detail later on in this chapter, the performative utterance is a proposition that also constitutes the object the utterance infers. An example of such an utterance is the phrase “I do” uttered by the bride or groom at a wedding. Austin elucidates this concept in his book *How to Do Things with Words*.
"imperative, since it enables a society to date key events and co-ordinate its public life collectively." "However," writes Barker:

. . . such a concept of time is phenomenologically inauthentic since it presents time as a sequence of successive moments or ‘nows’ . . . Instead, time occurs in the fleeting disquietude which makes us wonder how a particular event can be accounted for. . . . All of us will have experienced situations which appear to exceed the bounds of ordinary time, moments when a minute lasts a lifetime, or when a week seems to fly by in no time. (75-76).

I conceive temporality at work in the act of writing as "continuum;" a continuum of poetry interprets time as having several time pockets branching off from linear clock time. Conceptualizing time in this way maintains the link between the basic criteria for detecting improvisation, that is, recognizing improvisation as an act taking place in real time at points along the continuum of poetry, as opposed to a figurative or tropological use of improvisation as a model or concept for writing, which encodes improvisation into a text representationally rather than actually.

**I'll just make it up as I go along: Improvisation, Spontaneity, Mythology, Tropology**

In the area of poetics, improvisation is surprisingly under-articulated. Improvisation is well articulated and researched in the academic literature of several non-literary areas, including medicine, dance, drama and business management, but tends to exist in poetics as a mysterious phenomenon. Frequently, the meaning of improvisation is used uncritically and the term is deployed to suggest any number of "spontaneous" events of writing. In the medical journal *Pediatric Anesthesia*, for example, Dr. Ashima Sharma's article
"Maxillary tumor in child: Improvisation of Airway Assist Device to Aid Intubation," discusses the possibility of having to improvise an intubation device in the operating theatre for infants with a large maxillary tumor that would prevent the surgeons from using the commercially-available intubation devices. Sharma writes:

Dealing [with the] airway in an infant is more challenging than an older child because of a relatively large tongue to mandible ratio and a more cephalad-placed laryngeal inlet. Although airway equipment has radically improved over the last several years, it is still at times necessary to improvise before using them for infants. In this article, we discuss the management strategy of an infant with a big maxillary tumor and potentially difficult airway. The emphasis is on the utilization of available tools in the theater for the purpose of designing a bougie of adequate size. Because of a proper preoperative preparation we were able to avoid surgical tracheotomy in the child. (1124)

In another example, David Mendonca and William Al Wallace, cognitive psychologists, have developed a detailed description of the cognitive processes inherent to improvisation towards preparing organizations in unplanned and unprecedented emergencies. Their article, A Cognitive Model for Contingency Management, states:

An enduring characteristic of emergencies is the need for near-simultaneous development and deployment of new management procedures. This need can arise with the onset of highly novel problems and the need to act quickly—factors that reduce opportunities for extensive planning in managing the emergency. As a result, decision makers in emergencies must be prepared to improvise. By understanding the cognitive processes in improvisation, organizations can better learn how to plan for, manage and learn from improvised action. (547)

In the article “Not Just Funny Business: Improvisation," business journalist Jennifer J. Salopek discusses business consultant Alain Rostain’s approach to
using improvisation in manifold business situations, ranging from brainstorming to engaging with and selling products to clients, to training around corporate values and ethics. Salopek quotes Rostain as saying, “Improv in business is exploding. It is a powerful tool that had to overcome the idea that it’s some kind of metaphor, or that it’s frivolous. Improvisation is about real people doing stuff in the moment” (1). Salopek also discusses business professor Mary Crossan’s notion of business improvisation; Crossan states that “[Improvisation] is more than just a role play; it’s a real play, made up on the fly. . . . The learning takes places best when people are willing to take risks and make mistakes” (2).

All three examples focus on the role of spontaneity, which, in my view, is the least understood aspect of improvisation. Tropological metaphors conceive of spontaneity as something done "on the spur of the moment" and without planning, also naming it as the creation of something out of a zero degree of nothing. By looking at the idea of improvisational spontaneity through five different perspectives, I will point out the nature of improvisational spontaneity with regards to improvisation.

**Spontaneity and Improvisation**

The following quotation from Charlie Trotter, chef and founder, Charlie Trotter’s Restaurant, Chicago, makes a link between two activities that depend highly on improvisation: cooking at a high-end restaurant and playing jazz music:

A jazz musician can improvise based on his knowledge of music. He understands how things go together. For a chef, once you have that basis, that's when cuisine is truly exciting.
Along with identifying the improvisational aspect to cooking, Trotter also points out that improvisation requires knowledge and an understanding of “how things go together.” In the Trotter quotation, spontaneity comprises the ability to use one’s knowledge on the fly in an act of creation, suggesting that improvisation is a fluent manipulation of the nuances of a specific skill. Both cooking and jazz improvisation are acts in the sense that they deliberately employ improvisation to achieve particular ends, which are, respectively, soloing over a set of chord changes and creating a gourmet meal. But there are other kinds of improvisation as well. The term describes the process inherent to activities such as conversing with a stranger, playing a sport, driving a car, or speaking on the phone at work. Improvisation, as a basic component of human functionality, operates in many situations. In the following passage, Crossan and Sorenti make the link between improvisational processes and the business office:

Whether you are responding to a phone call, a knock at the door, or a chance meeting in the hall, spontaneous activities permeate your day. In his study of CEOs, Mintzberg (1973, p. 36) observed that over 90 percent of [employees’] verbal contacts were *ad hoc*. The sheer number of spontaneous actions within organizations would seem to imply that improvisation is a well-studied topic in management literature. However, improvisation has received minimal attention from management theorists and practitioners. In part, this is due to the assumption that there is no skill or quality to improvisation, or at least none that can be taught . . . We assert that there is a skill to improvisation and that the quality of improvisational action varies. (Crossan and Sorenti 1)

Crossan and Sorenti make two important points about improvisation: that it is a common process inherent to everyday life and that it tends to be understudied and misunderstood within their academic field of business theory. That is, improvisation is understood tropologically without clear linkages between
improvisation and the context in which it occurs. In general, the term tends to be represented, especially around notions of spontaneity, as an elusive and mysterious, if not a mystical, process. Rather, they point out, improvisation, manifested through verbal communication through a business-oriented discourse, i.e. the business situation, is a skill and is therefore not amorphous or mysterious.

British guitarist Derek Bailey also sees improvisation as elusive, both in terms of how people understand it and how it is practised in musical improvisation:

Improvisation enjoys the curious distinction of being both the most widely practised of all musical activities and the least acknowledged and understood. While it is today present in almost every area of music, there is an almost total absence of information about it. Perhaps this is inevitable, even appropriate. Improvisation is always changing and adjusting, never fixed, too elusive for analysis and precise description; essentially non-academic. (Bailey, *Improvisation* IX)

Poet Nathaniel Mackey's description of improvisation resembles Bailey's in that it also emphasizes improvisation's apparent elusiveness:

[Improvisation] . . . is an impossible subject to define; . . . I had a thing written down in my notebook once which says: possible definitions of improvisation are imprecise—god knows—because space must be left; you will discover in the field but not remain attached to it; believing is as important as the opening, no one lives there. ("Panel on Poetry and Jazz" 56:15 )

And finally, American saxophonist Steve Lacy's articulation of improvisation also surprisingly leaves improvisation up to the mystery of musical energies:

I can put one little thing in about improvisation, because it's a vastly misunderstood subject, I think. . . . it's much simpler than one makes out. I prefer the word playing. It's too long a word,
improvisation: there’s no time. In improvisation, there’s no time: it’s gone already! What you do is gone. The important thing is to be there and be doing and then, that’s it, you know? But you can plan, but when the actual time goes down, you just play! . . . we play with elements, given elements and we play with them freely, like a child plays with a set of blocks! It’s no different, really, except that we know what we’re doing, that’s all. ("Panel on Poetry and Jazz" 32:19)

All three passages express an anxiety around defining improvisation, as if the definition itself threatens to interfere with improvisational spontaneity. Such descriptions, in my view, exchange an objective and quantitative description of process for the qualitative, mystical point of view because the term "improvisation" is appended to "creativity." Improvisation, in the mystical sense, is linked to a distinct feeling of generating music that we can associate with a feeling of being creative or the release of creative energies, so to speak. These poets and musicians also default to the mystical in order to describe the concentrated, focused psychological state of the improviser in action. But from a position of a poetics of improvisation, improvisation is material rather than mystical.

Despite definitions of improvisation as imprecise, spontaneous, elusive, or transgressive, it is possible to describe improvisation in objective terms, especially with regards to its literal application in the case of the jazz musician and the performing, improvising poet. But although Bailey, Mackey and Lacy do not position improvisation in a material sense, they elaborate a discursive position about the nature of improvisation in their work. Derek Bailey, for example, is a British guitarist who participates in a branch of music known as “free improvisation” or “improvised music” that focuses on improvisation as a
primary musical activity and avoids using pre-determined and/or written musical structures. Bailey calls this approach to improvisation “non-idiomatic” to emphasize the fact that improvisation is an end in-and-of-itself, as opposed to idiomatic forms of improvisation, such as jazz, which replicates a particular approach to playing harmony and uses pre-determined formal apparatuses to contain and define how improvisation is to take place. Bailey states:

Idiomatic improvisation, much the most widely used, is mainly concerned with the expression of an idiom—such as jazz, flamenco, or baroque—and takes its identity and motivation from that idiom. Non-idiomatic improvisation has other concerns and is most usually found in so-called ‘free’ improvisation and, while it can be highly stylized, it is not usually tied to representing an idiomatic identity.” (Bailey xii)

For Bailey, the fact that improvisation is “non-academic” is important to his particular politics of dehierarchizing musical practice on two fronts, the first being the relationship between music and tradition (traditionally, in Western countries, students study music based on a classicist European approach) and the second front being the social organization of a group of improvisers performing together. Traditionally, jazz music contains the following hierarchical relationships (which free improvisation tries to avoid): musicians in a jazz group front particular roles; the bass and drums are the accompaniment to the solo players, who usually play horns such as the saxophone or trumpet. Bailey’s conception of free improvisation removes aspects of role-playing from within an assembly of musicians and suggests that all musicians are there to play music together as

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2 Free Improvisation is a deceptively simple term for the kind of music it describes. In actuality, Bailey’s description of this music as “non-idiomatic” is incorrect because despite its deceptively open title, free improvisation
equal partners in the real time emergence of an improvised piece. The physical properties of musical instruments lend themselves to particular roles. The double bass, for example, occupies the role of rhythm instrument because its low pitch complements the higher pitch of horns and other string instruments. Playing the strings without the bow frees the fingers to pluck the strings, which creates a rhythmic percussive sound coupled with a particular pitch. The bass generally occupies a central place in the jazz rhythm section in that it is able to articulate both harmony and rhythm. In the free improvisation scenario, however, players conceive of themselves as acting as equals, outside of the roles traditionally assigned to a particular instrument; the bassist no longer works in an accompanying role. Improvisation also overthrows the hierarchy of the pre-determined organization of a performance induced by compositional music. The free improviser is free to determine individually what to play as long as the player's musical choices fit into and support (rather than dominate) what the other musicians play during the course of a performance. This relationship between the performers shifts the conventional hierarchy of composer-performer operating in European classicism to a collectivity of individual performers, who are both composer and performer in the moment of improvisation.

**Improvisation in the West: Musical and Poetic Parallel**

Improvisation in Western music, with the exception of jazz music, blues, church organ music and the occasional improvised solo by the lead guitarist in a rock band, has largely disappeared. Improvisational music tends to be viewed by
the person oriented to Western music as a special and rarefied musical scenario. Smith and Dean point out that the lack of improvisation in Western music is peculiar to European culture; most music from the planet in general, including African, Indian, Japanese and Indonesian music, is fundamentally improvisatory. For the West, however, "the appearance of improvisation has oscillated"

In the medieval period it was common in the performances of the Troubadours. Then, in the period of Classical composition, composers such as J.S. Bach, Mozart and Beethoven were accomplished keyboard improvisers . . . But, [by 1927], church organ improvising was almost the only continuing improvisatory form in Western music and it was not until the strong development of jazz and particularly the arrival of Bebop around 1945, that Western art music began again to take advantage of the possibilities of pure improvisation. (55-56)

It is often the case that students of music in a formal university setting studying classical approaches to instrumentalist musicianship view improvisation as lazy; they see improvising as a last resort for players who lack the discipline or talent for learning the rigours of classical training playing musically and stylistically complex compositions. George Lewis, American improvising trombonist and musicologist, points out that contention about the nature of improvisation as a legitimate musical practice creates competition between improvisers and composers:

. . . texts documenting the musical products of the American version of the move to incorporate real time music-making into composition often present this activity as part of 'American music since 1945,' a construct almost invariably theorized as emanating almost exclusively from a generally venerated stream of European cultural, social and intellectual history—the 'Western tradition.' In such texts, an attempted erasure or denial of the impact of African-American forms on the real time work of European and Euro-American composers is commonly asserted. This denial itself,
however, drew the outlines of a space where improvisation as a theoretical construct could clearly be viewed as a site not only for music-theoretical contention but for social and cultural competition between musicians representing improvisative and compositional modes of musical discourse. (216)

Insofar as musical improvisation in and of itself constitutes a transgression of dominant musical practices, it is somewhat ironic that improvisation is seen to be esoteric and undervalued in the light of Smith and Dean's comments above. The return of improvisation to the Western cultural scene via jazz is a matter of recuperating improvisation back into contemporary iterations of musical practice. With regards to poetry, especially printed poetry, however, an overt, declared act of improvisation clashes with the apparent completeness of the published poem at rest on the page. During the time of the act of writing, improvisation is a default component of the compositional process. But with regards to the printed poem, where is the authorial improvisation? How does improvisation already built into the poem at the time of writing re-emerge at the time of reading, in the absence of the original improviser? These questions exemplify the challenge that improvisation brings to print. Another significant issue around the notion of poetic improvisation has to do with time, since improvisation is a time-based activity, where does the time go? In the absence of the original improvisation, how can we say that a poem is improvisational and continues in a state of improvisation, even after publication? And also, improvisation, performed in real time, is obviously being done by someone, yet with the printed poem, the improvising someone, or rather, the improvisation that initially generated the text, is absent at the time of reading.
The reader can engage in a kind of real time readerly improvisation—which I will discuss further later on—in reading the poem, meaning that improvisation itself does not disappear for the printed poem. Real time writerly improvisation, however, has already taken place and has disappeared in time; In other words, where does the time go?

“Real time” is a term used in a variety of discourses to mean “live” or “concurrently.” Real time is fundamentally shared between one or more individuals who occupy the same time continuum together and thus are said to experience time at the same rate. Notions of real time always make the connection between medium and audience. The term makes the link between ordinary clock time experienced by an audience of a medium and the time contained in the medium with regards to the time it takes to observe a pre-recorded program or read a newspaper, and with regards to how ordinary clock time is interpreted narratively within the medium in question. The CBC National News, for example, is broadcast live, meaning that the news reporters are performing at the very same time the program is made available to the audience through the television. The broadcast itself narratively moves through ordinary clock time concurrently with the viewer; the sequences presenting the top international news stories, followed by the national stories, with the sports cast concluding the hard news portion, are timed to fit within the allotted total time for the broadcast. The live news broadcast can thus be said to take place in real time since the time of the performance takes place in front of the audience since the time of performance is concurrent with the time of apprehension by the
audience. The television show *24*, starring Kiefer Sutherland, uses a conceit of real time; each hour of the program takes place over an hour of clock time as experienced by Sutherland’s character Jack Bauer. Even though there are weekly interruptions between each hour—the television show is not broadcast live but is pre-recorded—the audience participates in Jack Bauer’s relative clock time during the program. As a narrative technique, the events taking place within the story of whatever page length or length of broadcast time take place within the span of the narrative and at the same rate of time, as opposed to a story that uses a number of flashbacks, or a story that takes liberties with the span of clock time by speeding up or slowing down time for the sake of revealing key points along the plot.

In computing, there are a number of technical uses for the term real time referring to programming languages, software applications, and game platforms. A “Real Time RPG,” for example, is a role playing game set in a fictional digital world in which players interact live with other players through digital avatars. Thus the events that take place in the game, which are set in motion by living, active players, take place in a shared continuum of events. Live streaming webcasts of events such as the 2011 Vancouver hockey riots, which were broadcast live onto the Canadian Television Company (CTV)’s website during the riot on June 15 2011. Internet chat rooms and the popular telephone software program “Skype” allow users to chat and talk with each other live. Real time is fundamentally shared between one or more individuals who occupy the same time continuum together and thus are said to experience time at the
same rate. In the real time continuum one event follows another from the past to the future, or from the beginning to the end of an event. In real time improvisation, then, both the improviser and the audience share the same event, or rather, the same time continuum. D.H. Mellor, a scholar of the philosophy of time, defines events as “temporally located facts, people, and things” (8). In *Real Time II*, Mellor defines real time events as part of “A-Times,” a classification of time events that take place in the perceived moment of the present. Times in the A-series of classification reflect “…how fast the events located at them succeed each other in the present, and also how long those events are present. . . . Other entities last less long: a wedding might be present for less than an hour. But neither people nor weddings are instantaneous: we can no more locate them at a single moment than we can locate them at a single spatial point” (8).

There is contention, as Mellor points out, with regards to whether or not we can define moments of time as having a beginning or end, especially when they occur during the present. Isolating pockets of real time for is a methodological move made available through the power of hindsight to identify and bracket a sequence of once-lived events as a story or moment. A sound poetry performance, for example, has a clear beginning and end. A printed poem, such as Zukofsky’s *A*, can be consumed over a long period of time being that it exists materially in the static medium of print. The book, however, has a beginning and ending in terms of page counts, and the series of poems within also have beginnings and endings that the reader can ignore; the beginnings and endings of the printed poem do not have any temporal effect on their
consumption. What is important about real time in the situations I present here, however, is that there is an experience of the present-ness of an event despite its length. Mellor states that:

The right way to define the present is this. In 1943, World War II stretched four years into the past and into the future. Yet it was certainly present then, as any combatant would have testified. So its A-time, a six-year A-interval including the present moment, should, despite its length, count as ‘present,’ however long it is, if and only if it includes the present moment. This makes this century as present an A-time as today or this moment. (9)

Following from Mellor, a moment of improvisation, or an improvisation, whether performed live or used as a technique to generate poetic language during the stages of writing before the poem becomes print, is part of Mellor’s A-series classification because it is a pocket of time experienced as a present-ness despite the length of time—minutes or hours—in which the improvisation takes place.

N. Katherine Hayles points out that poetic time—the time of writing—is constituted of several temporal divisions between writing and reading. She begins with an intriguing reference to William Carlos Williams’s famous statement, "A poem is a machine made of words." Hayles views the poem as "a machine that organizes time:"

The time of a poem can be considered to consist of the time of writing, the time of coding, the time of production/performance and the time of reading. While both print and electronic poetry evolve within this general temporal flow, they organize it differently. Consider first the time of writing and the time of coding. With print, writing and coding often coincide and become virtually the same activity from the author’s point of view, particularly when the coding is conceived as a trivial exercise of converting words into the appropriate alphabetic symbols. In days past, when the print writer
banged on his typewriter, he wrote and coded simultaneously as a singular cognitive muscular activity. . . . With electronic poetry, by contrast, writing and coding become distinct and often temporally separated events. (Hayles 46)

Hayles describes distinct "temporal divisions" in the continuum of the poem. For printed poetry, not only is there a temporal division between writing and reading, the writer does not have to be present for a reading of the poem to occur. The reader and writer are not only temporally distant but they are different people performing different acts towards interacting with the printed poem. In performed poetry, on the other hand, coding and performing occur simultaneously along with the simultaneous uptake of the poem by the listening audience; "[a]lthough print readers perform sophisticated cognitive operations when they read a book, the printed lines exist as such before the book is opened, read, or understood" (Hayles 26). In contrast, an improvisational performance scenario by the Four Horsemen, takes place live before an audience. During performance the material of performance manifests itself in real time and does not exist as such before the performance. There may be a rehearsal of a performance using the same material, but the particular events taking place during the rehearsal improvisation are not exactly the same events that take place during the performance; the material remains the same between rehearsal and performance, but the particular manifestation of the material changes. The rehearsal and the performance, then, rather than focusing on using a particular material or strategy, are both events that, as Stephen Nachmanovitch discusses, collapses the time of writing, the time of coding, the time of production/performance and the time of reading into a singularity of time:
In improvisation, there is only one time: this is what computer people call real time. The time of improvisation, the time of technically structuring and realizing the music, the time of playing it and the time of communicating with the audience, as well as ordinary clock time; all are one. Memory and intention (which postulates past and future) and intuition (which indicates the eternal present) are fused. (17-18)

Additionally, the audience’s presence during the improvisation collapses listening time into performance time. In printed poetry that purports to be improvised, however and with improvisation so fused to time, where does the time go? In the absence of the author, who ostensibly is the generator of the improvised poem, is it possible that the poem can still be improvisational? Answering this question requires that we consider the printed poem as part of a *continuum of poetry* that takes account of processual developments during the process of writing beginning with the invention of a poem and extending through to its delivery to the reader in print.

**Improvisation and the Everyday/Improvisation as the Everyday**

Improvisation is a basic component of what Henri Léfèbvre calls “the everyday.” For Léfèbvre, the everyday consists the mundane and typical facts of human existence, the multitude of mostly unconscious daily activities that humans perform, and the “human facts”—the physical marks of human influence on his own environment, including roads, trails, the shape of a field, or telephone poles—which are familiar to humans but are unknown in the human realm of conscious awareness. According to Léfèbvre in *Critique of Everyday Life Volume 1*, even though human facts are always in plain view, humans tend to
ignore human facts because “[o]ur search for the human takes us too far, too ‘deep’” beyond what is already within our sightlines. Human knowledge, says Lefebvre, prefers the “dark world of metaphysics” to the “humblest facts” everyday life contains:

City dwellers getting away from it all, intellectuals at a loose end, we wander through the French countryside simply for something to do, we look but we are unable to see. . . . When the flight of a bird catches are attention, or the mooing of the cow, . . . we think we are being very clever and very concrete. But we are unable to seize the human facts. We fail to see them where they are, namely in humble, familiar everyday objects: the shape of fields, of ploughs.

Improvisation, from the point of view of the everyday, is the unseen human fact behind the everyday acts of improvisation inherent to driving a car, having a conversation, or dodging through a group of teenagers blocking one’s path in the street. Conscious, deliberate acts of improvisation in aesthetic situations, such as playing an improvised solo on the tenor saxophone using free improvisation methodology is, in Lefebvre’s view, is an extension of improvisation as “human raw material” into higher activities of intellectual abstraction and artistic expression. “If in our minds (by a sort of abstraction),” writes Lefebvre, “we remove the highly specialized occupations from man and from the human, what is left? An apparently very scanty residue. In reality this so-called residue contains a ‘human raw material’ which holds hidden wealth . . . . The higher activities derive from it, they are at one and the same time its ultimate expression . . .” (86). Using improvisation to have a telephone conversation, on the other hand, is still an extension of human raw material, but one that uses improvisation unconsciously as a default mode of negotiating the act of talking on the
telephone, which foregrounds communicating to a conversation partner on the other end of the line as the object of its activity. Talking on the telephone is an act of conversation that employs improvisation tacitly during listening and responding to the various utterances and ideas generated by the conversation partner. Such improvisation is not an abstracted, higher activity since talking on the telephone does not present improvisation as its primary object in the way that jazz improvisation foregrounds improvisation as its primary object and method of manipulating musical elements.³

Improvisation in the process of conversation differs from situations in which improvisation is specifically applied to an object, which in the quotation below, is music:

> Of course, everyone “improvises.” Conversation is the most common form. All the mental states that one experiences in conversation are somewhat applicable to musical improvisation. Often, mostly, one just speaks, hears what one has to say and goes on from there, one is not conscious of thinking, one acts. Sometimes, one’s mind will be preparing a reply while listening to someone else’s statement. (Snow 49)

The greatest distinction between making conversation and making music lies in how improvisation is isolated from everyday life processes and applied to the activity of making music. The difference between the two, according to Michael

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³ In other words, what the individual may experience as making a decision, for example, based on individual, personal desire is in fact a responsive to the greater human environment in exactly the same way that free improvisation involves making spontaneous decisions about what to play in a musical situation. Everyday life decisions are affected and determined by social, economic, political and cultural circumstances and are not “neutral” processes. The realm of human facts of everyday life, beyond what I have discussed as the familiar but unknown, are not entirely veiled by human unconsciousness. Lefèbvre explains that the human facts of everyday life also includes political life, which is conscious and known. “Everyday life” he writes, “includes political life: the public consciousness, the consciousness of belonging to a society and a nation, the consciousness of class” (92).
Snow, is that "one just speaks . . . one is not conscious of thinking, one acts" such that speaking is improvisational in itself. All humans improvise in some way since "[l]ogical, irrational and intuitive processes are probably necessary components of the human mind . . . [The interaction of these processes] produces an infinity of possibilities . . . " (Smith and Dean 36). As a component of the human mind in general, improvisation provides a way of operating in multiple kinds of situations, including both aesthetic and practical, everyday situations.

At bottom, improvisation is a mundane process of everyday life, reflective of habitual, repetitive activities that characterize everyday existence. Discussing Léfèbvre’s notion of everyday life, Michael E. Gardiner writes:

Drawing on Nietzsche’s concept of ‘eternal recurrence,’ [Léfèbvre] suggests that everyday life is highly diffuse, inchoate and marked by ‘repetition’—endless, undulating cycles of birth and death, remembrance and recapitulation, ebb and flow. As he observes, ‘cyclical time underlies all quotidian and cosmic duration.’ Given the habitualized and recurrent nature of daily life, it is difficult to conceptualize or describe in theoretical terms, mainly because it is profoundly lived and experienced as ceaseless recurrence. (86-87)

Spontaneity, just like everyday life in Léfèbvre’s articulation of the place of repetition in everyday life, is dependent on cycles, patterns and repetitions and is not actually a pool of infinite choices to be chosen from at the whim of the improviser. When one improvises, one works with finitude in a finite set consisting of multiple ficultudes. The improviser works with not only a finite amount of time, but also a finite amount of improvisational skills and a finite amount of improvisational material. One is further limited by the improvisational media he/she chooses; for example, a saxophone, due to the particular physical
nature of the instrument, offers a different set of limitations than, say, the guitar. Improvising involves the manipulation of pre-existing material, “material” here referring to whatever concerns, combinatorial ideas, words, musical or verbal lines, intentions and the material support for creating improvisation, which may include a musical instrument, or in the case of poetic improvisation, the marks made on paper by pen or other device, the breath, the lungs and the expulsion of vocal sound. In straight ahead⁴ jazz music, for example, players improvise using predetermined harmonic patterns; players begin an improvisation with the “head,” or the tune upon which the harmony is based. The repetition of the head traditionally both begins and ends a piece; between the heads, the players improvise based on chord changes and must play ideas that relate to the chord changes according to the dictates of the harmony and rhythm inscribed by the head chart. A typical head chart appears like my example below, with the chord names written below the notated melody, along with some written instructions regarding the tempo:.

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⁴ “Straight ahead jazz” refers to a modern approach to playing jazz music that emphasizes the “tradition” of jazz music, meaning that players closely follow the tradition of playing the head at the beginning and ending of each piece and their harmonic choices stay strictly within the dictates of the head’s chord progression. Free jazz or “out” jazz, on the other hand, encourages playing outside of the parameters of the tune’s harmony. That straight ahead players stick close to a “tradition” is ironic in that some perspectives on jazz playing suggest that the tradition of jazz is always to break earlier moulds of musicianship. Straight ahead jazz therefore focuses on more material, stylistic aspects of jazz music rather than conceptual or political aspects of jazz music. Straight ahead jazz, especially in Canada and the U.S., is the standard, default “classicist” version of jazz music recirculated through conservative communities of jazz players, the university/college music education programs, and the music played over the speaker system at Starbucks coffee shops.
Within the structural constraints of harmony and melody, players tend to move through the changes by relying on strategies for outlining the harmonies learned through hours of instrumental practice. The players practice to build up a vocabulary for use within jazz's particular discursive space. Jazz musicians in essence repeat themselves continuously, relying on musical clichés, harmonic patterns and "licks." Musicians are limited also by their bodies: they are constrained by their technique and the fact that a player can learn only so many ways to play an instrument. Some musicians' hands are incapable of certain fingerings and patterns depending on the degree to which each finger can operate individually without affecting other fingers. Also, in the case of wind instruments, the jaw and skull are integral in sound production; not all players' jaws are equally flexible or strong. The skull plays an important roll in the tone quality and projection of the instrument, so the player's overall tone is determined partially by the physics of the skull. All of the properties I have named above,
including technique, harmonic patterns, limitations of the musical instrument, the
physicality of the performer and improvisational materials in general, are
"ceaseless recurrences" in Léfèbvre's terms.

Improvisational spontaneity is a combinatorial and responsive act rather
than an act of creation of something out of absolute nothing, an attitude that is
the bias within the trope. This extended passage from Gertrude Stein's
“Composition as Explanation” written in 1926 is an accurate, nontropological
description of improvisational spontaneity as such:

Nothing changes from generation to generation except the thing seen and that makes a composition. Lord Grey remarked that when the generals before the war talked about the way they talked about it as a nineteenth-century war although to be fought with twentieth-century weapons. This is because war is a thing that decides how it is to be done where it is to be done. It is prepared and to that degree it is like all academies it is not a thing made by it being made it is a thing prepared. Writing and painting and all that, is like that, for those who occupy themselves with it and don't make it as it is made. Now the few who make it as it is made, and it is to be remarked that the most decided of them usually are prepared just as the world around them is preparing, do it in this way and so if you do not mind I will tell you how it happens. Naturally one does not know how it happened until it is well over beginning happening. To come back to the part that the only thing that is different is what is seen when it seems to be being seen, in other words, composition and time sense. (21-22)

Stein’s sense of the word *composition* above is synonymous with “improvisation" in terms of her notion of process. Stein points out through the example of war that the object of doing, in this case, “war,” remains the same for anyone choosing to examine it. Similarly, the act of writing or painting remains essentially the same for everyone who writes and paints. What changes, however, is “composition and time sense,” or rather, the act of painting, writing,
or war. That “war is a thing that decides how it is to be done whereas it is to be
done” limits the participants of war to making war, albeit in a different time: the
past versus the present, in this case. In the same way, the doing of writing limits
one to writing, and the doing of improvisation limits one to improvising, if, indeed,
the intention is to improvise rather than to let improvising occur as it does in
every day life activities. Stein also points out that such doing is a process
endemic to human beings' existence and therefore improvisation is present in
both war and composition. The difference between each new improvisational
event is the time in which the event occurs and the intention of the improviser. I
read Stein's phrase “the only thing that is different is what is seen when it seems
to be being seen” as a remark about intention; the object of seeing (or doing)
remains as-is while the seeing of the thing changes. Spontaneity resides within
intention and in the act of making decisions concerning what there is to improvise
and how to improvise it, rather than in some act of manifesting something from
nothing. The doing of everyday life, of improvising, of war, of writing and painting
is spontaneous in intention even though the thing that is being improvised
essentially remains the same. The jazz musician applies his knowledge of chord
changes and harmony spontaneously rather than deciding what notes to play
and how to structure the solo before improvising. Improvisation functions in this
situation as a means of manipulating the rules indicated by the composition
mediated through intention, meaning that spontaneity is no more than an
intentional manipulation of realities, whether they be notes and instruments or
telephones and sales pitches. With regards to music, “realities” include
instrumental technique, musical traditions and the rules concerning the role of the instrument in any given musical situation and harmonic patterns appropriate to the particular genre of music. In everyday life, the situation of the phone conversation and the rules of politeness and phone etiquette in use in a particular setting shadow the moment of conversation.

**The Improvisational Time Axis**

Improvisation requires a dynamic theory to account for its particular materials and objects and techniques. Also, it is important to determine just what is being improvised and to what end in order for improvisation to become an applied aesthetic *act*. In order to account for improvisation's dynamic qualities, I have organized the model below based on the common denominator between all kinds of improvising, time:

![Image of model](image)

This model makes a link between *improvising*, a real time activity that takes place in a finite moment\(^5\) or finite time frame and the *improvised*, the contexts and intentions of the improviser. In the case of improvised poetry whose medium is ultimately print, improvisation occurs along a continuum of composition in which

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\(^5\) As Smith and Dean point out, “Improvisation does not usually take place in set time because no exact time limit is established before the improvisation starts. Some improvisations may take place in event time (those in which a score or set of instructions set out a sequence of events which have to be completed). But, many free improvisations do not, since any sequence of events can occur. Improvisations can take place in symbolic time, . . . but this is not common. Pure improvisation therefore usually occupies a unique type of performance time which we might call “improvisatory time.” It occurs in real time and normally acknowledges the concept of an approximate time frame.”
the improvisational time axis has little to no bearing on the object of improvisational activity, the printed poem. For the printed poem, improvisation is no less integral, but it exists in the past and for the reader, it is available as an overarching concept through which to read the poem. In performance situations that involve audiences, the performer and audience alike experience time and thus improvisation is cast in the foreground as an integral component of textual production. I call the last component of the model “subjective contexts" to indicate that individual writers' particular poetics, unique improvisational methods and choices with regards to improvisational content and techniques, create varying improvisational effects. With regards to poetic improvisation, this model also privileges a concept of improvisation as being or as having been performed by a writer rather than a reader. This model sees improvisation as a referent, something signified within the continuum of the poem but remaining outside the poem-as-object since the act of improvisation, based in time, no longer exists when the poem is written, but it does exist in referential form in the sense that it can be understood and read into the text by the reader as a term of process or a concept governing the form.

Improvisation, in its fundamental sense, is tied exclusively to real time. In this way my model of improvisation resembles what Smith and Dean term “pure improvisation," but differs in that Smith and Dean see pure improvisation as mainly belonging to the aesthetic realm. Their definition expresses a “ground zero" concept of improvisation:

In its purest form, an improvisation involves the simultaneous conception and performance of a work of art. Such an
improvisation is a public performance which takes place without any pre-written score or script. It is in the nature of improvisation that it will always be different from the last improvisation, and that it will not necessarily be saved in a reproducible form. Pure improvisation, therefore, takes place at the intersection of performance and creativity, and there are two consequences of this: 1) it takes place within a defined time frame; 2) it occurs continuously through time, at speed, and does not involve revision. The improviser makes a succession of choices in performance which cannot be erased, so everything (s)he does within the performance must be incorporated into the whole. This involves an attentiveness to the present moment . . . though the choices made by the improviser are inevitably influenced by past experience of improvising. It is because these choices are different with every performance that no two improvisations are the same. (26)

Smith and Dean contrast “pure” improvisation with “applied” improvisation; applied improvisation takes place as a step towards creating a work that will eventually be displayed to audiences as a finished product. Applied improvisation may take place during sculpting or painting, in preparation for a live performance which itself does not use improvisation, or to produce a recorded work. Musicians who produce fully notated scores for performers often also use applied improvisation in developing them" (28). Cultural products using applied improvisation do not themselves focus on improvisation as the primary activity. Pure improvisation that takes place for a recording in the absence of a live audience avoids becoming a case of applied improvisation since a recording is a recording of something that once was live; “the process of the improvisation and its progression through time is still available to the audience, even if the reception of the work is delayed” (28)⁶. A recording of American soprano saxophonist

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⁶ This remark assumes that it is the same audience that experiences the improvisational event over a long period of either continual or interrupted time. Improvisation here is assumed to be part of Mellor’s A-series of time in which the audience experiences the improvisation as part of a present moment.
Steve Lacy improvising is of a secondary order to the improvisation itself since
the recording is created with a technician who has a different intention; Lacy
intends to improvise music on his saxophone in real time, while the person
making a recording is concerned primarily with capturing a musical event. As
Sarah Parry points out, in the case of a recorded improvisation, the recording
itself is a text which differs from the text created in real time by the improviser
due to the fact that it is the recording engineer, rather than the musician, who
ultimately creates the recorded text:

Sound engineering clearly modifies authorial voice-practice in ways
that complicate a close listening to such practice. The speaking [or
playing] subject is not necessarily the person speaking. Similarly,
the listening subject is not necessarily the person listening. The
ears in the machine belong to engineers. It is their listening
processes, rather than our own [i.e. the audience's], that are
reproduced in a sound recording. One way of understanding this is
to approach sound recording as a representation of the
psychological act of listening rather than reproduction of a speech
and sound event. We are cultured to attend to information-bearing
sounds and to ignore non-information bearing sounds. A recording
apparatus records all sounds according to their amplitude and
proximity. . . . In the case of voice documents, the recording
process is manipulated in order to amplify the speaker's voice as a
signifying sound. The engineer also constructs a social and spatial
relationship between speaker and listener as the space of
intersubjectivity. In the process, he or she constructs both a
speaking and a listening subject. (25-26)

A recording of Steve Lacy is neither an instance of applied or pure improvisation;
much as in the case of the printed poem, improvisation itself is no longer present
in the recording. Further, the recording is not improvisational because an
engineer creates the recording, but the engineer is not improvising music
(although it could be argued that the engineer uses improvisation towards
making the recording by responding, in real time, to the performer by adjusting

36
the sound parameters via his recording equipment). The recording delivers a captured Lacy performance to an audience that is distant from the performance in both time and space.

Applied improvisation is an appropriate term to describe the kind of improvisation William Carlos Williams uses in his improvisational writing in that Williams's improvisations occur prior to the poems' final manifestations in print. Yet, as I will discuss in detail in Chapter 2, improvisation for Williams is more than just a tactic for generating the poem *Kora in Hell* because, in the continuum of writing, improvisation took place intentionally, as an act of writing in itself and as such, improvisation is not quite applied, nor is it quite pure. Rather, improvised writing supersedes mere application when the writing is intentionally improvised, but since improvised writing exists only in the continuum of composition, improvised writing is not quite "pure" in Smith and Dean's sense. But also, comparing writing to playing the saxophone: writing *qua* writing takes place on the page, manifesting itself in graphemic marks made by pencil or ink printed on paper or another surface that can display language. The saxophone, on the other hand, generates sound which is bound spatially and temporally to the moment during which the sound is produced. In other words, for improvised print poetry, improvisation is an attempt to somehow fuse the spontaneity and finite temporality of language on the page.

Working together as The Toronto Research group (TRG), Steve McCaffery and bpNichol point out in *Rational Geomancy* that print arrests language in a static, stored, immutable form much in the same way a recording
stores a copy of a performance. McCaffery and Nichol discuss the book as having the same properties as a machine, stating, “[b]y machine we mean the book’s capacity and the method for storing information by arresting, in the relatively immutable form of the printed word, the flow of speech conveying that information. The book’s mechanism is activated when the reader picks it up, opens the covers and starts reading it” (60). In its relationship to the book, the page is a micro-unit of information storage that is activated when a reader reads the page’s content. Writing combines time with the grapheme immediately during the moment of writing. Generally, the page functions as a kind of recording device for poetry wherein the page is intended as a storage medium only, but there are cases, as McCaffery and Nichol point out, where the page ceases to be a neutral surface. They cite poet bill bissett’s poetry as an instance of writing that attempts to transcend the static page, stating that bissett’s writing “makes a radically different demand upon the page than regular linear transcription. The page ceases to be a neutral surface of support and becomes instead a spatially interacting region; it is granted thereby a metaphorical extension. Conceived as a spatially significant unit, the page carries dimensional and gravitational implications” (65). The same is true for Steve McCaffery’s famous visual poem, Carnival, which rejects the page’s restrictions of size and the traditional mode of writing that divides the page into margins that control the physical direction of the writing (from left to right and top to bottom).

Improvised poetry attempts to inscribe improvisation into the writing process as an integral component that must be read along with the graphic
marks on the page; written improvisation moves writing outside of itself and places it into a time-continuum, in much the same way Gertrude Stein uses the noun in her book *Tender Buttons*:

**AN UMBRELLA.**

Colouring high means that the strange reason is in front not more in front behind. Not more in front in peace of the dot. (22)

In the TRG's view, Stein’s “. . . umbrella [is] not visually fixed on the page. When all the words inside her at the moment of composition (of perception) came out they fused perceiver with perceived within the activity of perceiving. The language which described the object also became the object in a psychic space” (*Rational Geomancy* 64). For Stein, “when the words come out,” or rather, as she writes in the moment of composition, the words exist at the centre of an act of perception/composition and as linguistic objects in themselves, words occupy a psychic space as well as a space on the flat plain of the page. McCaffery and Nichol’s description is applicable to all types of writing in their mildly Saussurean description of words; “the language which described the object” is both the signifier and signified of a referent, such as an umbrella or carafe. All reading requires the object of language to occupy the reader's psychic head space so that basic comprehension of the written can take place. But in reading Stein or any other formally radical poet, the reader has the demanding task of assessing the relationship between language and the content it attempts to communicate and the idea of “communication” itself is an issue; Stein’s language is not transparent and is not simply a delivery device for meaning, as is the language
used in a newspaper article or book review. In applied improvisation, then, improvisation itself is transparent, if not non-existent, with respect to the finished product. The key here is that, in the case of the newspaper article which uses prose and the formal constraint of the pyramid model of reporting, the facts are more important than the language containing the facts and the language itself is conceived of primarily as a delivery device for fact. But with formally radical writing, language itself is an issue for the reader and must be taken into account; in such radical poetry, it is impossible for the reader to avoid reading form and structure alongside meaning. Thus, Smith and Dean’s notion of applied improvisation is inadequate to take into account how poetic language can both be improvised and maintain a trace of the improvisation within the language on the page.

**The Impossibility of Improvisation and the Continuous Present**

I am interested in the question of how poetic language can maintain traces of improvisation after the spontaneous moment of improvisation disappears in time. In poetic improvisation, improvisational spontaneity outside of the narrow sense of applied improvisation seems logically impossible because of the nature of print. From a Derridean point of view, however, the impossibility of improvisation is improvisation’s strength in that improvisation remains possible via its impossibility; improvisation is itself a figure of impossibility that signifies the always possible, or the potential.
In “Deconstructin(g) Jazz Improvisation: Derrida and the Law of the Singular Event,” Sara Ramshaw uses Derridean arguments against the possibility of spontaneity to question saxophonist Ornette Coleman’s claim that improvisation in and of itself can transgress the “law of jazz,” the “perfectly formed, complete and ‘out there’ frame work or ‘code of agreements’ which made up . . . the ‘musically universal’ in jazz that remain constant as the set of rules defining what jazz music is and how one plays it” (quoting Ekkhard Jost, 1). Improvisational spontaneity is impossible because:

The unity of the signifying form is constituted only by its iterability, by the possibility of being repeated in the absence not only of its referent . . . but of a determined signified or current intention of signification. . . . The structural possibility of being severed from its referent or signified (and therefore from communication and its context) seems to me to make of every mark, even oral, a grapheme in general, that is, as we have seen, the nonpresent remaining of a differential mark cut off from its alleged ‘production’ or origin. And I will extend this law even to all ‘experience’ in general, if it is granted that there is no experience of pure presence, but only chains of differential marks. (On Grammatology 318)

Any signifier, such as Saussure’s typical “tree,” for example, has meaning for English speakers because the word is iterable, or repeatable, both as the sign “tree” and the concept (although, what exactly constitutes a tree in the ultimate or Ur sense of the word may differ between individuals). Poetry is made readable because of the iterability of the individual letters within a poem, but also through the iterability of the culture around the writing, whether or not we are dealing with, for example, what Charles Bernstein refers to as “official verse,” the expressive, lyric poetry that informs the general North American cultural imagination of poetry that maintains a transparency of form and language, or the formally radical work
of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, which in effect relies on an opacity of language read in dialectic with conventional writing rules. Free jazz saxophonist Ornette Coleman’s claim is that the division between harmony and melody can be transgressed through his philosophy of improvisation known as “harmelodics,” which finds ways to unify harmony with melody, a direct violation of the law of jazz. For Derrida, this transgression is impossible since the law of jazz always “hums in the background,” and Coleman’s improvisation is merely an utterance of “the law of the law of jazz” (1). Thus, improvisation as such is impossible. Ramshaw, however, indicates that Derrida is not against improvisation but instead embraces improvisation with the corollary that improvisation is always impossible.

Improvisation, as Derrida posits in relation to deconstruction, “loses nothing from admitting that it is impossible” (Ramshaw 2). It is instead “possibility” that hinders and constrains, for possibility contains “the danger of becoming an available set of rule-governed procedures, methods, accessible approaches” (Ramshaw 36). "It contains the danger, if you will, of becoming a fully-determined law. . . . For if improvisation were truly possible, in the sense of being wholly improvised or original, there would be no call for spontaneous invention or, by analogy, jazz. . . . In its failure, improvisation survives" (8). Improvisation is not “truly possible” in this view because improvisation itself, which is a process, cannot exist materially without something to improvise with; although we can conceptualize of improvisation as being separate from a telephone conversation, for example, improvisation can only come about when it
is applied to an object or activity. Derrida’s notion of iterability, when applied to improvisation, points to a general misunderstanding about improvisation around the notion of spontaneity. “Spontaneity” suggests that something is manifest from nothing on the spur of the improvisational moment. The story of American saxophonist Anthony Braxton’s first concert of wholly improvised music contains the elements of both possibility and impossibility as Derrida sees them. Improvising without predetermining the structure for the improvising seemed to Braxton at the beginning of his career to be the most open to possibility.

I gave a solo concert in ’66 and in that period, I just came on the stage with the alto saxophone and played for two hours. And I discovered something very quickly. I discovered after ten minutes that I was repeating myself; I ran out of ideas; it was completely horrible. I found that I didn’t have enough ideas . . . I had to find some way to partition variables so that I would not repeat myself and to establish definition [between variables] that would help me. My interest was in establishing a vocabulary, or at least to focus on the particles of my music as a basis for establishing independent logics. So after the first concert I started to section off music. (Anthony Braxton interviewed by Charles Amirkhanian13:10)

Braxton adds that his relationship to music is quite visual and that he tends to “see” musical structures. From that point, Braxton began to develop his own system of visual notation to denote improvisational techniques (his vocabulary) which he used to formulate compositional strategies.

At the outset, Braxton’s anecdote sounds contradictory according to Derrida’s point. It is generally true that for musical improvisers, working with a

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7 “In fact, a field termed 'improvised music' has arisen and come to some prominence in the period since 1970. I would identify improvised music as a social location inhabited by a considerable number of present-day musicians, coming from diverse cultural backgrounds and musical practices, who have chosen to make improvisation a central part of their musical discourse. Individual improvisers are now able to reference an intercultural establishment of techniques, styles, aesthetic attitudes, antecedents and networks of cultural and social practice” (Lewis 234).
limited amount of material generates much more interesting music than does being free to play what one wants since the tendency is for players to use all of their ideas all at once, thus exhausting their improvisational vocabulary, leaving no opportunity for musical development beyond generating a cacophony of techniques. Faced with limited materials, the challenge is to make do; the improviser must focus on combining and recombining these materials during a performance. For improvisers, “ideas” include not only specific musical passages or melodic material, but also specific techniques for creating non-traditional sounds on their instruments. Many improvisers view the instrument itself as the main material for improvising and develop musical techniques oriented around manipulating the instrument while eschewing any thematic or tonal material. This concept is central to an approach to instrumentalism known as “extended technique,” meaning that technique is extended beyond what is classically thought of as standard technique for an instrument. “Extended technique” can also be applied to the voice in considering the wide range of sounds that a voice can make that extend beyond singing sounds or talking sounds. Music that emphasizes harmony and/or melody tends to work with notes and pitches, whereas extended technique takes any sound that can be generated on an instrument as a legitimate technique. Improvisational practice in the “free improvisation” idiom tends to take these sounds as the base material of musical improvisation rather than relying on compositions, as I have discussed previously.
In Braxton’s case, "the impossibility of possibility," an impossibility imposed upon the player through composition, prevents the default manifestation of the law, whether it be the law of jazz, or the law imposed by the limitations of Braxton’s instrumental technique. One aspect of the tropological understanding of improvisation is the notion of improvisation as having limitless possibility. In musical improvisation, limitlessness, however, is mythological and impossible for several reasons, not least of which is the fact that individual musical instruments present limitations to what they can do musically and what players can do with their instruments in group musical situations. Players are also limited by their musical interests, physiology and the abilities and tastes of other musicians around them in group situations. It is the very nature of all improvisation, in fact, that it takes place between limits because of the fact that 1) human practitioners are themselves capable of learning and using only a finite amount of ideas and 2) improvisation is combinatorial and processual.

The Improvisational Situation and the Act of Improvisation

Improvisation always constitutes a doing, in the same way that J.L. Austin’s notion of illocutionary act constitutes a doing as well as a saying, or the "performance of an act in saying something as opposed to performance of an act of saying something; [Austin calls] the act performed an ‘illocution’ and shall refer to the doctrine of the different types of function of language here in question as the doctrine of ‘illocutionary forces’” (91). With improvisation, because it is a basic activity of everyday life, it is important for the improviser to be conscious
that he/she is improvising and to even declare that he/she is improvising in order to situate improvising as an act in itself. Whereas it is not necessary for the improviser to actually declare “I improvise,” what is important is that improvising is foregrounded as a central act, rather than the default mode of everyday life. The model of improvisation I established earlier describes a situation in which improvisation is a fundamental, rather than a supporting, act. What makes improvisation “illocutionary,” following from Austin’s theory, is the fact that it is both itself—an act of doing something—that also defines itself as improvisatory via foregrounding its improvisatory nature. Then, to say that improvisation is illocutionary means also that it carries an illocutionary force, or the intention in producing an improvisation for the sake of improvising.

I defined materials earlier as the ideas, words, or structural materials chosen by the improviser, but there are several materials outside of the improviser’s realm of choice, including the particular limitations of skill or knowledge of the improviser, the presence of the audience both literally in performed improvisations and rhetorically for print-based poetic improvisation. The phrase “the improvisational situation” comes from Lloyd F. Bitzer’s work on rhetorical situationism. Whereas improvisation does not use rhetoric per se (although an argument can be made regarding using particular modes of improvisation to create a rhetorical identification between the audience and improviser), I think of improvisation as having parallels with rhetorical form in the way it potentially handles meaning and works spontaneously with the
manipulation of or interaction with improvisational materials. Rhetorical situation, according to Bitzer, is

. . . a natural context of persons, events, objects, relations and an exigence\(^8\) which strongly invites utterance; this invited utterance participates naturally in the situation, is in many instances necessary to the completion of situational activity, and by means of its participation with situation obtains its meaning and its rhetorical character . . . . Hence, to say that rhetoric is situational means: (1) rhetorical discourse comes into existence as a response to a situation, in the same sense that an answer comes into existence in response to a question, or a solution in response to a problem; (2) a speech is given \textit{rhetorical} significance by the situation, just as a unit of discourse is given significance by the situation, just as a unit of discourse is given significance as answer or as solution by the question or problem . . . .(7) Finally, the situation controls the rhetorical response in the same sense that the question controls the answer and the problem controls the solution. (5-6).

Bitzer’s notion of the rhetorical situation is bi-directional in that rhetorical discourse occurs in response to a situation at the same time the situation gives rhetorical discourse significance; rhetoric is unable to operate without a particular situation upon which to operate, but also, the situation is made significant by the fact that rhetoric can be created around it. Further, the rhetorical situation is a complex of “persons, events, objects and an exigence.”

Through Bitzer I want to point out that improvisation is given significance by its situation, and that any discussion of improvisation thus necessarily requires an understanding of the situation in which improvisation occurs. The fact that something is improvised is of no particular significance unless what is being

\(^8\) Bitzer defines “exigence” as “an imperfection marked by urgency; it is a defect, an obstacle, something waiting to be done, a thing which is other than it should be. In almost any sort of context, there will be numerous exigences, but not all are elements of a rhetorical situation—not all are rhetorical exigences. An exigence which cannot be modified is not rhetorical; thus, whatever comes about of necessity and cannot be changed—death, winter and some natural disasters, for instance—are exigences to be sure, but they are not rhetorical” (Bitzer 6).
improved is taken into account. But also, to place so much significance on something that is a usual component of everyday life is to focus on it in an excessive way and fetishize its presence rather than allow it to operate in everyday ways. In the improvisational situation, improvisation recombines and repurposes its materials through an excess of improvisation.

**Improvisation and Excess**

Excess is the pivot point upon which we can read printed poetry as improvisational via interpreting the excess to determine what aspects of the poem attempt to exceed non-improvised textuality. Steve McCaffery’s influential essay “Writing as a General Economy” borrows Georges Bataille’s notion of the restricted and general economies as a means of regarding the act of writing as excessive, but also as a means of circulation and distribution of contexts, ideas and language-materials within writing:

I’ve chosen to approach writing and the written text as an economy rather than a structure. The latter tends to promote essence as relational, which has the clear advantage of avoiding all closed notions of the poem as “a well-wrought urn” but suffers from a presupposed stasis, a bracketed immobility among the parts under observation and specification. As an alternative to structure, economy is concerned with the distribution and circulation of the numerous forces and intensities that saturate a text. A textual economy would concern itself not with the order of forms and sites but with the order-disorder of circulations and distributions. (McCaffery 201)

For McCaffery, a writing based on general economy essentially recovers that which is abandoned by utilitarian forms of writing. In the musical practice of using extended instrumental techniques, extended techniques not only extend
the range of sounds beyond what is classically thought of as proper instrumental sound, but they propel musical instruments into the realm of the general economy by providing a vocabulary of sounds that do not fit into the system of the restricted economy. The saxophonist's “slap tongue” technique, for example, produces a slapping or popping sound when the tongue creates a vacuum of air against the reed, then suddenly releases to create a sound that by classicist modes of thought is completely non-musical and undesirable as a legitimate technique. Both the slap tongue and the line break are incommensurate with their respective restricted economy's value system or “terministic screen.”

Kenneth Burke’s concept of the terministic screen, which he defines in *Language as Symbolic Action*, provides a useful way to consider the relationship between the general and restricted economies. A terministic screen is a homogeneous network of symbols that are commensurate with each other and the discourse that mobilizes them. Terministic screens create realities by developing a discursive system of related terms that both attract like terms, i.e. terms that fit the rubric of the screen and deflect terms that do not fit:

Not only does the nature of our terms affect the nature of our observations, in the sense that the terms direct the attention [sic] to one field rather than to another. Also, *many of the ‘observations’ are but implications of the particular terminology in terms of which the observations are made.* In brief, much that we take as observations about ‘reality’ may be but the spinning out of possibilities implicit in our choice of terms. (Burke 46)

The terministic screen is effectively a network of symbols and ideas that become a grid of intelligibility, but also a filter for that which does not automatically comply with the grid. For example, medical discourse employs a specific set of Latin-
based terms used to describe the body and disease. The terms are commensurate with each other both in that each term shares a Latinate-base (they look and sound “medical”) and that they comprise a homogeneous space of communicating medical ideas. The main method of diagnosing illness in Chinese medicine, which is to analyze the body via the pulse and condition of the tongue along with the Doctor’s observance of the balance of yin and yang in the body (if something appears either too yin or too yang, this denotes illness, according to the theory) is incommensurate with Western medicine’s terministic screens because the method of diagnosis is based on an assessment of the patient’s yin and yang balance in the body, rather than an empirical, quantitative diagnosis.

In McCaffery’s view, using materials that are incommensurate with the general economy’s terministic screen would constitute a loss of meaning in the context of the restrictive economy since the waste products of the general economy are terministically useless. In McCaffery’s particular scheme, a loss of meaning through terministic incompatibility in this way is positive. A writing within the general economy then would be one entirely made up of textual materials that refuse to handle meaning in conventional ways. Below, McCaffery describes the general economic properties of sound poetry in sound poetry’s return to the material base of language, vocal sound. In sound poetry, the use of pure vocal sounds as opposed to semantically oriented sounds constitutes an irrecoverable loss of meaning:

The sound poem can never be reduced to its textual “equivalent” or notation; it is essentially performative and implicates the subject not
as a speaking subject, but as a phonic, pneumatic outlay. In contrast to Projective Verse that seeks a re-incorporation of breath inside the textual economy as part of an extended tradition of representation (viz. representation of the body in language and process) sound poetry is a poetry of complete expenditure in which nothing is recoverable and usable as “meaning.” . . . Sound poetry shatters meaning at the point where language commits its move to idealization; it sustains the materiality and material effects of the phonematic structures whilst avoiding their traditional semantic purpose. (214-215).

The Four Horseman's collection of sound poetry scores, *The Prose Tattoo*, contains several examples of visual scores that direct the sound poet towards absolute expenditure of the sounds and vocal activity that are necessary for spoken language to function; the “sound” of words here becomes sound without words:

![Figure 2: Excerpt from "The Room (A Valentine) Winter's Day"](image)

The performer uses the lines as a figurative suggestion for the shape of a vocal sound. The score provides some standard phonemic material as well, along with
a visual suggestion for how the mouth should make sounds via the diagram of the lips. Also, the direction “lips that click” instructs the performer to use a particular kind of mouth sound, one that is a material support of standard speech, but here is isolated as a material for sound performance.

In the general/restricted economy model, the terms flip depending on the context of their use. From the point of view of the restricted economy, the poem above operates in excess of speech by essentially cutting-out and separating conventional meaning from verbal language and using the material support for verbal language—basically, sound generated from the body in absence of conventional linguistic organization—as the materials for sound poetry. In that the sound poet’s primary source of sonic material is waste, waste becomes useful. The sound poem, then, becomes its own restricted economy. Improvisation is not subject to the same flipping of the general/restrictive economic terms because it is not recoverable as useful since, theoretically speaking, without an object upon which to improvise, improvisation itself cannot exist in a material sense; there is no improvisation without an object for improvisation to act upon. That is, the writer-improviser operates using the excess of daily life—the process of improvisation itself—to combine and recombine improvisational materials. The general-cum-restricted economy of the sound poet sees sounds without meaning as sound poetry’s primary material, thus transforming from a general economic operation to a restricted operation by virtue of what sound poetry takes as valuable materials. Improvisation, on the other hand, sees all materials as useful but it is not constituted by its materials.
the way sound poetry is because improvisation is a process in itself and not a material.

In McCaffery's view, improvisation would be inseparable from the sound poem in that both improvisation and sound poetry release energy and the sound poem's energy release is wholly dependent on improvisation since sound poetry takes up energy as its essence:

When considering text-sound it is energy, not semantically shaped meaning, that constitutes the essence of communicated data. The classical, Aristotelian concept of form is that of goal, the target-destination at which we arrive as at a postponed reward by way of a composition. It was, hence, to be a highly significant reversal of Aristotle when Wilhelm Reich was to declare form to be frozen energy, opening a path to a new conception of form as the aggregate of departures not arrivals, the notion of the de-form as a thawing of the construct, a strategy of release, of flow. What the sound poet practices is the deformation of linguistic form at the level of the signifier. For it is the scripted signifier, the phonematic unit that marks the crypt of a vast repression, where energy is frozen in the articulated and subordinated elements of representation. (88)

For McCaffery, sound-poetry's excess is an energetic release of language frozen by form and what is frozen by the notion of writing as a product rather than a process. Improvisation, taking place in real time, is effectively a release of energy in much the same way as sound poetry releases what was once repressed libidinal energy of creation and process, an “aggregate of departures.” For the sound poet, improvisation becomes a readerly act as well as a performative act in that the sound poet performs essentially a reading of a score, approach, or strategy in literal, real time. For live improvisation then, a double-reading takes place in that the performer enacts a reading of the poem which is
in turn listened to by the audience. By “readerly improvisation,” I mean
improvisation used during the reading process by the reader as opposed to the
improvisation taking place during the writing process performed by the writer.
Everyday improvisation is part of the reading process just as it is part of the
writing process; it is the process by which the reader enters a text, engaging with
it in a playful way to discover the possibilities of its meaning and to generate an
interpretation. Yet, within the relationship between improvisation and everyday
life, reading is an improvisational process just as much as any other kind of
improvisational process in that one draws on a previously learned set of reading
skills to read anything. The reader approaches the text from the position of the
restricted economy in that he/she is confronted with the poem as a poem and
any form of excess as it applies to the poem, from the point of view of general
economy of production, is part the poem in question. Improvisation in the printed
poem is made manifest outside the continuum of poetry via excess; the reader
must remain aware of the improvisational nature of the writing, or at least the
author's intention to improvise during the time of writing, in order to read

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9 Roland Barthes makes the distinction between the readerly and the writerly in *S/Z*. The writerly
denotes a relationship between text and reader wherein the reader produces the text during
the act of reading, which is in contrast to the readerly, which causes the reader to become a
consumer of the text. Readerly texts “are products (and not productions), they make up the
enormous mass of our literature” and are meant to be read once—consumed—and discarded.
The reader of such a text is compelled to either accept or reject the text at face value. Writerly
texts, on the other hand, are in a “perpetual present; . . . the writerly text is *ourselves writing*
before the infinite play of the world (the function of the world) is traversed . . . by some singular
system (Ideology, Genius, Criticism) which reduces the plurality of entrances, the opening of
networks, the infinity of languages” (5). A newspaper, for example, can be said to be readerly
since it is intended for the transmission of current events through a transparent linguistic
medium that draws no attention to its own construction. Improvised texts, on the other hand,
are writerly because they require the reader to engage the text by reading improvisation back
into the text; the reader is partially responsible for making meaning from the text. The writerly
text, then, gives the reader the opportunity to re-write and participate in the text rather than
merely consuming and disposing of the text.
improvisation back in to the poem. Thus, in this category, improvisation tends to appear as a formal device, an organizational principle, a tonal quality, a loose description of the feel of a poem, or a figurative concept that creates a reading heuristic for dealing with the improvised poem. The obvious difference between this sense of readerly for the print-based poem vs. the listener of the sound poem, which falls under the category of live, pure improvisation, is that the poet is responsible for improvising, leaving the audience out of the participatory loop in that they are passive listeners during the performance.

The conceptual difficulty here arises around the question of who does the improvising in the case of the printed poem. It seems as though both the reader and the writer of the improvisatory poem are improvising. Yet the readerly improvisation is closest to an interpretation rather than an act of writing. It is also possible for the writer to not include a codex with the poem that indicates that the poem has been improvised. The reader in this case may completely overlook improvisation altogether, whereas presumably the improvised poem could not exist without improvisation having happened. In other words, improvising would be optional, or even supplemental, to the printed poem: from musicology concerned with classicist approaches to musical terms, the supplementary is “obbligato,” that which is extra to music. In his book Drifting on a Read: Jazz as a Model for Reading, Michael Jarrett defines this term for both the musical and verbal arts:

Obbligato alludes to everything traditionally considered paragonal, supplemental, “hors d’oeuvre,” or a matter of style. Within the verbal arts this includes prefaces, footnotes, marginalia and illustrations; within the visual arts it includes frames, mattes and
even the walls on which paintings are hung; within music—ornamentation: *agrément*, grace notes and improvisation (Jarrett 62, quoting Ulmer).

Jarrett points out that jazz music makes improvisation into a musical element beyond the supplemental because it makes the optional and spontaneous a fundamental aspect of music:

[Improvisation] . . . is traditionally regarded as an activity *different from* playing obbligatos, because it is perceived as *more than* embellishment. . . . Improvisation makes the optional a matter of obligation. The improviser can’t play only what’s required; he’s bound to contribute a *certain excess*. . . . There is a *certain relation* between writing and the conditions of improvisation (its conventions, contexts, intentions and so forth. Writing . . . is not opposed to improvisation. It results from it. The term "obbligato," then, is useful because it makes explicit what’s implied by other terms for ornamentation: namely, that any and all distinctions between composition and improvisation are socially constructed and ultimately incomplete. (64)

Jarrett presents the central problem that I have been addressing in this chapter: that improvisation is part of any and all processual, skilled activities and that it is indeed part of compositional practice even though the object of such practice is to arrest language in print. One can either choose to perform a Mozart suite as written, or to deviate from the score and improvise using the themes and ideas Mozart offers. This has an effect of "line-blurring" in several regards: it blurs the line between composer and performer (author and reader) since the performer presumes to improvise spontaneously around something attributed to Mozart, meaning that the performer in this situation uses interpretation as an improvisational invention. In this situation, the performer becomes an instant composer. The terms of improvisation and composition are a slippery binary pair
that can exchange their meanings, much like the terms restricted and general in McCaffery's formulation of Bataille's theory.

The following discussion of improvisation is organized based on my view of the relationship between improvisation and its materials. Chapter 2 proceeds with a discussion of the dominant mode of idiomatic poetic improvisation in English: jazz poetry. Jazz poetry is a broad category that includes Beat poetry, the Poetry-and-Jazz movement, Nathaniel Mackey and Amiri Baraka, along with various other poets associated with jazz. Chapter 3 takes up the notion of non-idiomatic improvisation which theorizes that improvisation can be separated from idiomatic expression and applied to writing, creating what I call a non-idiomatic poetic improvisation. Chapter 4 examines how sound poetry and other performance practices use improvisation in live, real time performance.
CHAPTER 2: IDIOMATIC POETIC IMPROVISATION: JAZZ POETRY

Jazz Poetry and Polarity

The Jazz Poetry Anthology (1991) edited by Sascha Feinstein and Yusef Komunyakaa, is one of the two defining anthologies of jazz poetry, the other being Art Lange and Nathaniel Mackey's Moment's Notice (1992). The Jazz Poetry Anthology in particular contains work that demonstrates the two modes of writing jazz poetry. I call these modes "jazz-as-signification" and "jazz-as-form."

Feinstein begins his introduction with a discussion of a 1990 conference panel on jazz and its relationship to poetry:

We never addressed the various kinds of jazz poems that have been written, nor did we talk about the complex history of jazz poetry. Instead, the panel argued over unanswerable questions: What is jazz? How can we define jazz poetry if we can't define jazz or poetry individually? . . . After awhile, the panel agreed that there was music in the world commonly referred to as "jazz" and that jazz has inspired poets for about three-quarters of a century. But then the conversation took a new argumentative turn: Does a jazz poem, somebody asked, have to be about jazz, or can it simply suggest jazz in its rhythmic structure? (2)

For jazz poets, this question—how to define the relationship between jazz and language in poetry—results in two emergent modes of jazz poetry. The first mode, "jazz-as-signification," what the panel calls "poetry about jazz," involves signifying jazz in the content of the poetry through direct references to specific jazz musicians (especially iconic bebop saxophonists John Coltrane and Charlie
Parker) musical instruments used in jazz (such as saxophones or drums), song
titles (for example, Thelonious Monk's "In Walked Bud" or Coltrane's "A Love
Supreme"), popular jazz clubs like New York's 5-Spot, African-Americans and
African-American and other African cultures, as well as more nuanced references
to an ethos of jazz as freedom of form that can be used as a means of revoking
oppression. The panel arrives at the second mode, "jazz-as-form," by
acknowledging that jazz offers structural possibilities for poetry. This mode
involves using the technical and practical aspects of jazz music, including rhythm,
tonality and a notion of the poem becoming a projective "sound" beyond word, as
formal devices.

Feinstein's poem "Buying Wine" is exemplary of jazz-as-signification in its
pattern of overt, deliberate references to jazz:

His alto leaks steam, a radiator of sound
frozen breath shining on the bell. He's good,
and I can't help but lean against the bus stop

and watch . . .

. . . he's playing "Blue Monk," slow for the mood
just up enough for circulation. (Feinstein and Komunyakaa 58-59).

The poem describes an alto saxophonist busking on a cold winter's evening,
presumably in New York City, the mythologically sacred and historically fertile
ground for jazz music performance and innovation. It invokes the narrative of the
jazz musician as a hard-working and brilliant person who, despite his obvious
talent and jazz ethos, is disenfranchised and forced to busk because his music is
not appreciated at large by American consumer culture. Feinstein employs the
standard jazz signifiers here: the alto saxophone; the popular Thelonious Monk standard "Blue Monk," which links both the narrative, the speaker's attitude about jazz and the saxophonist's style, to Thelonious Monk's own idiosyncratic version of bebop; and the smatterings of jazz talk (the word "hip" in line 13) suspended in a free verse mesh of lineated sentences. The poem sets up a comfortable domestic scene to contrast the busker working outside in the freezing New York winter; the speaker has gone out to buy Chianti to bring home to his "you," who is home "basting a roast" in their warm apartment waiting for the speaker to bring home the wine that will make the meal perfect. The scene of domestic contentment and cheer is sharply contrasted by the scene of the saxophonist labouring outside in harsh winter conditions.

In contrast, Sonia Sanchez's poem "a/coltrane/poem" inscribes jazz into the language and form of the poem and thus represents poetry that sits somewhere in the middle of the two polarities:

```
my favourite things
  is u/blowen
  yo/favourite things.

strechen the mind
till it bursts passt the con/fines of
 solo/en melodies.
      to the many/solos
 of the
  mind/spirit.

 are u sleepen (to be
 are u sleepen sung
brotha john softly)
brotha john
 where have u gone to.

... 

yrs. befo u blew away our passst
```
Sanchez's poem signifies jazz through the figure of tenor saxophonist John Coltrane and his famous Impulse! Records 1964 release "A Love Supreme." The idiosyncratic spelling of many of the words, including "strechen" and "blowen" instead of "stretching" and "blowing," has the dual function of inscribing African-American speech into the poem and invoking the ideal individualistic sound quality that signifies a specific quality of voice.10 Sanchez's spelling signifies the uniqueness of Coltrane's sound on his tenor saxophone, which is easily recognizable to most jazz listeners because of the particularities of the sound quality he generates. Sanchez's spelling also simultaneously contributes to Sanchez's own unique and individualistic poetic "sound" or voice. Jazz in this poem both represents and creates the opportunity to develop an authentic personal voice via the author's apparent freedom with choices in diction, spelling and lineation, among other formal features. The mood and sound of Coltrane's tenor saxophone is signified via Sanchez's "sound effect" language, such as the "scrEEEEEEEch." And finally, the rhythmic element appears in phrases such as "lovesupremealovesupremealovesupreme," which imitates the bass line as well.

10 Individual saxophonists work towards establishing their own personal and recognizable sound on their instrument. They achieve this through using equipment, selecting specific saxophones, mouthpieces and reeds that compliment their sense of how they want to sound. They also achieve this by establishing their own unique musical vocabulary and through techniques, including patterns of inflection, use of preferred fingering combinations and through their choice of repertoire.
as the brief vocalization of "a love supreme" that opens the song on Coltrane's 1965 recording. Sanchez's poem is exemplary of jazz poetry that attempts to be jazz, not only signify it.

**Upper Limit: Jazz Poetry**

Jazz poetry in general, irrespective of its particular mode, attempts to generate poetry whose form and thematic content is influenced by the musical conventions of the jazz idiom and/or the culture surrounding jazz music practices. The jazz poetry genre forms around a notion of poetic language that takes on the properties of music. In Louis Zukofsky's terms, the attempt to combine music with language is an elevation of poetic language from speech to music. Jazz poetry, in these terms, elevates poetic language to the *condition of music*.

Zukofsky's poetics of the upper limit provide a model for examining the relationship between music and language in jazz poetry. The poetics of the upper limit describe a relationship between music and language characterized by a poetic language that is closer to music in nature than everyday speech. Poetic language that reaches the upper limit does so by achieving the "condition of music," which means the poetry achieves a level of musicality, in form and diction, that creates a link to music through form rather than content. In "A-12," Zukofsky states his poetics in a stanza that is part free verse, part calculus formula:

```
I'll tell you
About my poetics—
```
Zukofsky borrows the structure of his diagram from calculus, a mathematical science concerned with comparing quantities that vary in non-linear ways. Zukofsky brackets music and speech into a formulation of poetic language using the mathematical symbol for "integral." The integral bracket indicates that the upper and lower limits of music and speech are the limits around a "space" of poetic language, rather than a hierarchy. Calculus contains two main branches of inquiry: 1) "differentiation," which is concerned with identifying and formulating the rate of change between quantities and 2) "integration," which is the reverse of differentiation; integration involves beginning with a known rate of change and breaking it down into its mathematical parts and representing them in an equation. In Zukofsky's usage, the symbol denotes the operation of "antiderivation," or the procedure of determining the derivatives of a given mathematical function. In this case, the diagram focuses on Zukofsky's conception of a poetic language that is constantly in flux between music and speech. Zukofsky's poetics, as Mark Scroggins points out in *Zukofsky and the Poetry of Knowledge*, indicate poetic language that is "... never quite music, never quite speech" (5-6). But, as Scroggins points out, "Zukofsky's verse spends more time in the upper than the lower reaches of this integral; it proposes
a species of pleasure that is more dependent on sound than on paraphrasable meaning" (5-6). Although the integral bracket indicates a state of flux between speech and music, it is conceptually possible in Zukofsky's poetics to generate a poetic language oriented more toward music than speech, thus attaining the "condition of music." Overall, Zukofsky's poetics, despite being formalistically oriented and carefully defined, emphasize the states of poetry's material suspended between the polarities of speech—which is non-musical in its lower limit—and musical sound.

"Limitation" has another connotation with regards to the degree that poetic language can become music. Language can only achieve a condition of music by taking on some of music's properties, but cannot become music. The music-poetry relationship, for Zukofsky and for the jazz poets I will go on to examine, is a negotiation between music and poetry that ultimately must result in a compromise due to the obvious but crucial fact that music and poetry are two separate areas of aesthetic practice that have material incommensurabilities with each other. I discuss this issue further on in this chapter, but for now, the principle difference between music and poetry is that poetic language has a semantic function, whereas music does not. Scroggins notes that in Zukofsky's writing, compromise arrives in the form of a metaphorical, imitative use of music as form, saying that, "...music is most important to Zukofsky insofar as it provides a formal model for his poetry, though it is important to stress that such modelling is primarily metaphorical—wishful thinking, if you will, rather than direct imitation" (Scroggins 185). Scroggins's phrase "wishful thinking" is an
unfortunate description for the outcomes of Zukofsky’s use of music because it seems to dismiss the fact that a completed music-plus-poetry composition is the direct result of compromise between music and poetry. Music, used in the openly figurative, but mathematical and precise way that Zukofsky does, is formally generative precisely because of how Zukofsky must invent poetic language that always drives towards achieving the condition of music. Zukofsky writes that: "A poem is a context associated with 'musical' shape, musical with quotation marks since it is not of notes as music, but of words more variable than variables and used outside as well as within the context with communicative reference" (16). Thus, music, incorporated metaphorically or otherwise, offers manifold "shapes," formal structures and strategies for writing poetry.

For example, musical sound appears as a careful weighing and balance of the verbal sounds in "Another Ashtray" from the sequence of short poems called "Barely and Widely:"

Three
  crimson
  mongrels
  bait
  the whip
  in a boot
  on a leg.  (Complete Short Poetry 170)

The lineation and space between the two stanzas, which I read as a pause about the length of the pause denoted by a semi-colon in prose, regulate the reading of the rhythm by allowing the spaces to function as a kind of spatial notation. The relationships between the vowel and consonant sounds are carefully constructed
out of a minimum of aural repetitions that help to "move" the poem along through its rhythmic structure, which I will emphasize with bold text: |crimson, mongrels|; |crimson, mongrels|; |mongrels, crimson, on|; |bait, boot|; "bait" and "leg" are both one syllable words with a hard consonant closure on a masculine ending.

Rhythmically, the stanzas contrast each other: whereas the first stanza uses a strong rhythm beginning on the "down beat" of the left margin, the second stanza is more syncopated using a pattern of two weak beats followed by a strong beat (here I indicate the strong beat using italics): the *whipl* in a *boot* on a *leg*.

While music appears in "Another Ashtray" through verbal sound, "A-24" incorporates music in a more obvious formal way, using the musical form of the fugue as a structure for an arrangement of Zukofsky's poetry against fragments of Handel's music. "A-24" is a collaborative arrangement and setting of several of Zukofsky's poems by Zukofsky and his pianist/composer wife, Celia Zukofsky, to Handel's "Harpsichord Pieces" which she originally titled "L.Z. Masque." Celia Zukofsky arranged A-24 into five voices, one being the music—the transcription of Handel's harpsichord pieces—and the other 4 voices each speaking a poem by Zukofsky. The poems-cum-lines of dialogue are, line-by-line: Line 1: from Zukofsky's "Thought" from *Prepositions*; Line 2: "Drama" from *Arise Arise*; Line 3: "Story" from *It Was*; and Line 4: "Poem" from "A." The effect is of five lines of independent language—four verbal and one musical—weaving in and out of each other.
In his talk at Bard College in Annandale Hudson in 1972, Zukofsky points out that "L.Z. Masque" answers a problem he was trying to solve with regard to importing musical structure into poetry:

Can the design of the fugue be transferred to poetry? Of course, the answer is "no." . . . to have literal fugues, literal polyphony, was not something that was part of a poetic work. . . . But you could never really do it in words. . . . I find myself fortunate that my wife found an answer to that question. (Bard College Talk 1.10 min.)

The dominant compositional technique at work in the fugue, or rather, "the design of the fugue," counterpoint is the relationship between two or more voices that are interdependent in harmony and rhythm. Musical lines composed in this way sound independent and very different from each other when played separately, but when played together become harmonious and rhythmically complex. Obviously, as Zukofsky points out, counterpoint cannot occur as such in poetry, but a kind of counterpoint is achieved through using four separate Zukofsky poems to stand in as independent musical lines and structuring them visually underneath the score in imitation of contrapuntal musical relationships. Together, the lines of poetry display no harmony in the way that musical lines do, but the piano line figuratively represents a harmonic union between the words and also functions as a time index that guides the reading pulse for the voices. Zukofsky's poems, relineated to follow a notated musical voice and arranged to generate a contrapuntal and polyphonic interaction between the voices and the voices and music, must effectively "leave" the page for the poems to move closer to achieving the upper limit of music. Further, the four Zukofsky poems, the product of Zukofsky's careful and exacting writing procedures, when
performed, achieve a disjunctive quality. When performed, the individual poems
collapse together through counterpoint. The effect is as if the poems are stacked
and rearranged vertically to discover what combinatorial possibilities may arise
from the four poems' new typography.

The point of my digression through Zukofsky, the condition of music and
the upper and lower limits of poetic language, is to situate jazz poetry in the
complexity of the music-plus-poetry relationship. The poet must negotiate with
the material limits of language and music in order to drive poetic language
towards the upper limit; compromise is necessary in hybridized poetic forms.
Zukofsky also demonstrates the generative possibilities inherent to combining
music with language through form and the material of language. Poetic language
can never actually reach the upper limit since to reach the condition of music
language must shed its capacity for semantics and signification or subject itself to
a musical organization of language as lyrics rather than everyday, or other, uses
of language that extend beyond the conventional. Rather, for jazz poets, the
process of inventing ways to append jazz to poetry and to create the possibility
for a jazz aesthetics within literary language is the improvisational imperative.

**Potted Plants: Artefactual and Actual Jazz Improvisation**

The move to hybridize jazz music with poetry is an attempt to use jazz to
expand the poem into the realms of sound and to open referential poetry to
individualistic formal innovations, thereby creating new cultural scenes of poetry
practice and performance. In Steve Lacy’s terms, jazz poetry is an attempt to
avoid poetry becoming a "potted plant:" an overdetermined and exhausted pre-
existing approach that is already firmly banalized. Jazz poetry replaces the
potted context of poetry with, to extend the metaphor, a poetry that grows
according to the poetics of the individual jazz poet. In his interview with William
Matthews, Yusef Komunyakaa describes the jazz poet's relationship to poetry
using the metaphor of the jazz soloist:

The poet is the soloist, providing a testimonial that employs a
different medium but achieves a similar sense of audience intimacy
whether the text is read aloud in a public venue or by a lone reader. The various ideas that inform a poet's individual jazz-influenced
poetics often break from the constraints of traditionally structured
verse. In jazz poetry, the tonal quality of the individual word is
given special emphasis and the manner in which the word is placed
within the text is integral to how the entire poem sounds. Since
sound is such a crucial element, the listener or critic is often unable
to adequately articulate the real connection between tone and
meaning. (8)

Komunyakaa describes an approach to writing that, by virtue of the fact that a
writer's individual jazz influence and individual decisions with regards to how
he/she applies jazz to writing, enables a break with verse convention.
Komunyakaa also sees value in the fact that, presumably, individual poets will all
answer the jazz poetry question in different ways according to their particular
interests and desires, meaning that the range of approach to the jazz poem is
potentially so vast as to escape "succinct textual analysis of a composition or
performance" (8-9). Through the trope of spontaneity jazz resonates with a
mysterious and mystical quality and the individual jazz poem exists essentially as
an iteration of an improvised solo, fresh and new in the immediacy of real time
utterance. Komunyakaa's description of jazz poetry, however, is dependent on a
notion of jazz improvisation that foils any attempts at quantitative description and instead leans on a mythos to complete its poetics.

Jazz poetry scholar Barry Wallerstein's description of the jazz and poetry relationship is significantly more quantifiable. He points out three possible ways to create connections between jazz and poetry:

The first is to search out traditional poetic definitions and values in jazz lyrics. Any number of songs have the effect of poetry and one of the ways people often express deep affection for a lyric is to say, "That's poetry!" . . . [Secondly,] [s]ince the performance of jazz is not unlike the performing language of poetry, one could also study the structure of a jazz composition and note how improvised solos break away from the original harmonic and melodic structure. [Thirdly,] . . in much of modern poetry, especially free verse, the range of improvisatory gesture is immense. One could observe how a traditional-sounding first line will not necessarily be followed by a regular meter, rhyme, or rhythm. (595)

Wallerstein's notion of the synergy between poetry and jazz creates parallels between versification and the material and formal elements of jazz. Wallerstein links line, rhythm and meter in poetry to the line, rhythm and meter in the jazz soloist's phraseology to emphasize that both jazz and poetry can deviate from regularity of structure and "break away" from conventional forms and also to introduce variations within a particular solo/poem. He suggests that improvisation is a kind of synergistic, fluctuating middle ground between jazz and language. Improvisation for Wallerstein, however, is possible only figuratively via "gesture," which is indicated by a potential diversity in metric and rhythmic variation. In other words, actual, "pure," or literal improvisation does not occur in the jazz poem. But at the same time, Wallerstein's vision of jazz poem includes a direct formal relationship between poetry and jazz since ". . . a poem that
alludes to jazz figures [i.e. luminaries such as John Coltrane or Thelonious Monk] is not the real thing unless it also demonstrates jazz-like rhythm or the feel of improvisation (665). This notion of jazz, which relegates improvisation to representative gestures, resembles a versifier's approach to writing in its rule-bound concern for a rhythmic regularity and formalization.

Wallerstein points out that in jazz poetry, such as exemplified in the Feinstein and Komunyakaa jazz poetry anthology, improvisation is manifest in both the consciousness and unconsciousness of the improviser during the moment of improvisation:

In some instances of jazz poetry, improvisation works as a movement between the conscious and unconscious, with the poet weaving in and out through various layers of awareness. Therefore, what occurs is the abandonment of "logical" cohesiveness, supplanted by emotional openness. It is this openness that connects the poetry to one of the key elements in jazz. (54)

Wallerstein's notion of improvisation addresses and incorporates both polarities of jazz poetry as a single poetic and expands jazz improvisation beyond a merely technical or formal relationship to poetry into a socio-political means of liberation from political hegemony. Yusef Komunyakaa uses an improvisational approach that resembles the description above. In his poetry, Komunyakaa attempts to move beyond the gestural and also considers the cultural aspects of jazz as part of his jazz poetics. In Blue Notes: Essays, Interviews and Commentaries, he writes:

More than what Villon or Ginsberg taught me, I learned from jazz that I could write anything into a poem. The music played off irony and from this I grasped the dynamics of insinuation. Jazz projects
tonal insinuation. Discovering this, I now had access to an expanded spectrum of emotions and a palette of linguistic colours that only enhanced the awareness that my intellectual pursuits provided. (6)

Komunyakaa sees jazz poetry improvisation as a revision of academic, canonical poetry, which he calls "re-vision," or "seeing again." The ability to see again and the variations of perception that come with each fresh iteration constitute the effect of "improvisational spirit" in poetry. In re-vision, "the intellect hums there in the juices and muscle of imagery, churning forth questions: Can it begin here and work backwards? How many ways can this tune be played?" (37). Jazz, in other words, opens the field of poetry up to the expressive needs of the individual rather than relying solely on the tenets of a particular genre.

**Kerouac and Beat-ness: Blowing the Discursive Blues**

“It's all gotta be non stop ad libbing within each chorus, or the gig is shot.” (Kerouac, opening remarks on flyleaf of *Orlanda Blues*)

The performing poet in North America is popularly associated with the figure of a Beatnik dressed in a black beret and black turtle neck sweater reciting poetry to a bongo accompaniment. Beatnik figures performing poetry appear in a number of places in North American culture. For example, the character Maynard G. Krebs (played by Bob Denver) was the lazy, bongo-playing sidekick of clean cut, ambitious Dobie Gillis in the television show "The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis" which aired on CBS from 1959 to 1963. *Tales of the Wizard of Oz* is a quirky 1961 animated television serial that recounts the continued adventures of the original Frank L. Baum *The Wizard of Oz* characters. The airhead, muddled Scarecrow character is renamed "Socrates the Scarecrow."
Socrates is a Beatnik, organic intellectual with stoned eyes sporting a stubbly goatee. He excels in spontaneously recombining fragments of fairy tales into narratively and symbolically disjunctive (and silly) performance poems. In So I Married an Axe Murder (directed by Thomas Schlamme and released in 1993), Mike Myers plays a San Francisco post-Beat poet who fears that the woman he plans to marry is a serial axe murderer who marries wealthy men and murders the men for money. The film contains several scenes of Meyers's character performing his poetry to a slow, smooth blues-inflected jazz riff provided by a jazz trio standing in the shadows at the rear of a stage at the back of a low-lit café. Beatniks also appear in unusual places such as Internet browser based games written on the Flash programming platform. The 2009 Flash video game Back to the Cubeture hosted by www.newgrounds.com, a popular website that hosts scores of browser-based video games, opens with an animation of the hero of the game on stage at a poetry reading. The character—whose body and head is a single cube with legs and arms—wears a black beret and turtle neck sweater stretched over his cube-shaped torso. He reads a poem that begins "Your face is like a swirling cappuccino!" to a "hip" café audience dressed in turtle neck sweaters, berets and beads (www.newgrounds.com/portal/view/513114). The line from the poem also plays with the café-culture trope involving the café as the hub of intellectual activity and a place to write and discuss poetry.

Among the Beat poets using jazz as a vehicle for poetry performance, Kerouac is the most popularly well known. Improvisation appears in his writing through both the jazz-as-signification and jazz-as-form modes of writing. Other
Beats, on the other hand, use improvisation in various writing scenarios, but tend to fall into one mode or the other. Allen Ginsberg, for example, applies improvisation to formal structures in writing and performing, making his work identifiable as jazz-as-signification. Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Kenneth Rexroth and Kenneth Patchen, the three poets of the Poetry-and-Jazz movement, by contrast, rely on the jazz-as-signification mode, preferring to leave improvisation for the musicians in the jazz band accompanying the reading poet. The poetry itself, in other words, does not take on aspects of jazz's form. The Beats' particular take on the relationship between music and poetry is exemplified and symbolized by the poet performing the "spoken word" over jazz music, which operates as a background support for the poetry and creates a continuous reference to jazz throughout the duration of a performance. In this performance scenario, both the music and the poetry maintain a connection to the symbolic realm in that the music maintains a clear connection to the jazz idiom (as opposed to engaging in non-idiomatic, free improvisation), while the poetry remains in the realm of symbolic speech (as opposed to breaking down into the characteristic whistles, grunts and fricatives that characterize the non-speech of European sound poetry, or as opposed to somehow integrating the words closely with the music through scoring. This approach to poetry performance persists in contemporary "slam" poetry performances involving collaborations with musicians, such as in the work of popular Canadian "spoken word artist" Shane Koyczan who performs with singer/guitarist Dan Mangan. Their performance relationship is rock- and folk-based rather than jazz-based, but Koyczan and Mangan retain the band-vocalist
relationship at work in Beat performance practices. This format is also a mainstay of poetry festivals and contests used to inject dynamic entertainment into lineups of readers who merely read their work from books rather than perform; in general, literary festivals tend to feature the poetry reading as the "fun" and exciting feature counteracting the apparent boredom induced by the "straight" literary reading. The Canadian Broadcasting Company (CBC), for example, holds a yearly "Poetry Faceoff" in which contestants (who have previously been vetted via submissions of printed poetry) take turns reading their poetry in front of a panel of judges. The 2008 finalist performance featured five finalists reading over jazz accompaniment provided by a jazz bass and guitar duo who improvise idiomatically behind the poets. For this event, the poets are inserted into the jazz poetry format even if their approach to writing has nothing to do with jazz or music at all; jazz, in this situation, becomes the all-purpose poetry background filler. The jazz band is also quite novel in this situation, both for the poets (who typically do not have a musical practice connected to their poetry) and for the audience. In the CBC 's ongoing quest to reach a popular audience while maintaining its grip on being the purveyor of Canadian culture, they employ jazz to attract an audience peripherally interested in literature. Jazz both signifies "poetry reading" for this audience and transforms a poetry reading, which also tends to be culturally coded as a dull, slow-paced, pretentious and thickly intellectual affair, into an energetic spectacle.

Kerouac aspired to make writing that attains the condition of jazz improvisation in various aspects of the writing practice beginning with the notion
of the “typewriter-as-piano” to his famous refusal to edit his original drafts, which were ultimately edited before publication. Kerouac enters the "jazz-as-form" mode of jazz poetry in that Kerouac's act of writing is an act of musical production in his conceptualization of the typewriter as an instrument of improvisation. According to Ann Charters, Kerouac compares himself “explicitly” to a jazz musician who sees jazz as a way to diverge from the conventions—the potted plants, so to speak—of American literature, the American literary scene and the conventions of the sentence, which to Kerouac “seemed . . . so iron bound in its rules, so inadmissible with reference to the actual format of my mind as [he] had learned to probe it in the modern spirit of Freud and Jung, that [he] couldn't express [him]self through that form any more” (Charters 481). In her essay on spontaneous bop prosody, Peggy Pacini points out that jazz appealed to the Beats as a way to escape the potted plants of literary convention that characterized American literary practice up to their generation:

For the Beat members, jazz and bebop were a way of life with a completely different approach to the creative process. A soundtrack for movement, rebellion and life, jazz and bebop appealed to this subterranean group . . . . They would pack in night clubs to hear Gillespie, Thelonius Monk and Charlie Parker to name but a few. Quite naturally, for many of them, jazz was included as a thematic presence in their novels. (688)

Influenced by bebop's improvisational approach, Kerouac invented a jazz poetics called "spontaneous bop prosody," which posits that there are nine essential elements required to write spontaneous prose: set-up, procedure, method, scoping, lag in procedure, timing, centre of interest, structure of work and mental
The second element, "procedure," includes Kerouac's notion that one blows words in the same way that a horn player blows notes, imbuing the act of writing with a free, soaring and expressive soloistic quality. For Kerouac, the essence of improvisational spontaneity lies in the act of blowing language freely over the subject of an image or a concept. Blowing also carries with it the connotation of loud, free expression; the phrase "blows over the changes," for example, suggests a mastery of jazz wherein the conventions of jazz have been internalized so thoroughly by the musician that the result is the musician can seemingly play freely despite the restrictions of harmony and rhythm implied by the head chart or tune.

Poet Clark Coolidge identifies spontaneity in Kerouac's work through the jazz term “blowing,” which refers to the improvisation played by the lead players in the band. Coolidge imports a vocabulary used by jazz musicians and jazz critics to describe Kerouac's work:

[One aspect of Kerouac's writing] is Blowing (as a jazz musician does) on Memory, or on the Subject of image. As if you could blow present words swinging over key centres of memory. As if words could be the melody of image. Word melody over image chords, that way? What we're really talking about here is improvisation, which is a totally fascinating and endless area. (Coolidge 50)

11 1) Set-up: considering the object or focus of one's writing before writing takes place; 2) Procedure: Kerouac's notion of blowing language, like a horn player, on an image; 3) Method: punctuation and syntax rules advising the writer to use as few periods and commas as possible; 4) Scoping: blowing freely into a subject, or rather, exploration of any and all aspects of a subject; 5) Lag in procedure: rather than stopping and thinking when coming upon a lag in writing, continuing to blow past the block; 6) Timing: keeping to the notion that writing process is always temporal and being aware of the temporal nature of writing; 7) Centre of interest: beginning a writing session without a plan in mind; 8) Structure of work: Kerouac advised to avoid the constriction of any formal structures beyond rough outlines "in out-fanning movement over subject," and 9) mental state: writing focused on the act of writing rather than the act of making meaning (Charters 481).
Here, Coolidge discursively renders musical improvisation into a Kerouacian writerly improvisation by exchanging musical concepts for literary; whereas jazz musicians *blow over chords*, Kerouac *blows over memory* and images are the "chords" built out of words (as opposed to chords built with intervallic sonorities) blown in the present moment. Coolidge's conception of a technical aspect of jazz music—the act of playing over a set of chord changes, or playing a "chorus"—creates a tropological tie between poetry and jazz. Coolidge turns a verbal description of an actual aspect of jazz musicianship into a figurative model for poetry. Jazz writing requires such tropological, figurative models in order to integrate jazz into writing because of the fundamental differences between writing and music. Music differs fundamentally from writing in its delivery device or medium; jazz music is an art whose delivery device is real time sound whereas writing manifests itself in static time on the page. For jazz and writing to intersect, there must be a notion of "symbolic jazz discourse" at work that inscribes jazz into writing through tropology since writing can never literally become music. Tropological signifiers about jazz enable jazz's entry into symbolic discourse through "... mark[ing] the entry of jazz into literature or, more precisely, into symbolic discourse. Because they grant it a voice and organize it on a highly abstract level, they enable us to recognize jazz as music and as a music with meaning. More importantly ... these tropes serve exegetical as well as grammatological ends. They function (1) as pedagogical tools, ways of explaining or writing about jazz and (2) as research tools, means of writing with jazz" (Jarret 64). A symbolic jazz discourse allows writers to create a poetics
around jazz that signifies a relationship to music through jazz language and metaphorical parallels, such as Coolidge’s comparison of chord changes to memory. Yet Coolidge’s comparison is not as much a description of improvisation—poetic improvisation or otherwise—as it is a description of a tropological appropriation of the concept of improvisation for the purposes of making an identification with improvising. His use of jazz symbolic discourse to bring jazz into literature simultaneously brings literature into a language of jazz.

Kerouac, on the other hand, attempts to apply a real time improvisation to writing. Kerouac's improvisational practice begins with his concept of the typewriter as musical instrument:

From the early 1950’s onward, he moved his method of composition ever closer to the area of music. He blew on his typewriter as a jazz musician blew on his instrument. It wasn’t cool jazz, it was bebop, hard and fast, the faster the better, until the melody was lost in a blur of notes. Kerouac could type faster than anyone else, according to the poet Philip Whalen: “The most noise that you heard while he was typing was the carriage return, slamming back again and again. The little bell would bing-bang! bing-bang! bing-bang! . . . (Malcolm quoting Whalen 367).

Kerouac's improvisation contains literal, jazz-as-form improvisation combined with figurative, jazz-as-signification improvisation mediated through symbolic discourse around jazz, which he uses to incorporate stylistic and figurative elements of jazz music into writing. Kerouac uses a trope of improvisation gleaned from his observation and listenership of jazz music to develop a notion of jazz-inflected, improvisational writing and also to shift his hybrid subjectivity into a sphere of outsider American life. Kerouac signifies his outsider status through jazz and through Beatness.
Kerouac invokes Beatness by, for example, incorporating aspects of blues music, particularly in his book *Book of Blues*, to create a cultural relationship between blackness and Beatness and in an attempt to participate in an African-American vernacular musical expression. The basic 12-bar blues pattern consists of three lines rhymed A-A-B; the first line states an issue followed by a repetition of the first line. The third line usually resolves or otherwise comments on the issue. For instance, iconic bluesman Robert Johnson's "32-20 Blues" follows the A-A-B pattern:

'f I send for my baby, man and she don't come  
'f I send for my baby, man and she don't come  
All the doctors in Hot Springs so' can't help her none.

Each verse in this particular song follows the A-A-B structure and is accompanied by the 12-bar blues chord progression. The various "blues" poems collected in *Book of Blues* attempt the blues formally in that Kerouac calls each poem a "chorus." In blues, chorus refers to the 12-bar blues form itself; playing 3 choruses, for example, means that the musician plays through the 12-bar form 3 times, or 36 bars. Each poem represents one iteration of the blues' A-A-B form. References to sadness and hardship in the poems also suggest common blues themes. But beyond these features, the blues-ness of Kerouac's blues is a thematic link to blues music along with a structural conceit:

A hard-hearted old farmer  
hidin' his wine in the cellar  
When he goes out he wears earmuffs  
He has a double-bitted axe  
sharp enough to shave shit  
His people are all buried  
in the same cemetery
which is located
under the doorstep
where the boy
couldn't get through
from the tomb (260)

Kerouac's posthumously released recording *Blues and Haikus* contains a recording of Kerouac himself singing the above poem in a blues style to accompaniment by television host and jazz pianist Steve Allen. During the recording, Kerouac makes a modification to his poem to make it fit into the blues structure by adding the phrase "In New England" (line 3) to round out the end of the first "A" phrase of the blues form. Altering the phraseology of the line against the melody is a technique often employed by blues singers in performance; Kerouac's use of adding a phrase to the sung version of his poem imitates the blues singer's prerogative to alter phraseology freely while singing. In this way, Kerouac engages with music-as-form in the performance of this poem. The poem itself, however, entirely relies on blues-as-signification through its titular association with blues music; the text itself does not seem to have any structural influence beyond the notion of this poem as a possible blues iteration.

The use of the blues form, however, signifies a desire to participate in African-American culture through what I call Kerouac's "Beat ethics." He derives Beat ethics from a socio-cultural formulation of jazz as the music of the African-American transgressor who rises against and transcends his marginalized racial position. Kerouac reads the socio-cultural contexts surrounding jazz into a notion of improvisation as always already embedded in a uniquely African-American form of musical practice. Kerouac was a knowledgeable fan of jazz music and
listened to it widely and extensively, but the bebop saxophonist Charlie Parker was Kerouac's primary signifier of Beat-ness in jazz music. Parker represents both counter-hegemonic improvisatory practices and the figure of the African-American achieving emancipation through innovative jazz improvisations. Kerouac's interpretation of bop music culturally and politically, as Richard Quinn discusses below, resonates with a popular notion of bop as having a social engagement beyond the music itself:

The interpretation of Parker's vision predominant today focuses on music as a socially corrective force. Since its nascence, many critics have perceived bebop as a form of counter-hegemonic critique. This critique, resting on the belief that bebop embodies African-American intellectual and emotional strength and that it expresses that strength through forms combining tradition and experimentation, asserts that the music enacts values that contradict post-war passivity and identity stereotyping. The music demands an engagement that precludes passive consumption and smug acceptance of the status quo. (162)

Quinn's passage sums up Kerouac's interest in Charlie Parker as a model for improvisatory jazz practice. Through Parker, Kerouac links his own writing with bebop's assault on the white appropriation of jazz music's harmony, rhythm, techniques and songs into the dance bands. But more importantly, for Kerouac, Charlie Parker was a signifier of cultural difference; Kerouac saw the figure of the “beat down” African-American musician as a sign of overcoming social adversity; thus Kerouac could see being Beat as something to aspire to.

James Campbell discusses the shift in signification that the term Beat undergoes:

12 Historically, bebop challenges the musical status quo due to its complicated harmonies and fast tempos, which differed from earlier jazz music that was more or less danceable and popular with the white middle and upper classes as the entertainment music known as "Swing." Bebop’s complexity is said also to responded to white appropriation of African-American jazz: the harmony is thought to be so complex as to be extremely difficult to appropriate and commodify for white musical audiences.
Sometime around the turn of the year 1948-49, the word *Beat* acquired glamor. From being a despised, fugitive condition, *Beat* became something someone might want to be. As used by lowdown blacks, in the spaces between drug-highs and sex-highs and music-highs, *Beat* packed into its abrupt syllable the experience of no-money, sadness, rejection. In its altering usage, however, the sense changed from passive to active—you weren’t rejected, you did the rejecting. As part of the process, the black word *Beat* turned white. (363)

Charlie Parker was a powerful Beat signifier for Kerouac in that Parker was both African-American and the primary inventor of bebop; thus Kerouac sees bop as a transgressive mode of expression and an act of rejection by marginalized people who are commonly the rejecters with Parker as its leading countercultural figure. In the sense that *Beatness* changed from passive to active and changed the subject position of Beat from the rejected to the rejecter, *Beatness* for the Beat poets constitutes a politico-aesthetic choice rather than a default register of being. Amor Kholi points out that:

Indeed, the Beats have traditionally been lauded and admired for their oppositionality and ‘individual flamboyant dissidence’ in the face of a restrictive Eisenhower America. Yet also, these outsiders have been inevitably attacked by calling attention to their ultimate exclusivity; they have been characterized as ‘white boys with bad habits and worse politics’ who ‘weirdly float above race and class and beyond history. (Quoting Kathryne V. Lindberg 174)

These outsider Beats, in taking on *Beatness* for themselves, establish themselves as outsiders that are in with each other, part of a group of outsider poets for whom “Beat” is a signifier of a particular, possibly self-induced and affected, normativity. “This normativity,” as Kholi says, “sublimates racial specificity in the name of a universality which is still ultimately white” (174). One of the codes of *Beatness* that links these in-outsiders to each other is an
approach to thinking about and participating in jazz through poetry and spontaneity that is a pillar of *Beatness*. Being non-musicians, Beat individuals like Kerouac could make whatever connections between writing and music they saw fit towards developing ways to participate in the production of the music. By doing so, the in-outsider Beats become in-outsiders to jazz music. James Malcolm describes Kerouac's interest in African-American culture as culturally fetishistic:

Kerouac was most attracted to jazz because of its ideological associations with African-American culture. . . . Kerouac and friends of his like Allen Ginsberg and William S. Burroughs typified the hipsters whom Norman Mailer, in his famous 1957 article “The White Negro,” characterized as outsiders to American life who were treated by white culture as if they thought they were black. . . . However much he identifies with African-Americans, Kerouac is more interested in the ideology of their “cultural dowry” than he is in the circumstances that produced it. Indeed, his primitivist view of black culture, one that shapes his use of jazz in *On the Road*, often misrepresents, exaggerates and suppresses important elements of the music and the culture in which it originated. (Malcolm 94)

As Malcolm describes, Kerouac creates for himself a *style* of black Beatness, forcing an identification with blackness that, by nature of the fact that Kerouac is an outsider to African-American culture, is an appropriated and manufactured persona. This identification is influenced by Kerouac's own marginalized subjectivity as a Québécois working class immigrant to the United States.

**The Poetry-and-Jazz Movement**

The three poets of West Coast "Poetry-and-Jazz" movement, Kenneth Rexroth, Kenneth Patchen and Laurence Ferlinghetti, take a position on the poetry and jazz relationship that severs jazz music from its narrative of the
revolutionary, political aspect of jazz music and from its links to African-American
culture, thereby falling into the "jazz-as-form" mode of jazz poetry. Although, like
Kerouac, they do employ references to jazz, jazz tunes and famous musicians,

The Poetry-and-Jazz movement, which coincides with the Beat movement,
diffs from the Beat movement in its conceptualization of jazz and its
relationship to culture. Rexroth, Patchen and Ferlinghetti use jazz mainly as a
formal vehicle for their poetry innovations, but do not see their use of jazz as
political. In Kenneth Patchen, Larry R. Smith points out the fundamental
distinction between the Poetry-and-Jazz poets and their Beat contemporaries:

The history of the [poetry-and-jazz] movement is surrounded by
misconceptions, the chief one being the popular but limited
association with Beat poetry. In reality, it is a varied movement
grounded on a deep appreciation of jazz rather than the disillusion
and nihilism of the Beats. (125)

In the chapter "Some Thoughts on Jazz as Music, as Revolt" in Rexroth's Bird in
The Bush, Rexroth reveals that his ideology concerning the jazz and poetry
relationship is, unlike Kerouac's, not concerned with the cultural politics of jazz.
Rexroth views jazz as an art form for-and-of itself and not crucially connected to
cultural politics. Rexroth writes:

What is jazz? First off, it is music, not a voice of revolt, not a social
mystique, a "way of life." It is music of a rather simple kind and so
it should be fairly easy to define and describe. (20)

Rexroth goes on to point out that jazz is generally played in 4/4 time, that its
material comes mainly from "Negro and Southern white" spiritual and work songs
and that much of jazz's sound is owed "to imitation of the human voice" (21). His
description points to a pre-bebop form of jazz, a dance music based on blues
and spiritual harmonies, which use simpler chord progressions and slower tempos than bebop. What makes jazz "jazz" for Rexroth is not its cultural connection, but the fact that jazz swings. To make his point, Rexroth attempts to show that it is not necessarily jazz's origins as an African-American music that makes jazz authentic, saying that:

> If you drop the word Negro [from his phrase "Negro and Southern white spirituals"] and substitute French or German, all [of Rexroth's points about jazz] apply equally to the music of Couperin or Bach. Does this mean that the essence of the question ["what is jazz?"] is the Negro origin of jazz or that something has been omitted in our definition? (23)

He concludes that swing, in its "organic, flexible, fluctuating" rhythm, is the essence of jazz and disavows any connection between jazz and politics since "The notion that jazz is social protest music is the product of the systematic anti-American paranoia of French intellectuals and the Friends of the Soviet Union folk culture of a couple of Greenwich Village night clubs of the Thirties" (37); "If jazz music is a revolt, it is a revolt towards more natural, wholesome, normal human relationships" (39). Rexroth strongly criticizes Beat poets as abusing and misunderstanding jazz music; he calls the Beats "debauched Puritans" who "agree with the most hostile critics of jazz, or for that matter, with the most chauvinistic slanderers of the American Negro . . . . In their utter ignorance they embrace the false image which their enemies the squares have painted" (Rexroth 40). Rexroth sees jazz as fostering positive human relationships in

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13 Alan Neil, the pianist in Kenneth Patchen's accompanying jazz band on the recording *Kenneth Patchen Reads with Jazz in Canada* makes remarks about the Beats similar to Rexroth's but from the jazz musician's point of view. "Jazz guys . . . who generally do not read poetry anyway . . . are really bugged about Beat jazz and poetry" (Neil np).
two ways. First, part of Rexroth's agenda in combining poetry and jazz is to use jazz music as a hook to get people interested in poetry. Secondly, Rexroth sees the relationships between the musicians in the band and the relationships between the musicians and the poet in the performance situation as a model for positive, egalitarian human relationships.

In "Four Essays on Jazz Poetry," Rexroth posits that "Jazz poetry gets poetry out of the classrooms and into contact with large audiences who have not read any verse since grammar school. They listen, they like it, they come back for more. It demands of poetry, however deep and complex, something of a public surface, like the plays of Shakespeare that had stuff for everybody, the commonality, the middle class, the nobility, the intellectuals" (7). Rexroth's position on the effect of jazz on poetry is similar to Komunyakaa's in that Rexroth perceives poetry as chronically bound by the restrictions of educational institutions and by its connection to the bourgeois class. One way that jazz counter-acts the bourgeois notion of poetry and the notion of individual genius by suggesting a non-hierarchical relationship between performers. Rexroth's approach to the performed jazz poetry relationship attempts to incorporate the reading poet into the band as an equal partner in performance. In contrast, jazz bands incorporating a vocalist into their format generally play a role as musical accompanists backing the vocalist, who "fronts" the band. The other musicians support the vocalist, which is a limited role that suppresses the range of expression musicians have available; with vocalists in the band, music defers to language; music is the vehicle for semantic meaning. For jazz bands that feature
vocalists, the tendency is for the musicians to back the vocalist. Rexroth's approach, on the other hand, is to find ways to incorporate language into the band as an equal partner with the other musicians, as opposed to the vocalist and backing band situation. For Rexroth, maintaining equality defines the music language relationship since "[w]henever the voice takes on the character of a solo singer or the band sinks to background music, we feel we have failed and we scrap that effort and start over. You can readily see that, contrary to popular belief, this poetry and jazz combination is harder work than either of the arts taken separately (3). He adds a warning to other jazz poets, saying, "if you don't work, but hard, you are going to fall on your face," a comment which suggests Rexroth sees making the jazz poetry relationship work as an act of mastery.

For Rexroth, negotiating the relationship between poetry and jazz involves negotiating the relationship between jazz and poetry and the social relationships between the poet and the band members. Through the egalitarian relationship between the musicians and the poets in the band, poetry approaches the condition of jazz and approaches the status of a musical instrument in the band, rather than being a fronting vocalist. The jazz poet, in Rexroth's view, elevates the written into the space of sound uttered in real time and contributes to the overall, homogeneous sound of the band. But Rexroth also works with the text in order to bring music and language together; much of the work that the jazz poet must do, according to Rexroth, involves setting poetry to music. Setting poetry to music, in terms of classical composition, involves appending melody, harmony and rhythm to poetry towards turning the poem into a song. In Rexroth's case,
the music is composed and written out with opportunities for the musicians to play improvised solos notated. But instead of setting the voice to music, the "voice [is] carefully scored in" to prescribe the music-poetry relationship. He adds, "There is nothing wrong with this. Far more of the greatest jazz is written music than the lay public realizes" (2). Rexroth is interested primarily in performing from scores and not improvising himself. He writes, "Needless to say, the poetry is not 'improvised' either. This has been tried, but with disastrously ridiculous results and not by me" (2). The flexibility and feeling of jazz spontaneity operates in Rexroth's conception of the relationship between music and poetic language and how the vocalist interacts with the band, rather than in an improvisational way; Rexroth appends poetry to jazz, but the poetry, scored along with the musical accompaniment, leaves improvisation for the musicians. On the other hand, although Rexroth's writing is not improvisational, it still maintains a fundamental connection to jazz in how it conceives of the relationships between performers. Instead of moving towards the condition of jazz music through overt formal features, Rexroth's jazz poetry incorporates an ethic of equal participation borrowed from the social relationships inherent to the jazz band.

14 Rexroth goes on to describe his band's use of textual materials: "Recently, in Los Angeles, I played a two-week engagement with a fine band led by Shorty Rogers. In each case we worked from carefully rehearsed "head arrangements." The musicians had each in front of them the text of the poetry and the sheets were used as cue sheets, scribbled with 'inners and outers,' chord progressions, melodic lines and various cues. I feel that this method ensures the maximum amount of flexibility and spontaneity and yet provides a steadily deepening and thickening (in the musical sense) basis, differing emotionally more than actually from a written score. The whole thing is elaborately rehearsed—more than usual for even the most complicated "band number." I would like to mention that jazz, contrary to lay opinion, is not just spontaneously "blown" out of the musicians' heads. Behind even the freest improvisation lies a fund of accepted patterns, chord changes, riffs, melodic figures, variations of tempo and dynamics, all understood by the musicians" (2).
Larry R. Smith characterizes Rexroth's work with poetry and jazz as "poetry-and-jazz," but describes Kenneth Patchen's approach as a more successful integration between the music and the language: "poetry-jazz" (130).

"Poetry-and-Jazz," for Smith, signifies a relationship between the two elements that places poetry and jazz side by side but does not integrate poetry with elements of jazz. Smith's term is similar to my notion of jazz-as-signification but has the added nuance of suggesting the relative positioning of jazz and poetry also keeps the two elements separate from each other. "Poetry-jazz," which is similar to my jazz-as-form, signifies a closer, more integrated relationship between formal properties of both elements in which jazz takes on some of the formal features of poetry and vice versa. Unlike Rexroth and his notion of "poetry-and-jazz," Patchen is not interested in the mercenary use of jazz to sweeten poetry to attract attention from readers who believe poetry on its own to be fusty and old fashioned. Patchen's approach is more improvisatory in that he prefers the band to listen to the words and respond to them in real time; the only thing arranged in Patchen's poetry-jazz is when the musicians come in during the poem (130). Smith describes Patchen's approach as "the free improvisational mind controlled only by a time form. . . . The poetry is influencing the jazz and the jazz, it seems, is influencing the poetry" (132). Smith is attempting to describe the relationship between the jazz poet and the rest of the band in the performance situation. Qualities of the jazz band's accompaniment inflect Patchen's delivery of the poem and qualities of Patchen's delivery are picked up and emulated by the backing band. The recording *Kenneth Patchen Reads with*
Jazz in Canada demonstrates the stylistic dialogue between Patchen and the Al Neil Quartet (Alan Neil, piano; Lionel Chambers, bass; Dale Hillary, alto saxophone; Bill Boyle, drums). Patchen elongates the consonant *n* sound when he needs to lengthen a phrase to coincide with what the musicians are playing. In the passage below, which I transcribed from the recording, I mark where he elongates the *n* to approximate the sound of a held note:

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Come in here, child
no cause you should go
brother nnnever hurt his brother
nnnobody here ever wonnnnnnnder without a hope
nnnobody here ever wonnnnnnnder with a hope
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("Four Blues Poems")

The consonant *n* (the voiced alveolar fricative, in phonetics) is a strange choice of verbal sound for Patchen's purposes. In English, vowel sounds are elongated in speech and in most English song forms, rather than consonants. Vowel sounds are produced when the vocal apparatus is in its most open and resonant position, meaning that they are tonally brighter and more expressive than consonant sounds when held over a duration. I see Patchen's elongated *n* as a means of importing a musical quality into the verbal and as way of interacting with the jazz band rather than moving poetic language to the condition of music. Patchen's elongated *n* has the effect of maintaining a connection to the spoken word such that the spoken word makes no attempts to transfer into song. This aspect of Patchen's reading style keeps "the poetry" separate from "the jazz," referring back to Smith's comments earlier, as if the poetry were just another instrument in the band. The rhythmic interplay between Patchen and the Al Neil Quartet, however, has an engaging contrapuntal dialogue that elicits a
comparison between musical phraseology and spoken phraseology. It is remarkable how Patchen's reading, in finding ways to link poetry and music, makes his text sound like musical phraseology without becoming musical beyond the level of the phrase (aside from the elongated n). In terms of improvisation, however, in Patchen's poetry-jazz, the only real improvisation is being performed by Al Neil and the other musicians. Patchen's approach is improvisational in the sense that he does not score the poems and prefers not to rehearse (Smith 132). The only improvisation taking place is due to the fact that the band does not practice beforehand, so the interactions between the musicians and exactly how Patchen will read is undetermined.

In the jazz poetry relationship, jazz is secondary to poetry. The majority of jazz poets are first of all poets attempting to inscribe jazz into poetry, rather than vice versa. Whether or not the most authentic jazz poetry operates as Rexroth describes, or is more successful when mostly improvised, poetry has the effect of historicizing jazz if it deals mostly with narratives about certain jazz musicians or tunes or events, or in the case of the Feinstein poem, mythologizing jazz. Jazz must be appropriated into poetry through tropological associations to jazz on both the form and content levels; jazz music is incorporated as a static musical artefact and not in an active sense. This means that the improvisational, real time quality of jazz is only ever represented in poetic language. Jazz poetry's contention that appending jazz to poetry constitutes an opening of poetry contains an irony in light of actual jazz music in that, as Neill Pastras points out,
jazz music requires the musician to absorb practical knowledge of the form of
jazz music and a jazz repertoire:

The literary analogue to Parker's music is neither Kerouac's
rambling prose nor Ginsberg's amorphous line. A more accurate
analogy would be a poet like Shakespeare, whose assimilation of
the traditional form of the sonnet is so complete that it no longer
seems to be imposed on the material from without. The jazz
musician's assimilation of traditional forms is equally complete.
(12)

Pastras describes the tendency for jazz poets to create language structures that
mimic and represent jazz metaphorically rather than actually. Interestingly,
Pastras suggests a way of literally incorporating jazz into poetry by creating a
strict parallel between two disparate forms. Such an incorporation would involve
using an "X is to Y as Y is to Z" analogy such as "jazz is to music as poetry is to
literature" and applying jazz as a modification of forms already in existence in the
field of literature. But in the poetry of writers such as Rexroth, Kerouac and
Ginsberg, the jazz poetry is an artefact not only of the exciting formal properties
of jazz music and jazz improvisation but also an artefact of race. Komunyakaa
points out:

Jazz shaped the Beat aesthetic, but that movement seemed a
privilege only whites could afford. Blacks, fighting for inclusion,
didn't have to ostracise themselves voluntarily. Of course, this was
a cultural paradox. To many, the Beat Movement was nothing
more than the latest minstrel show in town with the new Jim Crows
and Zip Coons, another social club that admitted hardly any women
or blacks. Yet they said that Charlie Parker was their Buddha.
(Komunyakaa 654).

Above, Komunyakaa describes a central problem in Beat poetry, that is, rather
than finding ways to participate in jazz music and apply jazz to poetics, Beat
poetry’s engagement with jazz also involves cultural appropriation through the symbolic.

**Nathaniel Mackey and Amiri Baraka: Cultural Improvisations**

In *Creativity and Cultural Improvisation, an Introduction*, Elizabeth Hallam and Tim Ingold posit that improvisation is a necessary aspect of living in a culture. Culture, as a framework for an established set of rules and norms for living in a particular society, is in essence a palette of improvisational materials linked to real time:

We begin with the assertion that there is no script for social and cultural life. But there are most certainly scripts *within* it. People have to work it out as they go along. In a word, they have to *improvise* . . . . [W]e want to make four points about improvisation. First, it is *generative*, in the sense that it gives rise to the phenomenal forms of culture as experienced by those who live by them or in accord with them. Second, it is *relational*, in that it is continually attuned and responsive to the performance of others. Third, it is *temporal*, meaning that it cannot be collapsed into an instant, or even a series of instants, but embodies a certain duration. Finally, improvisation is the *way we word*, not only in the ordinary conduct of our everyday lives, but also in our studied reflections on these lives in fields of art, literature and science. (1)

Ingold and Hallam posit a notion of improvisation that is not only a process of doing or being, but a *way of wording* something. Poetic improvisation is a way of re-wording or re-assembling socio-cultural rules within the space of the poem, since, as Walton Muyumba points out, “Improvisation is a way of articulating the agon between the individual artist, the musical setting, the composition itself and the larger social matrix that shapes the aesthetic” (32). Muyumba’s notion of improvisation as revision and othering is a concise description of both Amiri
Baraka and Nathaniel Mackey’s particular negotiations with culture in both their thematic concerns and poetic structures. Baraka and Mackey use jazz improvisation as a means of investing their identity as African-Americans with individual African-American subjectivity.

Amiri Baraka sees improvisation as a condition of language built-in to language through the verb. There is a difference, for example, between the noun "swing," which could describe jazz music as appropriated, stylized and codified by white culture as an artefact, and the verb "Swing," which indicates a condition of a cultural form as existing in a mutable, flexible form. Baraka uses the distinction between noun and verb as a way of describing the appropriation of African-American art forms by whites. As Baraka puts it in Blues People:

Swing, the verb, meant a simple reaction to the music (and as it developed in verb usage, a way of reacting to anything in life). As it was formalized and the term and the music taken further out of context, swing became a noun that meant a commercial popular music in cheap imitation of a kind of Afro-American music. (212-213)

Jazz manifests itself in Baraka’s work more through signification than through form, especially with regard to jazz’s socio-political connotations: As Mackey points out:

The cultivation of a unique, individual style that black music encourages informs and inspires [Baraka’s] attitudes toward writing. In his statement on poetics for the anthology The New American Poetry 1943-1960 he echoes Louis Armstrong’s ad-libbed line on a 1949 recording with Billie Holiday, calling it “How you Sound??” The emphasis on self-expression in his work is also an emphasis on self-transformation, an othering or, as [poet Kamau] Brathwaite has it, an X-ing of the self, the self not as noun but as verb. Of the post-bop innovations of such musicians as Albert Alyer and Sun Ra, he writes: “New Black Music is this: Find the self, then kill it”
Baraka uses a model of jazz improvisation as a way of fragmenting self and injecting something of the collectivity of the jazz ensemble into the writing. He does so by using the poem as a space where an ensemble of jazz luminaries, such as Thelonious Monk, Charles Mingus, Miles Davis and John Coltrane interact. "AM/TRAK" 3, for example, compares the attitudes of Miles Davis and John Coltrane with respect to their particular styles of playing:

Miles wd stand back and negative check  
. . . oh, he dug him—Trane  
But Trane clawed at limits of cool  
slandered sanity  
with his tryin' to be born  
raging  
shit  
Oh  
blow,  
yeh go do it  
honk, scream  
uhuh yeh—history  
love  
. . .

Although at earlier times in their careers Davis and Coltrane played together, Davis later went on to participate in the West Coast "cool jazz" style, whereas Coltrane increasingly moved towards the ferocious, emotionally expressive style that Baraka describes as screaming. The suggestion in the poem above is that Coltrane's playing and Coltrane himself, by "clawing at the limits of cool," makes Coltrane spiritually transcendent since he is not just playing but "tryin' to be born," whereas Davis is more worldly in his trying to be cool.
"AM/TRAK" also signifies music throughout in a variety of onomatopoeic passages; the following example uses the phoneme "duh" to inscribe the final phrase of Thelonious Monk's "In Walked Bud" into the poem:

There was nothing left to do but be where monk cd find him that crazy mother fucker duh duh-duh duh-duh duh duh duh duh-duh duh-duh duh duh Duuuuuuuuhhhhhhh (26)

Improvisation is present symbolically in this poem through the onomatopoeic passage; the passage imitates the final phrase in the tune's head, after which the musicians would go on to play several choruses of improvisation. The elongated "Duuuuuuuuuhhhhhhhhhhh" imitates the final note of the phrase being held long to ramp up the musical tension before the solos begin. This passage ends with the interrogative "Can you play this shit? (Life asks)/Come by and Listen." Here, Baraka links jazz improvisation to the everyday by suggesting that struggling is a form of everyday improvisation.

Mackey's engagement with improvisation is such that the improvisational properties of jazz inform his project of de-essentializing the African-American subject through disturbing tropes of identity that otherwise remain static. Jazz improvisation, for Mackey, operates as a signifier for dynamic epistemic instability analogous to the Wolof trickster god Legba's gait, made unstable because of uneven leg lengths. Mackey describes how instability operates in *Discrepant Engagement*: 
[O]bliquity or angularity (a word used frequently in reference to the music of Thelonious Monk, Andrew Hill, Eric Dolphy and others) challenges the epistemic order whose constraints it implicitly brings to light. This it does by insisting upon the partial, provisional character of any proposition or predication, by advancing a vigilant sense of any reign or regime of truth as susceptible to qualification. (29)

In terms of cultural improvisation, the poem for Mackey is a field for creating instability of the epistemic order through invoking African mythologies and mythological characters in his writing. Legba's step has a rhythmic lilt due to his uneven legs. Mackey explains his interest in Legba in Paracritical Hinge:

Legba is the god of doorways, gateways, entrances, thresholds, crossroads, intersections. Legba is crippled, the limping god who nevertheless dances. That conjunction of limping disability with the gracefulness of dance is one of the things I hear in [tenor saxophonist John Coltrane's] solo. This also relates to a forking of the voice, so that we hear the intersection of two lines of articulation—doubling the voice, splitting the voice, tearing it... The business of the pursuit of another voice, an alternate voice... is very much a part of the African-American musical tradition... (192-193)

The figure of Legba appears in "Song of the Andoumboulou," for example, as an offsetting of the final word of each stanza to the right, which has the effect of mimicking the "thump" of Legba's shorter leg striking the ground in step. This device appears in Song of the Andoumboulou 44:

Wherever we were it was a tavern
we were in, a bar we stepped up
to, ordered... Stood in front of
the jukebox, bartender at our backs,
rapture
what before we thought ruin...
Whatever we rode it was a record
we spun, wilting strings addressing
us as we looked out from Shard
Café, low-lying mist obscuring
summer,
Lone Coast… Every arrival outrun
by the image we had of it, begged
it be the where we’d been after, there
there be nowhere we’d rather
be…(44)

The words "rapture, summer" and "be" all fall on the thump of Legba's shorter leg. The rhythm imitates Legba's walking rhythm; the left-justified quatrain in each stanza falls on the movement of the longer, healthy leg, which takes a longer stride than the shorter, crippled leg, represented by the offset word following each quatrain. The effect is of a longer passage contrasted with the quick thump of the final word concluding each stanza. According to Wolof mythology, not only is Legba's gait uneven because of the length of his legs, but each leg walks in a different world than the other, making Legba a bridge figure between the human world and the spirit world; Legba walks in both worlds simultaneously. This aspect of the Legba myth appears in the poem as well; each quatrain narrates the activities of the speaker in the speaker's present and listening to jazz on the jukebox with friends in the Shard Café. The offset "thumps" use the words "rapture," "summer," and "be." In the context of the poem, these words represent the world the speaker sees but does not exist in. In stanza one, listening to the jukebox brings "rapture," which describes a kind of enthralled joy in listening to the music, but "rapture," in its religious sense, is a collecting and transporting away of the human spirit to heaven. In stanza two, "summer" is positioned spatially outside the bar in the distance obscured by a mist through which the speaker cannot see. The "be" in stanza three describes an existence in a place—The Lone Coast—and time other than where the
speaker is during the narration of the poem. The Lone Coast is a place the speaker moves toward but never arrives at; it is concealed by the speaker's expectations of the Lone Coast that never come to be realized. In the quatrain, the speaker is distant from the Lone Coast, but Legba's thump on "be" indicates that Legba is already in this place, bridged between the time and context of the speaker and the vision of elsewhere on the Lone Coast. Jazz in this poem is signified through the jukebox and the café. The music on the jukebox, which brings the listeners to rapture, is a symbol for the other place, the place where Legba's short leg steps; jazz music is a kind of signifier for the spirit world and indication that the spirit world does exist even though it is unattainable for the speaker. Jazz appears through the mode of jazz-as-signification and occupies a discursive role rather than a formal or structural role in the poem.

Mackey's approach to using jazz, just as in Kerouac, is largely artefactual in his invocation of and reference to music and musicians. Mackey specifically uses jazz discursively, as he says, in "the business in the pursuit of another voice," a split, unstable voice. It is interesting, however, that critic T.J. Anderson sees Mackey's work Atet A.D. as improvisational despite the fact that improvisation appears in the work only through signification. Anderson cites the following passage from Atet A.D. as an example of Mackey's improvisation, which I quote in its entirety in order to demonstrate the supposedly improvisational qualities of the passage:

Dear Angel of Dust:
You should’ve heard me in the dream last night. I found myself walking down a sidewalk and came upon an open manhole off to the right out of which came (or strewn around which lay) the disassembled parts of a bass clarinet. Only the funny thing was that, except for the bell of the horn, all the parts looked more like plumbing fixtures than like parts of a bass clarinet. Anyway, I picked up a particularly long piece of "pipe" and proceeded to play. I don't recall seeing anyone around but somehow I know the "crowd" wanted to hear "Naima." I decided I'd give it a try. In any event, I blew into heaven knows what but instead of "Naima" what came out was Shepp's solo on his version of "Cousin Mary" on the Four for Trane album—only infinitely more gruffly resonant and varied and warm. (I even threw in a few licks of my own). The last thing I remember is coming to the realization that what I was playing already existed on a record. I could hear scratches coming from somewhere in back and to the left of me. This realization turned out, of course, to be what woke me up. (1)

Anderson’s argues that "Mackey imaginatively uses improvisation not only to apply to the manipulation of sound but to demonstrate how physical objects (pipes) can be manipulated as well. . . . The dream continues until N. realizes that his performance already exists on record, that it is unoriginal. Once the act of improvisation is lost, the moment of awakening occurs" (165). However, I do not read Mackey as "using" improvisation *qua* improvisation, as Anderson indicates. Rather, in *Atet A.D.*, Mackey employs improvisation only through signification as a narrative trope. We see Mackey's narrator, N., improvising in several ways: 1) he attempts to play a bass clarinet, something that N. has never done before, so he must improvise not only musically but also he must invent an approach to playing the instrument; 2) the bass clarinet turns out to be some kind of PVC plumbing pipe rather than a bass clarinet. N. must then improvise a musical instrument out of an object that is not a musical instrument by design; 3) N. attempts to play the tune "Naima," but instead of playing Naima, and instead
of blowing a stream of non-musical noise, which one would expect to emit from a PVC pipe, N. quotes saxophonist Archie Shepp's recorded (improvised) solo; 4) while playing Shepp's solo, N. inserts his own improvised material. The passage actually has no improvisation at all structurally on the level of form nor in the narrative itself since what N. plays is ultimately a quotation of a recorded solo and not an improvisation. Improvisation's relationship to poetic language is itself a dream, existing in the ether of the imagination and the conceptual realm, with no hope of crossing over into materiality.

**Coolidge: Jazz Poet of the Middle Ground**

In "Clark Coolidge and a Jazz Aesthetic," Aldon Nielsen compares Coolidge's application of bebop to Kerouac's. Nielsen argues that other than a literary inheritance of the possibilities of a poetics of improvisation,

Coolidge's poems are in most other ways as unlike Kerouac's writing as might be imagined and in Coolidge's art, jazz is surrounded by none of the exoticism and primitivism we so often find among the Beats. The liberation Coolidge finds in the model of jazz is that freedom which comes to the intensely practised. It is not the freedom to do anything, but rather the freedom to replace the given of a melody line, the freedom to play over the bar lines, the freedom to supply inter-chords and counter-rhythms, freedoms successfully embraced only by those who are already familiar with their instrument and with its repertoire. It is the Free Jazz evolved by Ornette Coleman or Cecil Taylor, not the freedom of the technically ignorant so often conjured by early critics of these musicians. (96)

Nielsen suggests here that Coolidge's sense of how to apply music is not based in a romantic mythology of jazz the way Kerouac's poetry is. Coolidge's writing, compared to Mackey and Baraka, is artefactual in that the techniques of jazz
music are arrested and made static for the purposes of importing them into poetry, but unlike Mackey and Baraka, whose model of jazz is thoroughly artefactual, however, is informed by jazz practice; he has assimilated and learned how to use the materials of jazz to improvise music and to apply improvisational practice to writing at the moment of composition in literal ways.

In contrast to these three writers, poet Clark Coolidge, who is also a drummer, uses jazz rhythm and improvisation as both a model for his writing, in his practice, i.e. at the moment of writing and also literally in his revision of the jazz idiom as poetic technique. Jazz improvisation is also a model for the rhythm and syntax of Kerouac, Mackey and Baraka’s poetry, although neither Mackey nor Baraka attempt to directly import jazz improvisational techniques into their writing practice. Both Mackey and Baraka use jazz in a similar way: jazz is a model and informant for their explorations and revision of both the American literary tradition and the African-American subject. Kerouac, on the other hand, includes improvisational techniques in his writing as part of his writing practice while also drawing on jazz as a model for identity politics. As Nielsen writes, "Coolidge has attended carefully to the revolutions marked in American poetics by William Carlos Williams and Gertrude Stein, but he has also learned from African-American music in ways that they never could, for they never really listened" (108).

In the July 1993 Naropa University Panel on Poetry and Jazz, featuring saxophonist Steve Lacy along with Mackey and Coolidge, Coolidge describes his interest in bebop as a poetic strategy. Like Kerouac, Coolidge uses bebop
symbolically, but also structurally in his writing. Bebop provides Coolidge with an alternative to fixed verse forms and fixed meters by suggesting "a duration" as a unit of time:

I was interested in the ways that rhythm could make articulate all the possibilities of literal time and periods of time durations within a given situation of a set event. And if I went to the classic metrical resolutions at the time, I found basically potted context, no matter how skilfully used, you knew where you were going to begin and you certainly knew where you were going to end and it was all primarily accomplished before you even got there. You could make breaks and caesura and do things with that fixed containment, but nevertheless it was far previous to your experience and it really didn't need you; there was really nothing you could do with it in any decisive way. . . . I went to this as an alternative of the potted metrical systems already in place. That was always fascinating to me: what you could do in a particular duration. (13:21)

Coolidge discusses his use of bebop time as an alternative to what he sees as the static, predetermined, "potted" metric forms of verse poetry by providing an alternate way of thinking about the poetic line as consisting of durations of time. Coolidge's durations act conceptually as a pocket of time along the continuum of poetry. For Coolidge, bebop time causes the poem to become a temporal and rhythmic space rather than a rhythmic movement through the poem. Jazz music, often played in four-quarter time (4/4, read as "four over four" or "four-four time"), uses four beats to a bar. The "bar," however, is one duration that contains smaller durations that subdivide into increasingly smaller durations. Within a bar, each particular beat occupies its own rhythmic space that can be subdivided into smaller rhythmic units. In the chart below, four beats subdivides into eight, eight into sixteen and so on:
The jazz improviser thinks of each beat as containing other beats and part of the jazz musician's skill set is the ability to feel all the rhythmic possibilities within a given rhythmic space. Coolidge articulates this concept as a poetic strategy by saying:

In bop, especially in its drums . . . there is the sense that sheer continuance gets articulated. Momentum as seduction, in which the one of that ever-first beat tends very soon to lose its "e." . . . . Awareness of all the room that exists within a single beat and just exactly which point in that space you want to occupy, though the room itself may be moving at a very high rate of speed at the time. Bop's fascination with extremes of tempo reveals its major involvement with the realms of time. The feel is that time has a precise centre, like tightroping on a moving pulley clothesline you're always trying to keep up midway between the poles; it really gets that sharply physical. (5:40)

Time in bop, and by extension, in Coolidge's writing, is like "tightroping on a moving pulley clothesline" in that as one moves forward in time, one must also remain balanced and "still" in the subdivided beat. Coolidge's articulation of how he feels rhythm in jazz transferred over to poetry using the word "one" analogically describes rhythmic space in terms of verbal enunciation. He suggests that just as the jazz musician is aware not only of the four beats in each bar, but also the possible rhythmic subdivisions between these beats, Coolidge
can feel rhythmic possibilities not only on the level of the word, but also on the level of the letter. In other words, whereas metric forms such as iambic pentameter prescribe the rhythm that occurs in the pace of one line of poetry, Coolidge instead wants to use the rhythmic possibilities suggested by and inhabiting the interstices between phrases, words, letters and lines. Bebop poetics is Coolidge’s attempt to toss out the potted context of verse forms and create rhythmic possibilities for language beyond the stricture of versification.

For example, for *The Rova Improvisations*, Coolidge uses the complete discography of The Rova Saxophone Quartet to frame the improvisations. The book contains two separate movements, which are the results of "... two separate parallel surges of improvisation. The first written while listening to all the tracks of Rova’s albums in the order of their recording. The second while reading through those initial writings and written without the recordings" (*The Rova Improvisations* flyleaf). Coolidge uses the names for each separate track as the titles for the poems, using the playing duration of each track as a time constraint. The recording sets up the improvisational heuristic by setting up pockets of improvisational time along the continuum of poetry. Throughout the poems, Coolidge uses jazz on the symbolic level as well as the structural; musical references tend to have a narrative function in the book, but they do not dominate the writing. Rather, musical references function as the semantic link between the writing and the particulars of the music on the Rova record; they indicate the connection between the poetry and jazz improvisation. "The Bay," for example, contains a drummer character:
It lights up, doesn't it?
Funny to be here
at all and give the drummer some
he takes
slipped some parlors into it
went back Z-ed around the wedgewood
Great bores of trees
the bees that are snappy
where silence as a sort of fuel (18)

Coolidge uses lineation as his primary rhythmic notational device, as opposed to the meters or accentual-syllabic rhythms prescribed by the rules of versification, which are an outside structure imposed on the poetry before the moment of composition. Rather, Coolidge's approach demonstrates the rhythmic possibilities that already reside in language before, during and after the moment of composition. Presumably, Coolidge hears rhythm not as a pulse or meter, but a syncopated pattern erupting into space and time at the very moment of writing. The line breaks separate phrases according to rhythmic units according to Coolidge's sense of bebop rhythm and phraseology.

**Steve Lacy and Music-plus-Poetry Composition**

Beginning in 1970, in the later 20 years of his 40 year career, saxophonist Steve Lacy began setting modernist and contemporary poetry of various kinds to music. Most notably, Lacy has set the works of Robert Creeley, Samuel Beckett, Tom Raworth, Taslima Nasrin, Herman Melville, Vladimir Mayakovsky and Brion Gysin. Lacy also set English translations of the Tao Te Ching and various haiku poets. Whereas setting poetry to music is not particular to Steve Lacy, his recognition of poetry not only as a source for interesting lyrics but also improvisational structures led him to a way of not only adding lyrics to music but
also *music to lyrics* by distilling compositional and improvisational concepts from poetic structures. In the Naropa panel on poetry and music featuring Steve Lacy, Nathaniel Mackey and Clark Coolidge, Lacy states:

Jazz in the 50’s was becoming quite codified . . . it was getting very boring. . . . What we did in the 60’s is that we cracked all the elements—the harmony, the melody, and the rhythm went out the window—and we got free for awhile. But then, when we were looking for structures after that, we turned to literature, to words—to poetry—to find a freedom of form. Because a music that’s based on words is much more flexible than a music that just goes by bar lines, where the structure is the 32-bar form AABA with certain chord changes and all that, this is a rigid, potted structure. On the other hand, if you have a Herman Melville poem and set this to music you wind up with a thing that is a much more malleable, more interesting structure, and it’s phrasing, in a way, that we were looking for. (Panel on Poetry and Jazz 19:40-21:45)

Lacy discusses above a shift in compositional modes. Instead of beginning a composition from the point of view of jazz, jazz harmony and Western musical convention, which uses set forms involving an even number of bars and strict chord changes, Lacy moves to composing music out of the rhythmic, tonal and phraseological aspects of writing as basis for developing a musical composition out of a poem. A composition written in this manner uses the verbal phrase as the starting point for composition and fits the music to the words rather than the typical manner of setting poetry to music, which tends to involve fitting the poetry to the logic of European harmony. Above, Lacy expresses the problem Anthony Braxton faced during his first concert of purely improvisational music that I discussed in Chapter 1. Without some kind of operational heuristic imposed either by an overarching improvisational strategy or the decisions of the individual musician to consciously limit his or her improvisational vocabulary and
develop an improvised "piece" out of a handful of musical elements. Steve Lacy terms this aspect of improvisation "the hermetic free" to indicate that in the absence of composition, apparent musical freedom still butts up against the borders of both the limitations of musical freedom (that is to say, in the absence of harmony and compositional structure, there are still limits) and the limitations of the individual musician's skills, ideas, physiology and vocabulary. Referring to his post 1950s free period that Lacy discusses in the quotation above, Lacy characterizes the hermetic free as "the point of no return, where the music had the maximum calories in it. There was nothing to say, no words necessary. Just: play" (Panel on Poetry and Jazz 35:00). In other words, in the absence of compositional structure, free improvised jazz focused on energetic group expression as its primary heuristic, which directs improvisers to expend emotional energy to the maximum and exploit the "noise-making" capabilities of their instruments. The notion of the hermetic free contains unspoken rules about how to play together as Lacy indicates by saying "there was nothing to say, no words necessary." The freeness of free playing, for example, deters anyone in a group of freely improvising musicians from playing specific harmonic or melodic content that would disrupt the musical aesthetic of avoiding pre-established rules of jazz harmony; there are unspoken rules about what not to play that create the overarching heuristic of group free improvisation without prescribing specifically what to play. With regards to Lacy's song writing, Lacy used writing in several ways, ranging from using poetry as lyrics, to using poetry and its formal devices to structure approaches to improvisation. Lacy also transcribes the verbal sound
of the poem into his pieces by attempting to match a musical pitch with the approximate pitch present in the spoken word. In the Panel on Poetry and Jazz, Lacy demonstrates his method for the audience: Lacy asks Mackey to read the phrase "the skin on the water" and tries to match Mackey's spoken pitch with a tuned pitch on his saxophone. By doing so, Lacy imposes an exact tuned pitch on the phrase. The melodic content and harmonic content of his songs uses intervallic pitch sets derived from speech sounds. Deriving pitch sets in this way has the interesting effect of deflecting conventional tonal chord progressions since the pitches do suggest a chord progression. But the pitch sets also avoid the folk-ballad and aria approach to setting poetry, which uses music as the material support for verbal content and thus musical elements tend to defer to verbal. Lacy, however, draws melodically disjunctive vocal lines out of poetry by not just setting lyrics to music but incorporating the linguistic aspects, such as the relative spoken pitch of words, literally into the musical. Lacy claims to take this approach from Brion Gysin's influence. In *Conversations*, Lacy describes how meeting Gysin affected his sense of textuality:

Q: Were there any particular ways that your collaboration affected your sense of reading?

L: First of all, it was Brion's own way of reading them. . . . He would play with it, he really improvised, he was winging it. I've always been interested in pinning down speech sounds, speech rhythms, and getting the music exactly from the way people say it. Because if you say, "Hello!"—there's two pitches already, BA-boom, that's already a piece of music if you can write that down. So the distinction between words and music is very . . . next door, really. And my job is to get from one to the other, like a transmuting. (*Conversations* 150)
Lacy's transmuting process uses scansion to determine the rhythm and relative pitch between words and then assigns a pitch to the word which has the effect of constructing music out of language through speech rather the conventional method of setting poetry to music.

Lacy's compositions based on Gysin's own permutation strategies are possibly the best example of his approach since Lacy draws rhythmic, tonal and structural material from Gysin's writing. In Lacy and Gysin's album Songs, Lacy uses three Gysin permutations as the bases for song structure. In the following permutation used in the song "Junk is No Good Baby" Lacy assigns one musical pitch per word and then rearranges the pitches in the same order as the words in the original text. Gysin's text, printed in Brion Gysin Let the Mice In, reads as follows:

JUNK IS NO GOOD BABY IS JUNK NO GOOD BABY
JUNK NO IS GOOD BABY NO JUNK IS GOOD BABY
IS NO JUNK GOOD BABY NO IS JUNK GOOD BABY
JUNK IS GOOD NO BABY GOOD JUNK IS NO BABY (62)

This particular poem, which contains 120 permutations in total, exhausts its combinatorial possibilities by moving through all mutations of this phrase, cataloguing and exhausting all possibilities. I see this text as a list of all possibilities available to a manipulation of improvisational material. This piece appears on Lacy's 1981 recording Songs and features Lacy on saxophone, Irene Aebi on voice and strings, Bobby Few on piano, Jean-Jacques Avenel on bass, Steve Potts on alto saxophone and Oliver Johnson on drums. Gysin is also on voice and is featured in the tracks that use his writing, including "Junk is no Good
"Baby," "Kick the Habit Man," "Luvzya," and "I Don't Work You Dig." These pieces' musical structures are linked closely to the repetitive patterns built into the poems. The other pieces on this album—"Gay Paris Bop," "Nowhere Street," "Somebody Special," "Blue Baboon," and "Luvzya" (the only piece on the album not musically composed by Lacy)—similarly find their way into music through Lacy's assignment of a tonal pitch to the approximate spoken pitch, but the rhythm of the piece and the band's approach to playing the pieces are couched in the art song form inflected with jazz, meaning that the pieces proceed with a rhythmic, swinging groove behind the poem-cum-lyrics and each piece functions like a head chart with solos occurring in between the opening and closing iterations of the composition. As an improvisational strategy, then, Lacy's songs tend to use structures based on jazz with or without a strict harmonic progression to frame the improvisations.

In the essay "The Poetry of Tom Raworth" Keith Tuma points out that, for a poet:

Collaborating with a visual artist or a musician has its problems. I have heard [Tom] Raworth describe plans for a poetry and music CD with Steve Lacy by saying that the music might "decorate" the text, but he did not mean to suggest that Lacy's music would be somehow subsidiary or less interesting than the poems. If anything, music in poetry and music collaborations tends to overwhelm the poetry by carrying away attention; alternatively, it risks over determining possible responses to the text like a banal soundtrack in a bad movie. One challenge in Raworth/Lacy performances is setting text and music in a relationship that is balanced, text and music working together but also separately, each sustaining its own nuances. (208)
Tuma’s sense of avoiding poetry becoming song lyrics is negotiated through a notion of balance. A balanced composition, in Tuma’s view, would use poetry as poetry without dissociating the poem’s language from its form; Lacy accomplishes this by folding material aspects of the poetry into his songs. Tuma, however, suggests that music and poetry are fundamentally incommensurable and must somehow “sustain [their] own nuances” within the music-plus-poetry composition, meaning that only something of music and only something of poetry can remain in the final composed piece; the composed piece is neither poetry nor music. Although I do agree with Tuma’s notion of balance in the sense that poetry-plus-music compositions must retain features of the poetry in order for the poem to remain a poem and not be transmuted into lyrics and although music and poetry tend to be taken, from a North American cultural point of view, as separate practices, I do not view music and poetry as always already incommensurable, especially with regard to music-plus-poetry compositions that also function as strategies for improvisation. Finding a balance between music and poetry is also fundamentally a decision about how to generate an improvisational heuristic rather than a sacrifice of the features of one practice for the features of another in the mad quest for a perfect meshing of music and poetry that causes music to attain the lower limit of poetry and vice versa.

Critic Kevin McNeilly’s reading of Lacy’s composition around Raworth’s "Out of a Sudden"/"Absence" is unfortunately a typical perfectionistic reading of the poetry-plus-music relationship; McNeilly remarks that

The collaboration between Raworth and Lacy that produces "Out of a Sudden"/"Absence" is an act of friendship in Blanchot’s sense:
the score marks both a nostalgia for connection and an engagement with a profound incommensurability between language and music, between voice and voice. Lacy's setting is a sensitive reading of Raworth's poem, an interpretation actively responsive to the formal demands of the text, but also a careful distortion of the tonalities and rhythms of the words to make them mesh with the metered chromaticism of Western art song. (256)

For McNeilly, the primary feature of Lacy's song work is how "[w]ords and music do not fuse with, but pull at, one another" because they are fundamentally incommensurable. He sees the relationship between words and music through Blanchot's notion of friendship, which he quotes from Blanchot's writing on friendship translated by Elizabeth Rottenburg:

Friendship is not a gift or a promise; it is not a form of generosity. Rather, this incommensurable relation of one to the other is the outside drawing near in its separateness and inaccessibility. Desire, pure impure desire, is the call to bridge the distance, to die in common through separation. (McNeilly 256 quoting Blanchot 29).

However, Lacy is not working with words and music in his song work, but rather poetry and music, a fact that McNeilly does not acknowledge in his article. The notion of appending words to music implies that music will provide the form for the words since words as such are the smaller components of greater structures of meaning such as phrases and paragraphs. A poem, on the other hand, contains both words and structure and the inclusion of poetic structure transmuted to song leads to generative possibilities for poetry-music forms. A song, as poet and scholar Stephen Ratcliffe points out in Campion On Song, is the "unification of two detachable identities: one in words and one in music" (xi). A poem, or more precisely, a type of poem, such as a sonnet or a Raworth poem, in Ratcliffe's view, is one form of many possible word identities; in the
same way, an art song or rock song are two possible identities of music. Below, Ratcliffe describes the features of song identity and verse identity, pointing out that the combination of word and song, or rather, verse and song, involves a layering of complexities:

Because a song is composed of all of the structural patterns that organize verse—formal, logical, syntactic, semantic, phonetic, rhythmic and so on—plus all those that organize music—rhythmic, melodic, harmonic—the number of its structural patterns is necessarily greater than the number in either verse of music alone. (Campion's artistic excellence is, for this reason, quantitative as well as qualitative; in writing words-plus-music instead of words only, he was doing the kinds of things that other poets do, only more: there is a higher degree of complexity in his work than in the work of other poets because there is another whole set of organized raw materials—musical notes—whose operation complicates an already complex verbal network). At the same time, while the complexity of verse plus the complexity of music yields what amounts to "complexity squared," a song's complexity necessarily depends upon that genuine simplicity inherent in the combination of its two primary parts, words and music. (ix)

Although Ratcliffe points out that words and music are two different identities that are "detachable" from each other, they are not fundamentally incommensurable. Rather it is the job of the composer or writer to develop new poetry-plus-music identities with musical and linguistic elements through the "genuine simplicity inherent in the combination of . . . words and music." Ratcliffe's discussion about word and music identities in fact offers generative possibilities for the outcomes of the poetry-plus-music relationship. Ratcliffe's use of the term "words" with regards to Campion differs from McNeilly's since, as Ratcliffe discusses, "Campion's poems had originally been conceived of as songs and published as a text of words embedded in a musical score with notations for lute" (8). Beginning students of poetry are probably familiar with the transcriptions of Campion's
words only—an editorial decision made to conserve space on paper and also based on the realization that printed musical notations mean nothing to musically uneducated poetry readers—printed in anthologies such as *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* and *The Bedford Anthology of Poetry*. Campion did not compose words and music separately but instead conceived of them together as *song*.

A music-plus-poetry composition, such as Lacy's arrangement of Raworth's "Out of a Sudden"/"Absence," need not be an example of a universally finalized, finished piece, but rather a record of an instance of what Percy Shelley calls in his "Defense of Poetry" a "germ of a relation" between the poem and the writer:

There is a distinction between a story and a poem, that a story is a catalogue of detached facts, which have no other connexion [sic] than time, place, circumstance, cause and effect; the other [the poem] is the creation of actions according to the unchangeable forms of human nature, as existing in the mind of the creator, which is itself the image of all other minds. The one [story] is partial and applies only to a definite period of time and a certain combination of events which can never again recur; the other [poem] is universal, and contains within itself the germ of a relation to whatever motives or actions have place in the possible varieties of human nature.

For Shelley, a poem is universal because it contains the *germ* of a relationship between the poem and any one possible action or motive among a manifold of possibilities. In that the relationship is a "germ" only it does not completely define the actions or motives of human nature within a piece of writing, but is rather generative of other possibilities. The properties of story, according to Shelley—the fact that it is partial and temporally finite and is furthermore fixed by the
inscription of a certain teleologically oriented combination of events—resembles the properties of strict musical compositions, which statically inscribe particular musical events into a sequence. In the same way, the poem has a germ of a relation to poetry via poetry's rhythmic and euphonic qualities. Although at the outset music and poetry may appear to be fundamentally incommensurable, at least in terms of culturally determined genres of cultural production, the germ of their relationship is instead an opening to further music and poetry combinations built upon non-conventional relationships between poetry and music, such as Lacy's recognition of the germ of music built in to the phraseology and relative spoken pitch of the utterance. Further, in the interest of working with structures that allow improvisational freedom but do not default to the state of the hermetic free, the germs of relation can be explored, creating an improvisational heuristic out of a notion of exploration of materials. Improvisation is not a practice of total freedom; Lacy's song work, consisting of musical pieces that bear the fragmented and recombined identities of music, jazz, the Western Art Song, lyrics and poetry, is a struggle to conceive of musically generative improvisational possibilities out of limited materials.

**Improvisation and Jazz Poetry**

Although jazz improvisation, conceptually or otherwise, may be a solution to the potted contexts of poetry, its manifestation in jazz poetry is itself a potted context since improvisation largely appears tropologically. In jazz poetry's commitment to maintaining its idiomatic connections between jazz music and poetic language it actually prevents itself from opening to the possibility of "pure"
improvisation. The idiomatic nature of jazz poetry means that jazz poetry must be partially involved in signifying its participation in the jazz poetry genre to maintain the features of the idiom. Idiomatic improvisation, as Derek Bailey states, "... is mainly concerned with the expression of an idiom—such as jazz, flamenco, or baroque—and takes its identity and motivation from that idiom" (ix). Similarly, jazz poetry is concerned with creating its identity with jazz through signification and form as much as it is interested in using jazz improvisation as a model to avoid the potted contexts of poetry. Improvisation itself does not transfer over to jazz poetry no matter how closely its poetic language might come to meeting the upper limit of music, but aspects of jazz improvisation, such as rhythm, the interplay between soloing and accompanying voices, the relationships between musicians and the cultural history and politics embedded within the idiom, are feasible models for jazz poetry forms.

In Chapter 3, I will discuss non-idiomatic conceptions of poetic improvisation that employ improvisational strategies directly in the writing and performing process. These strategies focus on using improvisational strategies to generate poetic language for both page-based writing and performance. As I will show, non-idiomatic poetic improvisation primarily manifests itself as a manipulation and re-combination of its materials in deliberate acts of improvisation. In situations of performance, non-idiomatic poetic improvisation conceives of improvisation as existing apart from any particular idiom and as such it can be applied to poetry as a means to generate poetic language.
CHAPTER 3: NON-IDIOMATIC POETIC IMPROVISATION

Non-Idiomatic Poetic Improvisation and the "Plurality of Reals"

In Improvisation, guitarist-improviser Derek Bailey names the two main branches of musical improvisation "idiomatic improvisation" and "non-idiomatic improvisation." Idiomatic improvisation, such as jazz music or Indian classical music, pre-establishes its improvisational materials and generates a set of self-reflexive rules that direct players to maintain the idiom through the improvisation. In contrast, non-idiomatic musical improvisation does not begin with a predefined heuristic; rather, improvisation occurs without a predetermined musical framework; the materials of such improvisation tend to be based in the material properties of the instrument and its potential for creating a wide variety of sounds, both "musical" and "non-musical." Non-idiomatic improvisational materials, as I have discussed in Chapter 1, are bound to the capabilities and limits of particular musical instruments and the drives and desires of individual musicians. Non-idiomatic musical improvisations sound disjunctive and atonal in comparison to non-improvised Western music since the sound-material for this improvisation tends to come from the non-musical sounds of instruments, such as the saxophone's ability to generate a wide range of squeaks, wails and
multiple sounds\textsuperscript{16} beyond its ability to play tempered notes; tempered notes are considered to be just another sound in this conceptualization of improvisation. In this way, improvised music is generated from the sound environment available according to the kind of instrument played; in a sense, non-idiomatic improvisation "collects" materials from its environment.

Unlike Kerouac, whose conception of improvisation is mediated through the jazz idiom, the poets I discuss in this chapter—William Carlos Williams, David Antin, Andrew Levy and Lyn Hejinian—conceive of a kind of poetic improvisation\textit{qua} improvisation, removed from any idiomatic basis. In particular, what links the poets I discuss in this chapter is how improvisation becomes a process of:

1) gathering materials from their respective political, social, cultural and intellectual environments and 2) inscribing these materials into the poem through improvisation. Borrowing from Andrew Levy, I call the "source" of the non-idiomatic writer-improviser's material the "plurality of reals." Levy uses this term in the \textit{W12}, the Kootenay School of Writing's 2008 edition of their \textit{W} magazine:

\begin{quote}
What interests me as a writer and performer of poetry is an improvisatory foregrounding of content and technique. Mapping new pathways of listening to urban and media landscapes as configurations that can never be heard or seen all at once; and re-imagining ways of inheriting what has far too often been violently repressed. Writing and reading, seen this way, is lovemaking—a sensual and erotic connection with the matter necessary to understanding one's life. It improvises a plurality of “reals” in a world moving into a continuous transformation and dialogue. No matter how ruptured or abstracted that life may sometimes appear, or not appear, it’s all in the mix. (“Brief Note on Improvisation” 30)
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{16} Generally, horns such as the saxophone play only one note at a time. "Multiple sounds" or "multiphonics" on a horn occur when the player uses unconventional fingerings and embouchure technique to split the single note into its frequency partials, which sound simultaneously.
In Levy’s paradigm, the improviser’s immediate environment is comprised of a plurality of reals from which the improviser draws during the moment of composition. His view of writing and reading as "lovemaking," in my reading, is a description of improvisational process at the moment of improvisation; as lovemaking, improvisational writing maintains a spontaneous intimacy with its material. Levy suggests that the plurality of reals is what is improvised; that is, the improvised poem itself reflects the plurality of events, places, social and cultural realities, that comprise one’s daily life. The "real," to clarify, is not a mode of realism or a kind of reportage, but instead signifies the poet's attention and desire to inscribe the social into the poem.

In the excerpt below from "Don't Forget to Breathe," published in W12 magazine, Levy uses a combination of mixed references and inter-stanza disjunction that collects a number of improvisational materials:

There is always the danger
The facts will fall and part

Repeat what cannot be altered
Infinite and misunderstood

If I were the pronunciation of my name
The miseries of human life, tension of nothing
The softening of its existence, of yours
Arrested through mute consonants
Omniscient flood distributing a cultivated
Fragrance able to be fairly complementary
Or vernacular or made less arbitrary
In this undefinable sweetness . . . ("From Don't Forget to Breathe" 35-36)

Improvisational material gathered from the real appears here in two ways. First, between stanzas, there is a disjunction of reference and theme; separately, each
stanza improvises on one particular direction of thought. Although the stanzas are linked within the unified space of this particular poem in its function as a poem, each stanza contains the possibility of shifting one’s listening attention to a plurality of everyday life events, both mundane and crucial. Levy discusses the relationship between the individual subject and the plurality that the individual subject enters through language most notably via the line “If I were the pronunciation of my name,” which suggests a disjunction between the individual subject vs. the social structure the subject enters when the personal name is pronounced by others.

However, Levy’s poem both represents the plurality of reals and manifests a listening to pluralities; for the writer-improviser working primarily in print-based poetry, the poem itself becomes the structure that enables the listening to occur, but also the poem enables the improviser to engage with materials by directing and containing the listening. The poem functions as a kind of wax cylinder onto which something of the process of improvising is inscribed and is readable despite the fact that the moment of improvisation has passed. From the readerly perspective, the printed poem is a “portal” through which to access the residue or mark of the improvised. Referring again to the Levy excerpt, improvisation is marked in the poem’s internal disjunction between thought angles and between the individual and plurality of subjects. For Levy, improvisation constructs “. . . a whole world of relationships between what we feel and know and of the ways in which they might fit” (“Brief Note” 30).
Following from Levy's idea, the writer-improviser operates as a “hub” around and through which the plurality of reals is channelled. I think of the relationship between the improviser and the plurality of reals as the writer standing at the generative centre of an architectonic whole. Architectonics, according to Mikhail Bahktin, is "the intuitively indispensable non-arbitrary distribution and linkage of concrete, unique parts and aspects into a consummated whole and this is possible only around a given human being" (98). This definition of architectonics is also a good definition of the improviser in the moment of improvisation in that it accounts for the relationship between the intuitive processes of improvisation as they attempt to handle concrete materials of improvisation; concrete materials of improvisation are handled both intuitively with regards to how they are signified, combined and recombined. Bakhtin is careful to point out as well that intuitive process is not equal to an unreasoned, arbitrary use of improvisational material. Improvisation is the deliberate ordering of meaning and the integration of parts to form a whole around the improviser. Yet, Bakhtin's definition also describes the improvised as forming around an improviser, rather than being generated directly by the improviser. This positioning situates the improviser at the nexus of a wide range of “reals,” which include the writer's own particular background or poetic concerns as well as the social forces outside of the poet. Improvisation, from an architectonic point of view, is generated from the individual improviser standing in the centre of an architecture of improvisational materials. It is from this position that William
Carlos Williams, for example, generates his improvisations in his writing, most notably *Kora in Hell: Improvisations* and *Patterson*.

**William Carlos Williams Doesn't Like Jazz Improvisation**

William Carlos Williams’s particular use of improvisation is decidedly non-idiomatic, at least where jazz is concerned. In an interview with Linda Wagner, Williams reveals his bias against jazz music as "low culture." By extension, he criticizes the Beat poets and their approach to jazz, as uninformed and primitive:

> The Beat Generation has nothing to do with Beat, and they should if they're interested in jazz because jazz is always percussive. But in jazz music even the saxophone sounds are not advanced enough from the primitive to interest me at all. I don't like jazz. The artists in Paris rave about jazz, but it's too tiresome, it's too much the same thing. (26)

I interpret Williams’s rejection of jazz as a model for improvisational poetics based on a dislike for rhythmically oriented music; the "repetition" Williams is critical of is endemic to any kind of music that uses a "groove" or repeated rhythm that structures the music. European classical music focuses on melody and harmony and develops melody progressively over the duration of a piece. Such musical development uses rhythm as a support to melody rather than as a means of instituting a rhythmic pulse that governs the time of the entire improvisation. In this frame, I read Williams’s bias against jazz music as a decision to write "melody-based poetry" that uses improvisation as a way to develop the melody, the "melody" arriving with the sentence, which is Williams's basic unit of composition in his improvisational writing. Mitchim Heuhls describes Williams’s use of improvisation as "thinking with things as they exist" in the world, or rather,
an objective and positivistic representation of the world in the poem, rather than a symbolic representation:

Where a symbolist poet would concentrate on relations that dramatize meanings beyond the event . . . [Williams] wants to make relational forces intensify “the detail, not mirage, of seeing.” To do so articulates a field where one can think with things as they exist. The primary relations here are denotative (in an imaginary world) rather than connotative or metaphoric. In order to keep the detonations intensely resonant, the poet marks his or her field—perceptually and musically—by a dense interplay of direct perceptions standing toward one another as planes in an abstract painting. The poetry is in the parallels between forms of desire and energy held together in a perceptual space. . . . Desire here takes form, not by being mastered, but by achieving full expression in each of the overlapping energy fields—perception, memory, projected future and act of writing. Desire becomes a condition of energy at rest in itself. (Huehls 26-27, quoting Williams)

Following from Huehls’ discussion, the distillation of the moment of improvisation into poetic form has the side effect of disorientating the writer in the sensory realm. Along the continuum of poetry, the improvisation generated in real time from Williams’s improvisational materials necessarily sloughs off the sensory in the same way as improvisational real time has been sloughed off by print; one is disoriented from the sensory realm in the same way that the real time moment of improvisation is lost to the continuum of poetry. The notion here is that, in the moment of improvisation, Williams translates the sensory realm into the “live speech” represented by prose and his empirically oriented Objectivist mode of using language. "Objectivism" here refers to the poetics as practiced by the Modernist writers who appeared in An "Objectivists" Anthology edited by Louis Zukofsky in 1932 including Williams along with George Oppen, Ezra Pound, Basil Bunting, Carl Rakosi, Marianne Moore and Louis Zukofsky. Objectivist poetics
propose the possibility that words can exist in a state of "perfect rest" on the printed page. Poetic language achieves this state by the removal of metaphors, hyperbole, simile—any device, in fact, that would force a representation of the sensory and the subjective within poetic language. Objectivism, however, does not seek to avoid the sensory completely; rather it is left to the reader, who upon encountering Objectivist language applies his/her experience of the sensory to the act of reading. "Perfect rest" is the result of the proper application of Objectivist sincerity to the act of writing. Charles Altieri points out that:

Sincerity is not usually self-expression. Rather, it involves insistence on the surface of the poem as concerned primarily with direct acts of naming signs of the poet's immediate engagement in the area of experience made present by conceiving the act of writing as a mode of attention. Sincerity involves refusing the temptations of closure—both closure as a fixed form and closure as writing in the service of idea, doctrine, or abstract aesthetic ideal. Sincerity can take the form of presenting any form of direct experience—perceptions, or Olson's post-logical movements of thought—that is intensified in the act of writing. Objectification, then, pertains to various vehicles for bringing forms and resolution to the energy fields elicited in pursuit of sincerity while concentrating on form as measure rather than controlling imposition. (33).

Altieri's phrase "the act of writing as a mode of attention" resonates with the mode of improvisation I advance in this chapter; that is, improvisation as a gathering and representation of the plurality of reals in the poem. Further, Altieri argues that "[w]here Objectivist poets seek an artifact presenting the modality of things seen or felt as immediate structures of relations, symbolist poets typically strive to see beyond the seeing by rendering in their work a process of meditating upon what the immediate relations in perception reflect" (26). In these terms, Objectivism sees structures of relations between elements of poetic form
constructed as a framework for objective thought which makes links between the
dynamic interplay between mind and world; this dynamic is maintained almost
paradoxically through sincerity, which sees the more subjective approach of the
symbolist poets as interfering with the mind-world dynamism by focusing on the
transcendental properties of language to see "beyond the seeing." As
Wittengenstein points out, “the word 'red' means something known to everyone;
and in addition, for each person, it means something known only to him, or
perhaps rather: it refers to something known only to him” (273). In the context of
improvisation, Objectivist concepts of language allow the reader to improvise h/er
own meaning of the word “red” based on the pre-existing materials of common
language combined with individual senses of the word red. In a sense, the
reader takes the standard meaning of red as the tune and improvises her own
perceptions around the standard meaning. This is a non-aesthetic improvisation
inherent to the everyday act of reading.

For Williams, the distance between the moment of improvisation and the
poem equates to a distance between the sensory perception of the objects of
everyday life and the representation of those objects. Kora in Hell creates the “.
. . condition in which the disorientation from the sensory remains commensurable
with a valid perception of the object by asking the reader to read the poems
through a framework of improvisation,” which can only be done formally (Huehls
70). Thus the “valid perception of the object” is achieved when the reader forms
his/her own sense of the word “red.” The following passage from Kora in Hell
both describes and enacts Williams’s improvisational technique:
The trick is to never touch the world anywhere. Leave yourself at the door, walk in, admire the pictures, talk a few words with the master of the house, question his wife a little, rejoin yourself at the door—and go off arm in arm listening to last week’s symphony played by angel horsemen from the benches of a turned cloud. Or if dogs rub too close and the poor are too much out let your friend answer them. (*Kora in Hell* 25).

The “trick” of improvising for Williams is to never touch the world, i.e. to leave the ego's perception of the world out of the poem. This leaves the world untouched for the reader; the reader comes upon the world as if he/she is seeing it sincerely for the first time and generates his/her own perceptions of Williams’s world as it exists along the continuum of poetry, and the reader’s own world as it translates through and to Williams’s poem via the reader’s conception of what Williams’s language evokes. The passage above uses a visit to someone’s home to gather the world—Williams’s improvisational materials—into the poem. The language in the passage is matter-of-fact and direct; Williams offers no commentary with regard to how he feels about his experience at all, nor does he make qualitative comments about the immediate environment. For Williams, this strategy opens the poem up to the reader's “valid perception of the object.” More fittingly, however, Williams’s strategy opens the poem to the reader's valid perception of the sentence as the container for Williams’s objects. *Kora in Hell* uses the sentence as the basic unit of composition. Each sentence—in the poem above and throughout the book—contains distinct units of perception and observation in syntactical units that build upon each other syllogistically. The sentence's length and variable patterns of pauses and clauses create the feeling of encountering
thought moving through time at speed during the moment of perception, which makes it an attractive formal device for non-idiomatic poetic improvisation.

The prose poem is a form that evades the restrictions of strict poetic forms and versification by allowing *the sentence* and the rules of syntax to operate as the basic unit of composition for a poem. For Gertrude Stein, the sentence is a means of maintaining an attention to the continuous present, which I interpret as a mode of attention to the plurality of reals. As writer Natalie Simpson points out in her MA thesis:

The continuation of writing was important to Stein because she was concerned about recording each moment in a continuum; she was concerned with representing the present as accurately as possible at each moment in the written composition. As such, she composed sentences of increasing length and complexity, rarely straying from and never abandoning correct syntax and reiterating concepts through the use of repeated and varied participle phrases. (33-34)

For Stein, the present moment of composition includes not only an attention to the world but an attention of the world mediated through an attention to the language that comprises the poem. Stein's writing attends to the plurality of reals present in the act of using written language and thus also inscribes the moment of composition into the poem. In "Composition as Explanation," Stein connects the act of composition to the composer through the present moment of "living," saying that:

The composition is the thing seen by every one living in the living they are doing, they are the composing of the composition that at the time they are living in the composition of the time in which they are living. It is that that makes living a thing they are doing . . . The time when and the time of and the time in that composition is the
natural phenomena of that composition and of that perhaps every one can be certain. (45)

The sentence is important to maintaining the continuous present for Stein in that the sentence begins again and again; as a unit of composition it can represent and embody the quality of presentness in that each sentence also functions as a unit of attention that expends itself as it nears the period; as the sentence begins again, the attention to the present moment also begins again. This quality is improvisational in its attention to the present moment and the prose poem's potential for gathering improvisational material from the everyday and inscribing the moment of attention into the poem. Stein's notion of the continuous present, then, contains an improvisational drive in its dual attention to the plurality of reals and to poetic language.

Williams's version of beginning again and again is manifested in his attempt to inscribe everyday happenings and Williams's role in them. In his autobiography, Williams outlines his procedure for his writing, stating:

I decided to write something every day, without missing one day, for a year. I'd write nothing planned but take up a pencil, put the paper before me and write anything that came into my head. . . . I just did that, day after day, without missing one day for a year. Not a word was changed. I didn't change any, but . . . as may be expected, some of the entries were just pure nonsense and were rejected when the time for publication came. They were a reflection of the day's happenings more or less and what I had to do with them. (Autobiography 158)

Williams's emphasis on writing "the day's happenings" everyday focuses the act of writing into an attention of the present moment of the compositional process. Williams's refusal to change anything after he wrote the poems further binds the
present moment to the writing in that the printed poems are a preserved record of
the compositional moment rather than, for example, being edited for the page. In
"Composition as Explanation," Stein also goes on to point out that the quality of
attention at work during composition in the continuous present is improvisational
in that "[n]o one thinks these things [that is, no one thinks about composition
while composing; he/she "just" composes] when they are making when they are
creating what is the composition, naturally no one thinks, that is no one
formulates until what is to be formulated has been made" (45). Williams’s refusal
to edit inscribes the processual aspects of writing into a final draft and also allows
the poems to formulate themselves as they are being written.

Williams’s emphasis on writing in the present also has the effect of
challenging the restrictive ordering of language through grammatical or structural
rules—which exist as a force outside the act of writing yet govern the act of
writing and thus shape the formal qualities of the poem—by re-attaching
language to intuition and process. "If the whole of Kora in Hell has one
underlying drive," writes Roy Miki, "it is [an] insistence upon ‘flexibility’ against
the kind of thought that resists experience by attempting to stabilize its
essentially open nature through the imposition of ridged perspectives. This drive,
in fact, is so basic to an understanding of Williams that it can be taken as one of
the root assumptions of all his work as a writer" (83). As a poetic vehicle, the
sentence is much more flexible as a basic unit of composition than accentual-
syllabic metrical schemes, for example; the sentence functions more intuitively
than more strict forms that require the writer to count syllables or weigh rhyming
sounds by allowing an attention to the present moment of writing rather than maintaining patterns dictated by strict rules.

**David Antin: Talking Prose**

David Antin’s "talk poems" extend Wiliams’s improvisational process in that not only does Antin improvise his talks drawing on the plurality of reals, but he performs them in front of an audience, meaning that he must be attentive to the audience during the performance and his improvisational process will be affected by audience presence; the audience and whatever influence they might have on an improvisation is also included in Antin's improvisations. In Antin’s talk poems, the real time of improvisation is the time of the poem in the absence of the continuum of poetry. He performs his talks purportedly without preparation beforehand in front of audiences. In *I Never Knew What Time it Was*, a post-talk transcription of a live talk poem, Antin defines the nature of his talks against other forms of oratorical speech forms:

my talks are not lectures they’re thinkings and meditations i come with concerns and reflections with questions and matter for thinking even obsessions but there are no words not ahead of time (54)

Despite the fact that Antin publishes his talks in print form, print is not functional as a vehicle for recording improvisations in the same way that print functions as a manifestation of an improvisation. Antin records his talk pieces and then transcribes and edits them to prepare them for print, meaning that the printed poem functions more like a recording of musical improvisation than a poem, a
recording of an event that occurred in real time. Antin points this out in a transcript from *I Never Knew What Time it Was*:

> but the pieces in this book are texts texts starting from two places/ transcripts of the tape recordings always bring a little tape recorder/ with me and memories of the talking these are not the same a/tape recording doesnt record everything the audience hears and sees/or fails to hear or see and it records what they dont hear room/ noises slips of the tongue or irrelevant hesitations while the raw/transcriptions dont catch meaningful intonation patterns or shifts/ in vocal quality so composing the texts involves a restoration from/ a memory (*I Never Knew X*)

The presence of the tape recorder re-inscribes an oral poetics to the written, making Antin's orality in reality a secondary orality. “Secondary orality” is cultural theorist Walter Ong's term for a form of communication that is neither classically oral nor classically written; in literature and writing in general, ideas are generally stated only once, whereas in oral communication, ideas can be fluidly repeated and referred to in real time. Media that fall under the jurisdiction of secondary orality include the text message or email, technologies that deliver language faster than the speed of speech and maintain a cyclical pattern of exchange between users that resembles oral communication. I see Antin’s talk poems as being part of secondary orality because his talks, as improvisations, are based on the repetition and combination of previously existing and practised rhetorical patterns and strategies of performance. Thus, the written puts constant pressure on the oral to once again be written and the transcribed talk poems as transcriptions pressure the reader to listen to them as a kind of speech, much in the same way that the word *Improvisations* attached to *Kora in Hell* stands as a conceptual framework for re-listening to the plurality of reals
Williams engages. For Williams, Levy and Kerouac, the poem itself aspires to the condition of being an improvisation rather than a recording. Antin's published talk poems, by contrast, record and contain a version of an expired real time improvisational event by virtue of the fact that the improvisational material has been transcribed out of real time into a static-time medium.

Antin, however, feels uncomfortable with the term improvisation for his work due to the tropological and erroneous popular connotations of spontaneity that improvisation carries as its cultural baggage:

\[
\text{i could use the word “improvisations” ive used it before but ive come to distrust what most people think it means the idea of starting from a blank slate nobody starts from a blank slate not charlie parker nor homer nor ludwig wittgenstein started from a blank slate each in his different way going over a considered ground that became a new ground as they considered it again (I Never Knew ix-x)}
\]

Antin's aversion is to notions of spontaneity as the creation of something from absolute nothing. Spontaneity, as a trope, tends to disassociate improvisation from its material in its assumption that the improvisation emerges from the performer rather than something to be engaged. Antin's particular improvisational process, a performed, non-scripted oratory arranged around the elucidation of a particular topic—is performed strategically, not randomly. Antin’s own awareness of his improvisational process occurs along the same terms Williams uses to describe his Improvisations, as a freeing up of language from strict form, thus opening it up as a receptacle for the myriad perceptions of the mind interacting with the plurality of reals:
now as a poet that's the term I get stuck with
I actually choose it
fairly aggressively I choose it in spite of the fact that I tend to feel a little uncomfortable with it because if I'm going to be a poet I want to
be a poet who explores mind as the medium of his poetry not mind as a static thing but the act of thinking and the closest I can come to the act of thinking is the act of talking and thinking at the same time
(I Never Knew 49)

Antin expresses an anxiety around defining himself as a poet and balks at the word poetry; he suggests that the term poet is an overly restrictive definition for his practice and offers an "open," creatively freeing definition of the poet as an explorer of the mind rather than a writer. In his phrases "not mind/as a static thing/but the act of thinking and the closest I can come/to the act of thinking is the act of talking and thinking at the same time" he gestures towards a poetry that is attentive to the moment of the inner act of thinking which is expressed when thought connects to the verbal in real time. Antin's performances translate thought spontaneously into a more-or-less everyday English; but the audience can understand his thought as both poetic and non-poetic discourse since Antin's language resembles language conventionally used in the "talk" genre. For Antin, the poetry is located in the process of thinking and talking rather than in print. This aspect of Antin's work is a sticking point for critic George Leonard, who argues that Antin's talk poems do not themselves demonstrate improvisation in their language. In "The Art of Thought," Leonard writes:

First, is there anything materially there, like a color in a painting or sound in a sonata, that causes us to identify an Antin poem as an improvisation? How is an improvisation different from this essay's first draft? Is there any material difference between the two, anything we could literally point to? If a student puts off writing her
paper until the night before it's due, I might give it a low grade, saying it's "still rough" or "needs work." If the student replied, "That isn't a rough draft, it's an improvisation and I can't, on principle, revise it," is there something in the work she could point to, to support her claim? (110)

Leonard does not acknowledge the major difference between a student's essay and Antin's poetry, which is a difference of medium; a talk poem is performed orally and requires the performer to be a practiced orator, whereas a student's essay is a printed text written by a novice writer meant to be revised. A student's essay may also be accused of having under-developed thought as well as poor writing, whereas Antin's thought is obviously well-developed and his speech practiced and articulate. Antin’s talk pieces also tend to operate in much the same way as jazz music, or the suggestive and directive—but not restrictive—compositions of free improvisers, in that Antin sets up a material framework for his pieces bound by decisions about time length (usually a set length between half an hour or an hour and a half). Time length, however, is his only prepared element and without the ability to check sources or consult a notebook, Antin must wrestle with the contingency of his own inadequacy as part of his improvisational materials: “This is performance and performance is not competence . . . you divide between that which is potentially possible and that which one can execute in a given moment in time.” ("Talk on Williams" 13:48). In front of the audience, Antin's improvisations move towards the real time improvisation of the plurality of reals in the act of having an unplanned conversation with a friend: two people meet unexpectedly and begin to talk to each other using the means they have at hand. To improvise is, in Antin's
language, to be open to contingency and allow it into a performed speech and also to allow the fact that language itself, is also capable of operating outside of restriction. As Antin describes it:

That is, if I do this openly and celebrate the fact that I’m even succeeding from what I say as soon as I say it, at least in part, it's because the language isn’t organized in order for me to communicate a well-designed meaning which I already have in my hand. It’s a sort of network system in which I’m moving to try to get towards something I hope to discover and partially intend. I have a strong sense of tendency when I talk. That is, I tend towards something. I move in a direction because there I think is a thing I want to get at. I may not know entirely what I want to get at, but I have a good a view of it as most other people. (Antin talk at 36.24)

Antin’s approach to poetic improvisation is a populist, non-virtuosic approach in his choice of language material. Antin organizes his improvisational material through a notion of communication to an audience. For "communication" as such to occur, both the sender and receiver must be aware of the code acting as the vehicle for communication. A Steve McCaffery sound poetry performance, by contrast, is not bound to a notion of communication in that McCaffery's language material, as I discuss in Chapter 4, is based on non-speech aspects of the voice, including plosives, grunts and wails. A McCaffery audience must choose to approach McCaffery's language since it does not address the listener, whereas language based in communication is designed to be a transparent vehicle for meaning. Antin’s live audience is not confronted with an opacity of language that prompts them to engage as co-producer of meaning. The improvisation in Antin’s talk poetry, is an active, real time relationship between the verbal and the mental; rather than using language’s poetic function.
Poet Steve Benson's primary improvisational strategy uses the recording as an improvisational heuristic. In his primary approach, Benson listens to recordings of text on headphones in real time while improvising verbally over what he hears through his headphones, taking cues from the text on tape. During these performances, the audience can hear his improvised words but not the recording. For example, in the notes to his piece "Enter," Benson describes his procedure:

My piece, spontaneously dedicated to the recently deceased poet Robert Creeley and to Carla Harryman, was simultaneously spoken and written over a 35-minute period. Aside from the initial sentence, all the material was improvised, without advance decisions as to content or theme. I had decided in advance to perform repetitions and variations but not what they would say or how they would progress. (116-117)

His transcription of the recording of the improvised performance uses poetic lines typographically scattered across the page to demonstrate the approximate differences in time and the articulations between phrases. The left column below contains the recorded text, the right contains the improvised text:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recorded Text</th>
<th>Improved Text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>When you and I are kind to one another the war ends</td>
<td>When you and I are kind to one another the war ends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once you and I are kind to each other the warring ends</td>
<td>Once you and I are kind to each other the warring ends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once you and I were kind to each other as the war ended</td>
<td>Once you and I were kind to each other as the war ended</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The two columns demonstrate not the time of the piece, but rather the timing of Benson’s phrase against the timing of the phrase as it exists on the recording.
Benson uses line breaks on both columns to demonstrate where the articulatory phrase breaks fall; for example, in the first line, the left column (the recorded voice) begins and the improvised voice responds. The left margin in both columns acts as a phrase marker for the beginning of an articulation and time of articulation is roughly approximated using tabbed spaces as an indicator of articulatory space or breath space. Further on in the piece, Benson plays with the semantics of the text by adding words and phrases not originally present on the recording:

Because I was feeling myself
being there I felt in you a corresponding
felt tone
I felt a tune with you
that was stirring
I felt the contact between us
and I felt here
far from you and yet close

Because I was feel
myself I in you a responding feeling tune
I felt in tune with you the
was stirred by your contact
I feel the contact between
our skins and hearing
and from you and yet
very close (123)

Although the shift in diction does indeed change the semantic meaning of the text, Benson’s improvisational material is articulation and space rather than the semantic meaning of the words; the recorded words themselves are present for the sake of manifesting an articulatory improvisation. Benson’s reaction to the first phrase is to shorten it by altering the gerund "feeling" back into the root verb "feel;" line 2 also shortens the phrase of the original, whereas line 3 lengthens in Benson’s improvisation. Lines 4 and 5 add syllables to the original text adding speed and sound to the phrase.
Benson’s approach is reactive in that his improvisations consist of reactions to his material in real time and he literally brings his improvisational material with him on stage. Antin’s approach, by comparison, involves committing a number of details, themes and oratorical patterns to memory and drawing on these in real time. Benson’s approach is reactive also in that he claims not to work on his improvisational skills; improvisation, for Benson, instead is synonymous with reaction:

> I feel like my work has always been improvisatory . . . Right now I don't establish a skill or a structure that's going to be reliable in advance. That's part of the work that I'm doing. . . I don't want to know what I'm doing in advance in terms of improvising and I don't want to have some structure where I'll have it all set up. I don't know; I feel sort of hot when I say that, as though it's defined and not explained. (*Careers in the Arts* 12)

Benson’s phrase "defined and not explained" both describes and enacts his improvisational process. The gesture of improvisation resides within this phrase since the approach defined leaves room for the improvised text itself to exist; a definition would summarize and generalize his approach without over-prescribing a methodology. *Explanation*, on the other hand, suggests an exhaustive description of methodological possibilities. Benson prefers to locate his process in the real time moment of the processual rather than to describe exactly how his approach works. The reason for this is to avoid fetishizing the improvisational process itself so that the improvised text is bound to real time—rather than to theory or meta-discourse around improvisation. Post-performance, since Benson tends to record his performances, the performed text functions as possible material for a future improvisation. Despite Benson's disavowal of
improvisational skill, however, Benson's particular habits with regard to how he improvises, including his vocal patterns and the tonal quality of his voice, demonstrate a particular skill in making improvisational choices that are deflections of the articulation and time as they exist on his prepared recording. Although Benson is not interested in explaining precisely what he does and he leaves his technique largely undefined, he still depends on a set of techniques in order for improvisation to manifest "new" texts from his material.

Another effect of Benson's approach is the distillation of the recorded word from the written text and recording back into the body, which, during the moment of improvisation, is both the site and the source of improvisation. In Benson's case, the difference between the recording and the printed word is not as imperative as it is with, for example, a recording of an improvised saxophone solo vs. the improvised saxophone solo, as I discuss in Chapter 1. Rather, his choice of material has bearing on how his audience will listen to and interpret the improvisation. Both written and recorded texts have essentially the same function for Benson as collections of material for improvisation. In the poetics journal *Eoagh*, Benson writes:

...[H]ow do the body and language poetry stabilize one another? How does language poetry throw the body into question and how does the body throw language poetry into question? Let’s just say, the mind is over-productive, untraceable, the mind is untraceable, it is overly interactive, too much, it is too much, it is multi-tasking, it is slippery, the mind is slippery, elusive, allusive, illusory, the mind is allusive, associational, insecure. The body has no time to reflect. The body has no time. The body reacts. The body metabolises. The body has no location but the here and now. The body is not lost but only found. The body is foundational and it disappears again and again. Writing is different. ("As to the Body" 2)
The body, in Benson's view, occupies the "here and now," or the moment of improvisation. The mind, which is ostensibly both a language generator, seems to exist in a dimension of time more slippery and more ephemeral than a moment. Rather, it is the body that, through a reactive language generation, occupies a moment in time with language passing through it and dissipating with the passage of time. I also read in Benson's view the notion that, outside the moment of improvisation, both the mind and body are ephemeral. Writing, on the other hand, exists outside of time and Benson draws his improvisations out of recorded text back into the real time of the body and mind. During a performance, Benson's body/mind takes its place at the centre of the improvisational situation. Since Benson primarily works with the written/recorded text as material, he does not work with a plurality of reals as much as he works to pluralize the written/recorded text via the body in real time. In 2003 at the Kelly Writers' House at the University of Pennsylvania, Benson demonstrates an evolution of his method by both saying and typing his improvised language. The addition of the screen to his performances adds another layer of improvisational interaction with the source text. In this performance, the audience both sees and hears the improvised text, the improvised text is generated into voice and print from the prepared text and the typed text deviates from what Benson is actually saying in response to the recording.
Lyn Hejinian: Writing as Improvisation in the Epistemological Situation

Lyn Hejinian’s notion of improvisation differs from the other poets I have discussed in this chapter in the degree to which her improvisation is grounded the everyday. In "Continuing Against Closure," published in Jacket #14 (2001), Hejinian’s remarks suggest that improvisation is merely a conscious awareness of the process of negotiating the everyday uncertainty of the future:

If one equates fate with what happens, or even with all that happens, one can’t help but realize that one has an improviser’s experience of it. Improvisation has to do with being in time. And it has to do with taking one’s chances. In fact, one can’t take a chance outside of time; the whole concept of chance puts one inside a temporal framework. Improvisation consists of taking chances, i.e., entering the moment in relation to it—it’s about getting in time, being with it. (2)

Hejinian describes improvisation as a way of managing fate in the real time of being alive. Although she does not stress this aspect, my sense is that for Hejinian, improvisation is a self-conscious derivative and approximation of everyday acts of taking one’s chances; improvisation is a discursive—rather than a lived—experience that Hejinian applies to generating poetry about the experience of life. Positioning improvisation in this way has the effect of grounding it specifically in the everyday nature of being rather than in a more overt aesthetic practice of improvisation. Hejinian goes on to say that, in everyday life:

Improvisation begins at the moment when something has just happened, which is to say, it doesn’t begin at the beginning. Nonetheless, it is always involved with the process of beginning—that is, of setting things in motion. My intention here is to link fate with incipience, or to suffuse the limiting condition known as fate with the limiting condition known as beginning in such a way as to allow the limits to cancel each other out. (2)
Similar to Benson, Lyn Hejinian's poetics are concerned with occupying the real time of improvisation in both a generative mode—i.e. generating writing, poetic speech, or language—and a mode of receptive consciousness attentive to the plurality of reals. Hejinian's notion of improvisation, as the thing that arrives in response to fate in order to cancel out fate's limiting effects, implies a sense of negotiation between the self, fate and chance. The individual's experience of the world in this regard is from the point of view of being at the centre of a matrix of "possibly infinite contingencies and contextualities" ("The Person and Description" 167). This relationship between the individual and the matrix comprises what Hejinian calls the epistemological situation in “The Person and Description.” In the epistemological situation, the self negotiates its own epistemology through context of the world outside of it. Thus the condition of everyday being is that one must constantly negotiate the relationship between the self and other epistemological possibilities present in the matrix. In addition, the self is subject to influence from outside epistemology and can change under this influence, meaning that the self is also plural. In "meeting of circumstance," Hejinian describes the personal, or the "subject/self," as a "plural condition," as always already open to epistemological possibility:

The "personal" is already a plural condition. Perhaps one feels that it is located somewhere within, somewhere inside the body—in the stomach? The chest? the genitals? the throat? the head? One can look for it and already one is not oneself, one is several, incomplete, and subject to dispersal. The idea of the person enters poetics where art and reality, or intentionality and circumstance, meet. . . . But if this is where the idea of the person becomes a component in a poetics, it is also the point at which the person enters everyday life. The person is both the agent and the agency
of the quotidian, doing things which are hardly notable, hardly noted. ("The Person and Description" 170)

Her phrase "[t]he person is both the agent and agency of the quotidian"
describes the self/matrix relationship as participatory; the individual is both
formed by and as a creator of the plurality of reals. Hejinian parallels the
intersection of art and reality to the intersection of agent and agency to describe
the interaction between the self/subject and the plurality of reals, creating this set
of parallel terms:

in poetics:  Art/Writing (intentionality)  [meets]  Reality (circumstance)
in everyday life:                          Agent  [meets]  Agency

The epistemological basis of personhood in everyday life is both constructed and
created by the subject/self in dialogue with the plurality of reals; the self and the
plurality of reals are in a state of dialogic flux being that the self both constructs
and is constructed by the plurality of reals. Dialogic flux is a state of contingency
between the self and the plurality of reals since the self exists within this flux and
gathers improvisational material into this centre. Contingency manifests as a
struggle between the self as we "negotiate our mentalities and the world; off
balance, heavy at the mouth, we are pulled forward" (The Rejection of Closure
139). In this situation, the self is contingent with respect to the place and time of
its existence and during the moment of improvisation possesses temporary being
in whatever context the self finds itself:

Certainly I have an experience of being in position, at a time and
place, and of being conscious of this, but this position is temporary,
and beyond that, I have no experience of being except in position.
All my observations are made from within the matrix of possibly
infinite contingencies and contextualities. This sense of contingency is ultimately intrinsic to my experience of the self, as a relationship rather than an existence, whose exercise of the possibilities (including consciousness) of its conditions and occasions constitutes a person. The person, in this view, is a mobile (or mobilized) reference point; or to put it another way, subjectivity is not an entity but a dynamic. There is no self undefiled by experience, no self unmediated in the epistemological situation, but a person instead. ("The Person and Description" 167)

Hejinian describes a complex layering of dynamic interactions between the self and the world that locates the self as a dynamic epistemological centre. At the centre, the experience of the subject and its relationship to outside phenomena shapes the subject's being. Hejinian includes language among the phenomena outside the self; Hejinian sees language as the primary means through which humans investigate and create their identities. As Nicky Marsh states in her essay "Infidelity to an Impossible Task,"

Hejinian's poetic and critical work has been centrally concerned with the theoretical, cultural, and epistemological issues in representing self. Her thesis is that to explore and expand the limitations of language is to explore and expand our experience of life itself. Language is . . . "one of the principal forms our curiosity takes. It makes us restless," it is only by virtue of it that we "negotiate our mentalities and the world; pulled forward" by the inevitability of chance and time and the immediate need to respond to what is happening. (74 quoting Hejinian "Rejection of Closure" 139)

Poetic improvisation for Hejinian is a means of exploring epistemological issues through language, meaning that the poem itself is the means of negotiation with the plurality of reals. The poem, in this regard, continues to have an aesthetic function but its attention to the everyday through language suggests that the poem is a tool for creating the language of negotiation necessary for everyday life rather than a text written about life. The poem, in other words, is open and
responsive to dialogic flux; it is a record of the self's response to chance and
time. In "The Rejection of Closure," Hejinian posits that a poetic form open to
dialogic flux is the best way to confront the epistemological issue of being in the
world:

I perceive the world as vast and overwhelming; each moment
stands under an enormous vertical and horizontal pressure of
information, potent with ambiguity, meaning-ful, unfixed, and
certainly incomplete. What saves this from becoming a vast
undifferentiated mass of data and situation is one's ability to make
distinctions. . . . The experience of feeling overwhelmed by
undifferentiated material is like claustrophobia. One feels panicky,
closed in. The open text is one which both acknowledges the
vastness of the world and is formally differentiating. It is the form
that opens it, in that case. (271)

As "formally differentiating," the open text chooses how to represent the world
within the poem. The open text allows the possibility of the entire world to enter
the poem but in turn decides how it will differentiate between data and create
meaning out of the world's vastness that is the nature of chance. Her notion of
the "open text" uses a number of devices to allow the world to enter, including
arrangement and rearrangement of themes and details within a text, repetition,
parallelism, montage, and the non-syllogistic sentence. Hejinian points out that
these formal devices applied to writing have the effect of distorting the world as
such, but this ". . . very incapacity of language to match the world allows it to do
service as a medium of differentiation. The undifferentiated is one mass, the
differentiated is multiple. The (unimaginable) complete text, the text that contains
everything, would be in fact a closed text" ("Rejection of Closure" 285). Similar to
how musical improvisers acknowledge that limits are fundamental to generating
interesting musical improvisations, Hejinian acknowledges that to achieve open-
ness in writing one must make decisions about what possible material to include and how to manipulate this material.

Hejinian's major work, *My Life*, is a collection of such decisions. *My Life*, in its first edition, contains 37 prose poems of 37 lines each. Each of these prose poems uses the non-syllogistic sentence as their basic unit of composition. The second edition adds 8 poems to the book, and 8 lines to each poem in the book, making a total of 45 pages of 45 lines each. The numbers represent Hejinian's age at the time of writing, a formality that inscribes Hejinian's self into the matrix of epistemological instances that comprise *My Life*. Matrix, in an algebraic sense, is a rectangular array of numbers similar to a set of multiplication tables. The matrix contains the possibilities for any number of equations depending on the number of rows or columns in the table. *My Life*, as a matrix, contains 45 possibilities derived from the plurality of reals. In *Radical Artifice*, Marjorie Perloff points out that the eight new sentences in each poem of the second version blend in with the sentences in the first version. "Some of the phrases provide new information, . . . [and] some carry on image patterning . . . ." "The point, I think," she continues:

. . . is that, as Hejinian puts it in the eighth new sentence [of poem 29], "many facts about a life should be left out; they are easily replaced." This is precisely what her text does: a given "fact of life" will be "replaced" or at least recontextualized to take on different meanings by being inserted between a new $X$ and $Y$. And yet, as in a jigsaw puzzle or mosaic, the replacement strategies don't alter the fact that the "pieces" are very similar—cut, as it were, from the same cloth. (*Radical Artifice* 164 quoting *My Life*)
The addition of eight sentences in the second version, then, are not an attempt to increase information or to make more out of the text, but rather to increase the level of the ordinary in everyday life despite the fact that dialogic flux is dynamic and active. This emphasizes the dynamics of the self/matrix relationship, indicating that although events may seem repetitive and ordinary, it is the flux itself that shapes agent and agency. The way My Life does this is through form. The following passage, for example, generates a sense of the dynamic flux of subjectivity through a number of shifts in point of view. It moves through first, second, and third person freely throughout the passage:

You spill the sugar when you lift the spoon. My father had filled an old apothecary jar with what he called "sea glass," bits of old bottles rounded and textured by the sea, so abundant on beaches. There is no solitude. It buries itself in veracity. It is as if one splashed in the water lost by one's tears. My mother had climbed into the garbage can in order to stamp down the accumulated trash, but the can was knocked off balance, and when she fell she broke her arm. She could only give a little shrug. The family had little money but plenty of food. At the circus only the elephants were greater than anything I could have imagined. The egg of Columbus, landscape and grammar. She wanted one where the playground was dirt, with grass, shaded by a tree, from which would hang a rubber tire as a swing, and when she found it she sent me. These creatures are compound and nothing they do should surprise us. (Hejinian 9)

The passage above starts in second person and maintains an open subjectivity by moving through several points of view, sentence by sentence. For example, the first sentence could read as an addressed, factual observation of something the subject has done, or it could be axiomatically read as "Every time you lift the spoon, you spill the sugar." The second sentence, in first person, describes a memory of the speaker's father filling bottles. The third sentence, "There is no solitude," does not arrive out of a syllogistic connection to the previous
sentences; it is difficult to determine from what context the phrase arrives, i.e., does this sentence describe something on Hejinian's mind at the time of writing, something from a memory of the past, or a generalization describing the human being in the world? Each of the sentences above operate as individual contained units of meaning and are individual thoughts and events. For Hejinian, the sentence is the ideal medium to explore the plurality of reals because it is flexible; she remarks that "... in order to allow for digressive, anecdotal, common, quotidian, or discursive materials as I heard and observed them, I needed a very flexible line, and a prosaic line—the sentence" (*The Language of Inquiry* 194).

As Perloff points out, the order of the sentences is flexible; the first sentence, "You spill the sugar when you lift the spoon," semantically seems to function similarly to the other lines in the poem, and there is limited syllogistic connection between the sentences. This gives the effect of each sentence as a new beginning to the story of a life, although the "story" is never finished, which is reminiscent of a Steinian "beginning again and again." In beginning again and again, the passage blocks any possibility of syllogistic connection between sentences. The sentence exists in and of itself and does not integrate into higher linguistic structures, such as the paragraph, so the stanzas or paragraphs are measured at 45 lines. Blocking the syllogistic relationship between sentences has the further effect of problematizing the conventional narrative constructions usually found in autobiographies, yet maintains both a formal and thematic coherence; we can see that each line represents something of Hejinian's life, but
we rather see the plurality of experiences that constitute a life represented through shifting speakerly points of view rather than through a series of sentences working together to express a central idea or theme.

The reason why, as Perloff remarks, that each sentence in *My Life* is related to each other sentence in the book not through a syllogistic connection but through interchangeability. The sentences eschew narrative development and seem to be "cut from the same cloth" (*Radical Artifice* 164). They are predictable, recurring units of meaning linked to the everyday because they are the default unit of composition of everyday forms of writing such as the newspaper or job application. The effect of the blocked syllogism—which is a feature of Ron Silliman's notion of "the new sentence"—is to increase the everydayness of the sentence by directing the readers attention toward the materiality of the sentence rather than towards larger units of meaning:

1) The paragraph organizes the sentences; 2) The paragraph is a unit of quantity, not logic or argument; 3) Sentence length is a unit of measure; 4) Sentence structure is altered for torque, or increased polysemy/ambiguity. . . 5) Syllogistic movement is (a) limited (b) controlled; 6) Primary syllogistic movement is between the preceding and following sentences; 7) Secondary syllogistic movement is toward the paragraph as a whole, or the whole work; 8) The limiting of syllogistic movement keeps the reader's attention at or very close to the level of language, that is, most often at the sentence level or below. (91)

Using Léfèbvre's notion of the ceaseless recurrences of everyday life, sentences are the ceaseless recurrences of written language. The blocked syllogism of the new sentence prevents larger units of meaning from forming out of groups of sentences, which has the effect of locking the sentence into a recurrence rather
than a unit of development. Above, Silliman uses the term "syllogistic movement" to indicate that sentences are connected via their position in a chain of other sentences rather than through syllogistic connection. Reading through a chapter in *My Life* involves "moving through" the sentences serially rather than being drawn through the arc of semantically-oriented paragraph construction. Silliman also notes a "secondary syllogistic movement" that takes place when moving from piece to piece in a whole work; as in primary syllogistic movement, secondary syllogistic movement occurs through an entire work by virtue of the fact that each chapter is part of the work rather than through any kind of thematic or plot development. The limiting of syllogistic movement, Silliman states, keeps the reader's level of attention at the sentence because each sentence is a self-contained unit of non-integrating meaning.

**The Sentence as Non-idiomatic Poetic Improvisation's Basic Unit of Composition**

For over 90 years, from Gertrude Stein's 1914 *Tender Buttons* and 1926 *Composition as Explanation* and Wiliams's 1920 *Kora in Hell*, to Andrew Levy's work published in 2007's *W* magazine, the sentence has been the primary unit of composition in non-idiomatic poetic improvisation. In *The New Sentence*, Silliman explains that prose poems were invented in France in the 19th century in response to rigid rules of versification set in place by the French Academy. The sentence could be lengthened to encompass longer elocutions, or shortened to make exclamations or set simple images. "And longer sentences also suspended for greater periods of time the pulse of closure which enters into
prose as the mark of rhythm. It was perfect for hallucinated, fantastic and
dreamlike contents, for pieces with multiple locales and times squeezed into a
few words" (81). Thus, the prose poem relies on the poetic function of the
everyday sentence to break convention. Although sentence typically refers to a
grammatically governed unit of writing, it shares the same syntactical properties
as speech in that writing the sentence can occur improvisationally over time in
the way that speech can be improvised in a conversation or when being
prompted by a string of unexpected questions. In turn, the everyday act of
speech communication, and the act of generating a piece of writing, resembles
the experience of an improviser.

Non-idiomatic poetic improvisation uses pure improvisation as a technique
to manipulate poetic language and as such requires a "neutral" form that
supports improvisational process. The sentence is neutral, in this case, because
of its close resemblance to the everyday speech act, which takes place in real
time, often in improvisational situations such as conversations or arguments.
The improvisational processes of Levy, Stein, Williams, Hejinian, Antin and
Benson are all acts of generating language in real time, at speed, in speech or in
writing, that use the sentence to imitate a real time act of language generation.
The sentence has the effect of spilling out language and thought over a duration
and suggests a line of thought. Stein and Benson in particular demonstrate that
non-idiomatic improvisational strategies using the sentence as the basic unit of
composition leave open the option to dispense with communication and sense-
making during improvisation so long as the motion and direction of the sentence

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embedded in syntax is maintained. The sentence rather has functionality as a material support for non-idiomatic improvisation in much the same way a particular musical instrument is a material support for non-idiomatic free improvisation, or in the way the vocal apparatus is the material support for performed poetic improvisation, such as in Antin and Benson's performances.

In Chapter 4 I go on to discuss another type of non-idiomatic improvisation: sound poetry. Sound poetry's material support is the voice, but sound poetry uses the voice for its material properties as a generator of sounds beyond the conventional set of verbal sounds used in communication. The sound poetry performance situation is poetic improvisation's most ideal scenario because sound poetry is connected fundamentally to time through performance; sound poetry involves pure improvisation. Examining poetic non-idiomatic writing as I have done in this chapter requires the reader to consider improvisation as part of a continuum of poetry that has taken place somewhere in the past during the writing process. In performed poetic improvisation, however, the performer, audience and language generated by the performer are caught up together in the moment of improvisation.
CHAPTER 4: POETIC IMPROVISATION AND SOUND POETRY

The Intersection of Invention and Delivery

Sound poetry is poetic improvisation's most ideal situation in that the verbal performance of poetry occurs in real time. The "sounded" poem in this situation is subject to erasure soon after it has been vocalized. As I discuss in Chapter 1, Smith and Dean call the ideal form of improvisation "pure" improvisation; improvisation is "pure" when it takes place in real time since, in that moment, the improviser is compelled to act on the objects in front of him or her. Pure improvisation, says Smith and Dean:

. . . takes place at the intersection of performance and creativity and there are two consequences of this: 1) it takes place within a defined time frame; 2) it occurs continuously through time, at speed and does not involve revision. The improviser makes a succession of choices in performance which cannot be erased, so everything (s)he does within the performance must be incorporated into the whole" (26).

"The intersection of performance and creativity" describes how the performer in real time manipulates his or her materials for improvisation and in turn creates an improvisation. Smith and Dean use the terms as such to contrast invention with the polished, performance-ready version of a piece; the intersection of these terms involves a coalescence between creative invention and polished delivery. Viewed from the point of view of rhetorical theory, "invention" refers to the developmental stages of a text that take place before the text is ready to be
published or performed. At the final stages, the text is ready for delivery either in verbal performance or publication, depending on the nature of the text in question. The intersection of performance and creativity disrupts the conventional order of the preparatory process of invention occurring before delivery, meaning that invention and delivery occur simultaneously; this intersection is in itself *improvisation*.

In performance, an instance of sound poetry takes place at the intersection of invention and delivery within a finite time frame and during which there are no breaks in improvisation and no revision. Temporally, an instance of sound poetry resembles a jazz improvisation with the exception that the sound poem does not foreground its heuristic like jazz does; the jazz improviser's heuristic is formed by the restrictions of harmony and rhythm suggested by the tune and the improvisation itself gathers and uses improvisational materials that fulfil the harmonic and rhythmic constraints of the tune. As I will discuss in detail in this chapter, sound poets do develop improvisational heuristics through scoring. And, generally speaking, with regards to my ongoing comparison of various poetic improvisational strategies to musical ones, sound poetry involves a non-idiomatic approach to improvising much like the music of the free improvisers I introduce in Chapter 1.

The crucial feature of sound poetry, however, is its use of the voice and conception of vocal utterances—including conventionally linguistic or other vocal sounds—unilaterally as *sound*. Sound poets separate semantics from phonetic sound in order to generate an oral poetry based on the sonic possibilities of the
vocal apparatus. Conceiving of the voice as an apparatus, or instrument of sound—rather than the material support for a communicative verbal function—frees the improviser to use a wide array of sounds beyond the sounds of conventional speech. These sounds include glottal stops, fricatives, screams and breath sounds; in the sound poetry performance situation, the sounds themselves are often improvised during the moment of performance. In addition, similar to how the musician invents his/her own idiosyncratic version of instrumental extended technique, the particulars of the sonic material of sound poetry are individually varied depending on the sound producer. This means that there is no set sound poetry vocabulary because sound poetry vocabulary emerges out of a trialectic between linguistic and non-linguistic sounds and the uniqueness of the individual voice. These elements—temporal and phonetic—combine to make sound poetry improvisation’s most ideal poetic form.

**Basic Materials for Performed Poetic Improvisation**

In *What Makes Sound Patterns Expressive*, linguist Ruven Tsur categorizes vocal sounds into two modes, the "speech mode" and the "non-speech" mode. "In the [speech mode], the perceived noises or musical tones are very similar to the acoustic signal that conveys them," Tsur writes, "the sounds that the voice produces match the expected standard pronunciation of spoken language" (Tsur vii). But, in the non-speech mode, Tsur argues that "the perceived phonetic category is restructured, or 'recoded,' into abstract phonetic categories and does not reach awareness" (vii). The non-speech mode refers to all non-semantic sounds produced by the voice, including growls or tongue
clicks, as well as purely phonetic parts of language, including sounds like the bilabial plosive, or "puh" sound ([p]). Such sounds, according to the Haskins Speech Laboratory's studies on aural perception from which Tsur derives his categories, do not reach awareness. By this, Tsur indicates that sounds do not have an apparent meaning to the English speaking listener because they are not part of the conventional array of sounds in use in standard spoken English.

Further, Tsur points out that the Haskins studies also demonstrate that there is a third poetic mode of speech perception ". . . in which some precategorical sensory information is subliminally perceived, which is the source for 'mysterious' intuition concerning speech sounds" (vii). Tsur's "mysterious intuition" refers to the human being's ability to distinguish between sounds according to their category, or rather, the ability to identify the material sounds of speech as the sounds of speech even when they are not engaged in the production of speech communication. Tsur argues that this intuition is a cognitive ability triggered by speech sounds, but not by non-speech sounds. The poetic function of language, in other words, is concerned with the overall sound of language rather than meaning; the poetic function therefore creates a dialectic between speech and non-speech sounds. Charles Bernstein summarizes the notion of the poetic function as follows:

According to Tsur and following Jakobson, the “poetic function” of language is a third type: it involves hearing what we are listening to. That is, poetry creates something of the conditions of hearing (not just listening to) a foreign language—we hear. Another way of saying this is that the poetic function . . . rematerializes language, returns it from “speech” back to “sound”; or rather, the poetic mode synthesizes the speech mode of perception and the non-speech mode of perception. (Introduction to Close Listening 4)
According to Roman Jakobson, language has six functions, including the poetic, the referential, conative, emotive, phatic and metalingual functions. The referential function of language, for example, is concerned with providing adequate context for communicating a message to the hearer; the metalingual function checks the code while the speaker generates language; the conative function is concerned with addressing the listener; the phatic function of language checks to see if common communicative means are present between the speaker and listener and the emotive function is concerned with expressing the condition of the speaker's self to the listener. These are communicative functions oriented primarily towards delivering a message and use the materiality of language as a transparent vehicle for meaning. The poetic function, on the other hand, focuses "...on the message for its own sake," meaning that the poetic function is concerned not only with delivering a message but with how language uses euphony, syntax, rhythm and grammar to deliver the message. "Poetic function is not the sole function of verbal art," writes Jakobsen in his essay "Closing Statements: Linguistics and Poetics," "but only its dominant, determining function, whereas in all other verbal activities it acts as a subsidiary, accessory constituent. This function, by producing the palpability of signs, deepens the fundamental dichotomy between signs and objects. Hence, when dealing with the poetic function, linguistics cannot limit itself to the field of poetry" since poetic language is drawn from the system of language as a whole, including the other five functions (356). Poetic language must therefore be regarded as part of a whole language system, the difference being that poetic
language is interested in language itself rather than communication. The poetic function "deepens the palpability of signs" because it takes into account the materiality of language as well as its meaning. The poetic function of language, for Bernstein, thus synthesizes the speech and non-speech modes of language. Bernstein calls the relationship between speech and non-speech within the poetic function "synthesis" to indicate that the poetic mode places attention on both the sound and semantic content of language. Synthesis is therefore an equal and simultaneous attention to the semantic and sonic qualities of language whether in instances of "pure" sound such as screams or glottal stops, or communicative linguistic sound. The poetic mode functions as a dialectical site between speech and non-speech as two poles on either end of a spectrum of perception such that language in the poetic mode can exhibit a range of aural-semantic combinations. The poetic function contains both speech and non-speech, meaning that the poetic function identifies all sounds on the speech-non-speech spectrum as equal, or non-privileged, with regards to using sound for poetic material. This then breaks down the categorical distinction of speech and non-speech that Tsur identifies.

Synthetic Vocal Vocabularies: Towards Sonological Transhumanism

Following Tsur and Bernstein, I use the term synthetic vocal vocabulary to describe an approach to performed poetry that attempts to transcend the norms of everyday verbal communication and engages the voice as an apparatus outside its everyday function as the material support for speech. Synthetic vocal
vocabularies do not exhaustively exclude any speech use of the voice but rather consider the word as sound material for improvisation, and values pure sound as much as meaning. I see synthetic vocal vocabulary as regarding all vocal acts as "sound" whether or not speech acts contain semantic meaning. Yet, this category recognizes that meaning may arise out of the "mysterious intuition" that Tsur identifies. The synthetic vocal mode of improvisation emphasizes the poetic function of language and therefore allows all forms of vocal sound into the array of improvisational materials. The recording “6:15” on the Four Horsemen’s recording *Four Nights*, for example, contains a use of vocal synthesis that creates a texture out of four simultaneously occurring speaking voices. The four voices include: 1) a comical description of a mysterious situation in which the speaker wakes up to find himself in a chair with four strange men standing around him, 2) a series of dense, unexplained theoretical statements and absurd declarations (i.e. "Event labels focalize static in a football match;" "Colours go wrong between complexities;" "Am I a homo, or a hetero diachronic narrator"? 3) a series of statements that resemble newspaper headlines and reportage 4) a voice uttering numbers and letters interchangeably in random order and the occasional mathematical equation. The synthetic vocal vocabulary includes a range of sounds as the Horsemen demonstrate in the recording “5:27” which uses rhythmic speaking similar to a beatbox, nasal breathing, panting, counting, popped bilabial plosives (the consonant “p” sound”) “kissing” sounds and one speaking voice. In the following passage, Steve McCaffery breaks the voice
down according to its material constitution, or the base materials for synthetic
improvisation:

Voice is a polis of mouth, lips, teeth, tongue, tonsils, palette, breath,
rhyme, timbre and sound. Less a component than a production of
a materiopneumatic assemblage of interacting bone, liquid,
cartilage and tissue. Enjoying such complexity even a single voice
resonates as simultaneity of corporeal, acoustic events; the
consequence of energy and respiratory force in flight through fixed
cavities and adjustable tensors. (*North of Intention* 45)

McCaffery divides the voice into its material components, i.e. the specific
physical and biological apparatuses that are responsible for generating vocal
sound, calling them "materiopneumatic," a term that describes the body as
essentially a tool for compressing and expelling air. Representing the voice as
material repositions the role of voice from the realistic expression of the
consciousness and ego of the individual speaker through speech to a point of
view that understands the voice as an "instrument" in the sense of the musical
instrument, which is a sound generator, rather opens a language generator and
also in the generic sense of the word as *instrumental* in creating speech.

McCaffery's acknowledgement of the instrumental qualities of the vocal
apparatus deflects the lyrical expressive notion of voice by reducing the
presumed individuality of voiceness—the concept of having an individual voice—
down to a physical property of the human body, something that all speakers
share. The juxtaposition McCaffery makes between the materiality of the voice
and voiceness parallels the free improvisers' interest in generating music from
the point of view of the materiality of the instrument; according to Derek Bailey,
jazz is a form of idiomatic improvisation whereas free improvisation is non-
idiomatic due to its focus on improvisation itself rather than a stylized, rule-based improvisation. Similarly, McCaffery's definition of the voice frees the vocal apparatus from strictly speech-based forms of vocal performance and also removes it from the constrained "idiom" of voiceness, opening it to the possibility of generating conceptually "pure" sounds. Synthesis for McCaffery does not, however, as in the case of the free improvisers, involve an exchange of the idiomatic for the non-idiomatic, but rather an opening to the possibility of all vocal sounds as materials for improvisation.

McCaffery's synthetic vocabulary is based on a consciousness of the materiality of the voice, meaning that his engagement with the level of the word, for example in a performance situation, is predicated on the fact that the word is a material sound generated by the body. It is from this point of view that McCaffery attempts to manipulate phenomenological identity. In the passage below, McCaffery separates "idiomatic" or speech-based uses of the voice and material uses of the voice into the categories of "phenomenological voice" and "thanatological" voice:

The twentieth century presents two distinct scenarios for the voice in poetry. One is a primal identity, culturally empowered to define the property of a person. This is a phenomenological voice that serves in its self-evidence as the unquestionable guarantee of presence—when heard and understood through its communication of intelligible sounds this voice is named conscience. The other scenario—renegade and heterological—requires the voice’s primary drive to be persistently away from presence. This second is a thanatic voice triply destined to lines of flight and escape, to the expenditure of pulsional intensities and to its own dispersal in sounds between body and language. (North of Intention163)
The phenomenological voice defines the properties of personhood by representing individual consciousness through speech. Using Tsur's terms, McCaffery places non-speech at the centre of speech, a conceptualization that differs from both Tsur and Bernstein on the matter of the relationship between speech and non-speech. For McCaffery, non-speech is part of the fundamental "primal identity" of the speaker in that the speaker demonstrates conscience—the property of a person—through speech. In turn, conscience is built upon a platform of primal identity that is manifest through non-speech. In McCaffery's view, since non-speech is embedded at the level of the primal identity, non-speech is therefore the platform for speech: an outwardly social, communicative expression. In this way, non-speech allows for the possibility of speech. For Tsur, however, non-speech is a kind of inarticulate noise that requires linguistic tempering to be sensible. Non-speech is the absence of language, or sound in general, whereas speech necessarily contains both sound and a semantic system shaping the sound. Inarticulate non-speech contains no discernible identity and does not acknowledge sound as part of being. Although Bernstein describes a synthesis of speech and non-speech through a synthetic intersection, the two terms are binary in nature. Tsur and Bernstein's views distance non-speech from the phenomenological, whereas in McCaffery's view, the phenomenological is attached to both "primal" and tempered uses of the voice. The voice, so phenomenologically attached to being, becomes representative of a personhood to other humans.
The individual uses speech to communicate personhood and qualify his/herself in comparison to other persons. The phenomenological voice thus has a valuable social function in that it allows the individual speaker to attain social position and enter into a variety of human relationships mediated through speech. The thanatic voice, on the other hand, is the manifestation of the drive to escape presence and to expend the "pulsional intensities" of speech as sound removed from speech. In that the thanatic voice is dispersed in "sounds between body and language," it is free to take all sounds, semantic or otherwise, as material for sounding. The poetic function of language for McCaffery is always already imbued with presence and consciousness whether or not the voice using language. The poetic function of language in sound poetry is therefore never devoid of meaning despite its "failure" to communicate through standard linguistic means. Conceivably a sound poem containing only vocalizations with no semantic content may exist outside of conventional communication, but it nonetheless expresses the conscience and phenomenological being of the vocalist. In McCaffery's view, the primary motivator for using the voice is the expenditure of sound into the immediate environment rather than the need to communicate. This means that communication itself is made possible by the libidinal drive that motivates the vocalist to disperse sounds.

In his 1978 essay “Sound Poetry: A Survey,” McCaffery presents a comprehensive summary of various phases of sound poetry which he characterizes via the development of sound poetry’s investigation into language’s non-semantic, acoustic qualities. The first phase is “the vast intractable area of
as archaic and primitive poetries, the many instances of chant structures and
cantation, of nonsense syllabic mouthings and deliberate lexical distortions, still
alive among North American, African, Asian and Oceanic peoples” (1).
McCaffery also includes nursery rhymes, whisper games, skipping chants, mouth
music and folk song refrain as part of this first phase. McCaffery points out that
this first phase is better termed the first “area” of sound poetry since the practices
in this phase are part of ongoing everyday practices such as those found in
school yard games. The term phase suggests that these practices are
exclusively a part of a trajectory of sound poetry and therefore contribute
exclusively to a European tradition of sounding that has been set aside for more
“modern” sounding practices. “Consequently,” McCaffery notes,

... the very attempt to write a history of sound poetry is a doomed
activity from the very outset. For one thing, there is no ‘movement’
per se, but rather a complex, often oppositive and frequently
antithetical interconnectedness of concerns—attempts to recover
lost traditions mix with attempts to effect a radical break with all
continuities. What is referred to by ‘sound poetry’ is a rich, varied,
inconsistent phonic genealogy against which we can foreground the
specific developments of the last two decades. (1-2)

The second phase of sound poetry McCaffery outlines includes isolated attempts
at sound investigation by several writers including Christian Morgenstern, Lewis
Carroll, Rabelais and Aristophanes, among several others. What differentiates
the first and second phases is the fact that these authors represent the first
instances of sound poetry to appear in literature. Second phase sound poetry
occurs in "isolated" incidences, meaning that the writers' investigations were not
part of a greater community of sound writers or part of an avant garde. Much of
the second phase writing, such as Carroll's "The Jabberwocky," experiments with
exchanging conventional word sounds with "nonsense" sounds, but in the service of creating communicative semantic content. The third phase of sound poetry is characterized primarily by the isolation of the phonetic aspect of language from its communicative function and by the exploration of the phonetic aspect of language in performance situations. This shift in emphasis from verbal communication to phonetic production brings with it a shift in logics. A communicative logic organizes verbal language into genres of communication, such as the speech, the lecture, or the public service announcement, according to the rules of these genres. The order of the words themselves is governed by rules of syntax and grammar along with the particular rules for diction and style endemic to any genre in question. But in the poetic function of language, sounds are organized according to a logic of sound, or a sense of how "noise" of all types, communicative or not, can be organized based on a sense of how sounds fit together as sounds rather than as verbal symbols, or rather, the "sonological," a term I take from Otto E. Laske’s work on musical acoustics, that refers to how sounds can be organized based on their material aural properties.

The term sonological is an extension of Laske’s notion of sonology, the study of musical acoustics. Sonology is the pragmatic study of acoustical designs and problems for "sonic task environments... their associated problem spaces and the psychological and social relationships between them as they become manifest in different kinds of sonological problem solving" (Laske 35). Sonology is a pragmatic study of sonic materiality in-and-of-itself, rather than a study of sound for an aesthetic purpose; in order to apply sonology to aesthetic
constructions of sound, such as music, sonology must be combined with syntax and semantics in order to interpret how musical structures sound. Below, Laske describes how he formulated his approach to studying aesthetic sound, with the conclusion that ultimately, humans organize sound according to semantic structures:

Three years ago, when I undertook it to formulate a procedural theory of music consisting of three interrelated disciplines called sonology, syntax and semantics, I purposefully defined sonology as a discipline which only on account of its inherent relatedness with musical syntax and semantics can become a field of insight into the structure of musical sound. I defined sonology as a science dealing with a particular task domain; i.e. as a science of the artificial, not of the real. Work done on protocols making explicit the elements of sonological problem solving in the framework of real time sound synthesis made it very clear that humans listen to and understand, sound only in reference to an explicit or implicit semantic goal structure they try to realize. (36)

Laske considers music as a sound generated purposely by human beings using the voice or musical instruments, as opposed to the squeaking of a door or the rumble of a passing car engine. The difference between music and these other sounds is that musical sound is generated with the intent to make music, whereas the sound of a door or a car engine are generated as a by-product of opening a door or driving a car, two activities whose primary intention is not to generate sound. Musical sound, which exists outside of the realm of the semantic and outside of speech, is organized through a "semantic goal structure," or generative heuristic. His findings suggest that humans organize all sounds according to a sound logic, "all sounds" referring to non-speech sounds and non-tempered sounds as well as phonetic sound or the twelve tones of the Western scale. For an improvisational situation using non-speech, Laske's
sonology suggests that any improvisational use of non-speech is always already conditioned by and linked to a semantic connection between sounds that guide the improviser through his/her improvisational material regardless of its semantic properties, or lack thereof. As a model for how a poetics of poetic vocal performance could approach its improvisational material, sonology allows for a spectrum of sounds in material, ranging from the most purely material non-speech sounds to sounds assigned strictly to speech production.

In the introduction to Close Listening, Charles Bernstein provides another set of terms to describe the spectrum of speech and non-speech sounds. He terms speech simply as "human speech" and calls "non-speech" sounds "transhuman sound," which suggests that engaging with non-speech sounds is an act of transitioning out of a distinctly human application of sound to language into a generation of sound outside of meaning, with an attention to the material "noise" of language:

The most resonant possibilities for poetry as a medium can be realized only when the performance of language moves from human speech to animate, but transhuman, sound: that is, when we stop listening and begin to hear: which is to say, stop decoding and being, to get a nose for the sheer noise of language. (Close Listening 22)

The "trans" of Bernstein's transhumanism comprises a moving away from speech and aural consciousness induced by speech into a sense of sound that exists as a pure event independent of human consciousness and intention and the push to appropriate sounds for meaning.
In discussing McCaffery’s approach to improvisation, I want to combine Laske’s notion of the sonological with Bernstein’s notion of transhumanism into the single term "sonological transhumanism" which I think best describes McCaffery’s use of improvisation. The term implies that the improviser accesses the sonological through transhumanism. Here I take "transhumanism" as comprising both a dialectic between and the simultaneous inclusion of human uses of language (speech) with non-human (sound) based on the logic of sound combinations. The following paragraph from Bernstein frames this simultaneity:

Sound, like poetry itself, can never be recuperated as ideas, as content, as narrative, as extralexical meaning. The tension between sound and logic reflects the physical resistance in the medium of poetry. Rime's reason—the truth of sound—is that meaning is rooted in the arationality of sound, as well as in the body's multiple capacities for signification. Language is extralexical, goes beyond sense and nothing shows this better than verbal performance, which, like the soundless performance of the body, exceeds what seems necessary to establish the substantive content of the poem—what it is saying, its metaphors and allusions. (22)

The sonological opens to the transhuman in that sound moves between the poles of arationality and signification; Bernstein implies that, in verbal performance, which takes place both in real time, in front of a live audience in performance and in everyday conversational speech situations, the body itself is the "surface" or conduit of language that comprises the exact point of physical resistance. The body, as the generator of all verbal sounds, creates tension between signification and arationality. This tension appears because in order to create human speech the speaker must repress the full capacity of the body to make sounds that, in the context of speech, appear as noise or nonsense. Poetic improvisation based on
this notion of sonological transhumanism opens poetry up to the possibility of improvisation as a dynamic physical engagement with language by locating language both within the material of the body and the abstract realms (non-physical and intellectual) of signification.

**Scoring, or, Mapping the Adventures of the Voice**

Outside of the pure improvisational situation, sound poetry also uses scores as a means to organize a group improvisation out of a limited amount of improvisational material. Scoring, as I will demonstrate, does not contradict improvisation but instead creates generative possibilities for improvisational performance through notation. Scores for sound poetry must incorporate a visual symbolic system outside of standard written language since non-speech sounds cannot be notated as such, only described. The International Phonetic Alphabet, for example, is a system of phonetic notation based on the alphabet that represents all possible speech sounds. The voiced bilabial plosive (“b” as in “buy”) sound is notated as “/b/,” and the voiceless bilabial plosive (“p” as in “stop”) is notated as “/p/.” There is no official notation system, however, for sounds such as screeches, wails, or rapid nasal breathing, sounds which are a component of sonological transhuman sound.

In the introduction to *The Prose Tattoo*, bp Nichol discusses the function of the score for the Four Horsemen:

One of the first problems confronting the group when we formed, after having gone thru the orgiastic preliminaries of screaming our guts out in free-form improvisation, was an issue of notation (& hence structure). We wanted to find a way to write down certain
more complex pieces we had ideas for where, tho elements are improvised, other elements were fixed. In acoustic sound poetry there is no fixed tradition of notation. Vive la liberté but vive la certain limitations. We were moving into the whole area out of poetry, not out of music or theater, tho some of us had experience in these forms and we wanted "readable" texts as an element in performance. Not exclusively but we wanted them there. (1)

Above, Nichol outlines the quintessential problem for improvisers, namely, how to create limits around improvisational material so the improviser does not exhaust material during an improvisation. Both bpNichol and saxophonist Anthony Braxton—whom I discuss in chapters one and two with regards to this issue—arrive at the problem of improvisational material similarly. They discover that ultimate freedom in using improvisational material leads to an "orgiastic" expenditure of improvisational material which arises in cases of improvisation without an operational heuristic imposed either by an overarching improvisational strategy or the decisions of the individual musician to consciously limit his or her improvisational vocabulary and develop an improvised "piece" out of a handful of musical elements. Saxophonist Steve Lacy terms this aspect of improvisation "the hermetic free" to indicate the fact that, in the absence of composition, apparent musical freedom still butts up against the borders of both the limitations of musical freedom (that is to say, in the absence of harmony and compositional structure, there are still limits) and the limitations of the individual musician’s skills, ideas, physiology and vocabulary. Lacy characterizes the hermetic free as "The point of no return, where the music had the maximum calories in it. There was nothing to say, no words necessary. Just: 'play'" (Panel on Poetry and Jazz 35:00). Lacy describes an improvisational situation focusing on energetic group
expression as its primary heuristic, which directs improvisers to expend emotional energy to the maximum and exploit the "noise-making" capabilities of their instruments. The notion of the hermetic free contains unspoken rules about how to play together as Lacy indicates by saying "there was nothing to say, no words necessary," unspoken rules about how to play together. The free in free playing indicates what the player should not do as much as what he or she should do in an improvisational situation; for example, it deters anyone in a group of freely improvising musicians from playing specific harmonic or melodic content that would disrupt the musical aesthetic of avoiding pre-established rules of jazz harmony; there are unspoken rules about what not to play that create the overarching heuristic of group free improvisation without prescribing specifically what to play.

Beyond the issue of assigning heuristics, however, Nichol also articulates an interest in developing a compositional complexity balanced between fixed and unfixed elements, not to mention the individual performer's own particular interpretation of a score. Such complexity is facilitated through notational strategies. Nichol also points out that the Four Horsemen were "moving into the whole area out of poetry" rather than crossing poetry through an interdisciplinary intersection of poetry plus music or poetry plus theatre. Hence certain texts in the Four Horsemen's repertoire emphasize "readability" which maintains a connection between sound poetry—the new area—and the original area of poetry. For Nichol, the characteristic of readability is carried over from the poem to the sound poem, which is crucial in that readability provides the poetry in the
sound poetry. Readability in this view refers to the act of reading that is transmuted from written poetry into sound poetry. The performer reading the score not only uses the score to generate improvisations but also foregrounds the reading process as part of the performance. The reading process itself is improvisational in that, as I have pointed out before, many of the non-standard notational devices require the performers' own input as to the particular sound the performer develops to realize the sound inscribed by the notation.

"Readability," then, is an improvisational interpretation, predicated on an act of reading, of the idiosyncratic notational devices employed in sound poetry scores. Readability also depends on the performer's own particular improvisational vocabulary of vocal devices, which are further limited by the capabilities of the performer's body to generate particular sounds, another problem that sound poetry shares with instrumental improvisation.

Scores for vocal poetic improvisation use a variety of textual strategies to communicate instructions to improvisers and map a finite set of improvisational materials used by the performer during an improvisation. Generally, these strategies range from providing detailed written instructions to the improviser, using graphs to coordinate the relationship between sound event and time, or "fields" of words littered across the page, to creating a lexicon of purely visual symbols, organized as a kind of visual score. Written instructions prescribe how long to improvise and what sounds to use but ultimately leave the resolution of these instructions to the improviser. Visual scores use line, shape, space and other elements to represent the relative shape and quality of vocal sounds and
to suggest potential interactions for sounds and sound patterns. The abstract nature of non-speech sounds in particular requires the composer to invent sets of symbols to represent distinct qualities of non-speech sounds. These symbols are subject to interpretation by the performer, which means that although a score may give a specific instruction to a performer, the result of that instruction is never determined until the moment of performance. The performer's act of interpretation—i.e. the vocalized reading of the score—in the moment of performance is in itself an act of pure improvisation.

Compared to the conventional musical score, sound poetry notation is a productive, rather than a restrictive, means of contouring an improvisational performance. Musical scores restrict the performer to the materials and strategies for using the materials indicated by the composer; typically, the musical score is a strict indication of what and how to play. Sound poetry notation, in its emphasis of readability, may indicate the materials of a particular improvisation but ultimately requires the performer's input during the moment of performance. Sound poetry and musical notation are, respectively, instances of general and restricted economy. The restricted economy of the musical score wastes the full potential of the performer to realize a score via the full potential of his or her performance capability, including the performer's capacity for interpretation and to generate sound beyond what is indicated by the score. Reciprocally, sound poetry notation is a kind of receptacle for musical notation's wasted performative energies.
"The idea of notation implies, if not demands," Karl Young states in the Open Letter issue on notation, "performance. Virtually any form of writing is a kind of notation and any form of reading is a type of performance. Poetry is an intensely physical art, one that activates several senses at once. . . . Poetry is still a physical art using multiple senses [whether or not it is being performed or read from the page]. . . . (21). The score is the support for a performance, meaning that although the score places certain limitations on the performer, it is up to the performer to resolve his or her interpretation in the act of performance. The score, in creating limitations, also frees the improviser from being responsible for generating improvisational material spontaneously. The improviser's focus is left to apply the combinatorial and recombinatorial process to the prefabricated materials. Scores function, then, as an heuristic for an improvisational situation that places limitations on the amount of material available for an improvisation but require the input of the individual performer in order to function. In contrast, conventional musical scores, besides strictly indicating what notes will be played and when, do not allow for variance in the reading process itself, nor do they allow contributions from the performer. According to composer Cordelius Cardew, the history of Western notation is a history of increasing stricture since the system's inception:

This type of notation—staff notation—shows the shape of the music as it is to be heard. It coexisted and frequently had to compete with systems of notation called tablatures, which depicted what the musician was supposed to do, rather than showing what was to be heard. . . . The history of staff notation is a history of increasing differentiation, increasing precision. . . . The more differentiated and precise the notation became, the stronger the hegemony of the composer over the art of music. Elements of improvisation and
ornamentation, that is, independent contributions from the interpreter, were gradually eliminated. (239-240)

Sound poetry scores and scores designed for improvisation in general, rely on independent contributions and indicate what performers are supposed to do, similar to tablature, as Cardew points out. For string instruments, the tablature shows the player where to finger the instrument rather than telling the player what pitch to play. Scoring systems that indicate what the player should do represent the action of the body on the instrument itself, rather than universalizing a harmonic system, as does conventional Western notation. R. Murray Shafer points out that the Western musical notation system also has the effect of preserving music:

Music exists in time and is aurally perceived. When its time runs out it disappears. Those who made it may remember it and recapture it, or forget it. The notation of music exists in order that musical thoughts should not be forgotten. Notation describes aural sensations by means of a nomenclature which is written out in two-dimensional space (the musical score). Thus, to preserve musical ideas, they must pass out of time, through a spatial screen (notation) and back into time (performance). (35)

The musical score arrests and preserves musical data to be reproduced later; in the classical music tradition, playing the score precisely with no variation and according to the playing conventions of the period in which the score was composed is the dominant convention for using the musical score. Improvisational scores, however, require the performer's individual contribution for the score to function; unlike the musical score, the improvisational score does not strictly prescribe the outcome of its performance since the score directs and guides a process.
As Nichol states, a significant component of the Four Horsemen's performance strategy involves the use of a score. The Four Horsemen's scoring system converts the page from a static container for neutral graphic signs "into a dynamic field of typographic and sonographic forces" to liberate the word from both the page and its linear bondage to the page ("Sound Poetry: A Survey" 3). The Four Horsemen's scoring is influenced by European Dadaist Raoul Hausmann's notion of optophonetic poetry, which is a typographic representation of phonetic sound. Hausmann is a key figure in Berlin Dada who worked experimentally in sound poetry and photo collage. The term "optophonetic poetry" comes from Hausmann's theoretical invention, the optophone, a machine "capable of converting audio and visual signals interchangeably" (446). For Hausmann, "typography is an intermediate domain between art and technology, between seeing and understanding and is one of the most obvious means for the permanent psycho-physiological auto-instruction of human beings" (Borck 17). By "auto-instruction," Hausmann means that the visual orientation of symbols can communicate ideas to the mind in a direct and immediate way, which, in the sound poetry situation, means that the voice interprets and responds to typography in the immediate moment of reading. Hausmann is also particularly interested in the limitations of the human body as revealed by the performance of optophonetic poetry. In his essay "Sound Work and Visionary Poetics: Artistic Experiments in Raoul Hausmann," Cornelius Borck writes that optophonetic poetry reveals these limitations because:

[t]he elements of human perception are of sensory-psychological and of structural-functional nature. . . . Each is limited by conscious
and unconscious processes of selection and by the functional specificities of the sensory organs. These are the organic limitations and functional inhibitions of the human psycho-physical nature. (Borck 18)

The performer’s reaction to optophonetic scoring depends on the ability of the individual performer's body to interact with the score via the physical limitations of the voice and the limitations of the psychology that decides how to read the score.

Jonathan Albert suggests that the function of a score, besides limiting improvisational material, is to inscribe an improvisational vocabulary based on how the body itself produces sound. Albert calls this vocabulary "an alphabet of movement," connecting vocal sound production to the physical body by acknowledging that the body "moves" during vocalizations. The alphabet of movement, for Albert, is the specific case of generating sounds with the intention of improvising with them in the sound poetry situation; Albert contrasts the specific intentionality of the alphabet of movement with the "general movement" of nonintentional sounds, such as squeaks from doors or car noises, for example:

The movements conveyed by sound are general movements. . . . To develop a language of movement, you need an alphabet of movement. An alphabet in which speech sounds are perceived as movement. Human speech is produced by constricting the flow of breath. The air flow is like a river pouring in and out of the body. The flesh around the flow is like river banks and altering the river banks creates currents in the flow. Speech sounds are the currents and the articulators are the river banks. Moving the articulators changes the currents and thus changes the sound. The point where the articulators are closest together has the greatest effect on the sound currents. This point is called the point of articulation. (12)
An "alphabet of movement" indicates that there are specific movements that produce certain sounds and focuses on the body's production of sound through the voice and the respiratory system. This point of view connects sound production in a fundamental way to the body by seeing sound as an effect of the body's movement in real time. Notation, from Albert's point of view, indicates a process of sound production rather than a predetermined, recurrent sound, such as the note "A." An alphabet of movement would find ways to indicate what movements the body should make rather than indicating specifically what sound should be made (which is the general function of the musical score).

Many of the Four Horsemen's scores use an alphabet of movement to notate both sound events and interactions between voices through gestural symbols. This page from the piece "The Room (A Valentine) Winter's Day," combines gestural symbols with verbal directions:
The score above features a combination of written instructions, simple diagrams and words. Although it seems obvious to mention, the reader is expected to literally read the score during the performance, letting the diagrams focus the reader's vocalizations. Each reader chooses a section of the score and begins to read from the score moving freely among the various areas. The instructions on the top right indicate that the reader should "take a section from this curve and read it" using vocalizations of the reader's choosing. Notated on the curve, the instruction to "vocally straighten this line too" prompts the reader towards an interpretation of the line and its curve through non-speech sounds. A note directs attention to a square in the centre of the piece, directing the reader to "place here a non-semantic sound group that best conveys your sense of two chickens being killed." This instruction in particular, which tells the reader to
place the improvisation in the square, signifies the readability inherent to realizing
the score. The text of the score, McCaffery points out, has multiple functions:

Text functions in several different ways. Sometimes it's a precise
score in which sound features and values are specifically inscribed,
as too are the points of entry and exit. Exact time is never specified
(pieces may vary within 3 or 5 minutes length in a norm of say 9
minutes.) Frequently text functions as an anti-text: the text, in this
case, being what the group rebounds off, what is approached to be
resisted, what is refracted, what is reacted to. It's the text as anti-
text that is most commonly employed, although text often figures
prominently as dramatic prop i.e. the inclusion of text as a visual
device to focus the human group. . . . The physical presence then
of text (it might be as simple as a blank sheet of paper) is very
important as a structuring device; text promotes a gathering, a
calling into physical proximities which in itself has an effect upon
the energy state. (34)

More than being an heuristic or a collection of material meant for an
improvisation, the score directs the energy of each performer into the same
channel. Similar to Jonathan Albert's notion of the general movement of sound,
the score focuses a general movement of improvisational energy through its
particular alphabet of symbols and directions. Non-visual scores also function to
direct the movement of the body. In McCaffery's "Dilemma for the Memo," 16
performers are instructed to vocalize according to a set of verbal instructions
written on a cue card. Section 3, for example, states, "Attempt a history of music
in thirty-three seconds" (Seven Pages Missing Volume II 17). Section 11
instructs:

Your staccato against the other's cacophony
Your peach melba against their pork chop.
Your xerox against their parchment.
Your photograph against their crossword puzzle.
(Seven Pages Missing Volume II 98)
This is a very vague, yet evocative, direction that offers the performer no specific instructions regarding how to perform the above. Rather, the phrases are meant to suggest sounds and possible interpretations through allusion and encourage an impressionistic interpretation of the events suggested by the text. Line one indicates specific sound qualities but does not indicate if the sounds should be produced by the voice, by percussing the body, or both. The second, for example, could be interpreted through various means including: spontaneously generating a narrative using peach Melba as a theme or topic or vocally imitating the sound of eating peach Melba (which is an ice cream dessert). In his notes, McCaffery calls the performance of "Dilemma for the Meno" an act of "performance-interpretation," indicating that the performance itself is based on the performer's interpretation of the score in the moment of real time performance. In this case, the score is primarily verbal using the sentence, as opposed to a visual score using lines and shapes to indicate movements of the body. Here I use the term verbal to indicate a property of the score involving the use of words in general as instructions or as indicators for verbal semantic sound. The "Dilemma of the Meno," a verbal score, transmits performance instructions to the performer but it is left to the performer to create a performance out of the performance directions rather than producing a specific sound indicated by specific symbol.

The sound poetry score concretely notates the general direction or theme of an improvisation, but the audience also plays a role in how any given performance will develop. McCaffery accounts for this fact, using the term
"piece-process" to acknowledge the influence of the audience. In scoring sound


She is always this element of arche-composition present: the


type process shaped differently every time by the particular energy

gestalt created by the combined audience-performer dynamic. This quality of the unspoken, the unconscious communication and non-verbal, emotional dialogue that occurs each and every performance is to a large degree a factor in determining the duration of a piece. All this, I stress, is silent and often unconscious and highly subtle in its shaping. Our pieces are largely the result of a huge energy interface—between our own states of energy in performance and the energy complex of the audience (and the audience conceived too as a complex of molecular flows rather than a molar aggregate). ("Discussion . . . Genesis . . . Continuity" 33)


The audience itself becomes part of the performer's improvisational material in that the performer must be sensitive to the audience's energy and respond to that energy to maintain the audience's interest. The energy level of the audience is as much of a determining factor for how a piece is to be improvised as is the score. McCaffery underlines the importance of working with the audience by saying that the Horsemen "function as paradigm units of audience" in that the Horsemen's listening to each other parallels the audience's listening to four Horsemen; in other words the Horsemen are a microcosm of the audience's relationship to the performers in that each performer is audience to his own performance and the performance of the other Horsemen; "... that is, during a performance, [the Horsemen] play audience to each other, [they] are each other's texts, performers and audience. [They] are both what [they] say and what [they] hear. And simultaneously. At the same instance" ("Discussion . . . Genesis . . . Continuity" 33). The sound poet in the improvisatory situation, besides delivering
an improvised piece of sound poetry, is also engaged in an act of interpreting the audience, which subsequently has an effect on an improviser's choice of material. The sound poetry improvisatory situation is therefore an instance of performance-interpretation in real time. Performance-interpretation in sound poetry requires the practised performer's intuition to interpret the score, the other performers and the audience's energy. Improvisational scores do not require much material to be successful scores since the improvisation arises in the act of interpreting score, performers and audience. Another aspect of the relative intuitive simplicity of the visual score is its flexibility in terms of the relative expertise—or rather, non-expertise—of the performer in reading the score. Although the instructions for "Dilemma of the Meno" are semantically cryptic, for example, they do not require any strict adherence to reading either the verbal or visual instructions, i.e. what sound manifests in response to the score depends on the performer-interpretive relationship to the score. Graham Locke points out that graphic scores are able to function sympathetically with individual performers since they:

... operate as improvisational portals through which vibrational factors such as personal creativity and the 'feeling of the moment' can infuse a performance, thereby ensuring that the score retains the potential to be relevant to any player and any community... at any time... [G]raphic scores allow wider scope for improvisation and have the advantage of undermining critical notions of 'correctness,' since there is no correct way to play, say, a sequence of coloured shapes. They can also encourage players to explore the full [material and sonic] potential of their instruments... (8)

The visual score, according to Locke, supports, rather than blocks, improvisational process because it inscribes possibilities into an improvisational
performance procedure. In their readability, sound poetry scores manifest in sound only through the fullness of improvisation and therefore are capable of supporting, but not restricting, improvisational process.

**Jackson Mac Low and Chance Operations as Improvisation**

Jackson Mac Low’s scores for performance use a variety of techniques to notate both sound and word on the page and require improvisation in order to realize the score. Mac Low’s practice is oriented more around embedding moments of improvisation into a piece through compositional techniques rather than foregrounding the act of improvisation in itself. Mac Low’s scores use applied improvisation as part of realizing the scores, but improvisation functions as a default of reading the score. The notation for “A Piece for Sari Dienes,” for example, consists of several pencil rubbings of old IBM computer punch cards on a white paper surface and look like several sets of geometric shapes with broken lines stacked on each other. “The piece may be played on any musical instrument or other sound producer, or on any group of sound producers by any number of players,” Mac Low notes (*Doings* 30-31). “The performer or group of performers may make any sounds they please, but insofar as it is possible, should try to produce sounds not ordinarily made or associated with the sound sources” (30). Here, Mac Low asks the performers to improvise their own interpretation of the marks on the paper, much in the same way a gestural symbol demands an improvised interpretation of the gesture in sound.

"Musicwords (For Phil Niblock)” uses a similar application of improvisation, which asks the performers to improvise throughout the piece with a word group which is
Improvisation in Mac Low's writing, however, is a compositional strategy rather than an act in and of itself. A performance of a Mac Low score, is primarily a realization of the score into sound much in the same way a performance of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony realizes a score into musical sound. Mac Low writes strict frameworks for improvisation, such as in "Letters for Iris Numbers for Silence," which directs the performer how to sonologically interpret a series of ambiguous letters notated by hand on cards:

Letters may be pronounced shortly or for any duration up to that of a breath. No single letter's sound may be resumed after a new breath is taken unless the letter is repeated on a card. For each integer, readers are to be silent that number of seconds or moderately slow counts. Other silences are optional but should not exceed three seconds each. (*Doings* 36)

Beyond such surface instances of applied improvisation, however, what is more crucial about Mac Low's writing is how he builds improvisation into the pieces through chance operations. In the process of generating a composition, chance operations exists in the continuum of poetry during the moment of composition before the score arrives in its final version, similar to how William Carlos Williams uses improvisation along the continuum of poetry to interact with the plurality of reals in the moment of writing.

Mac Low's compositional process involves first deciding on the procedural method for writing the score/poem and then writing the poem strictly according to the method. In the introduction to *Doings*, which gives invaluable insight to Mac Low’s compositions due to the level of detail with which he describes the
performance procedures of his compositions, Steve Clay points out that Mac Low's interest revolves around the application of "nonintentional methods of composition with language" (14). "Nonintentional" not only means to generate language without intentionally using language to represent something, but also without the intent of using established genres and forms of writing, such as "poetry." Doubling the nonintentionality of his compositional process, Mac Low's compositions allow maximum performer input as to how the compositions should be read, although Mac Low stresses that the procedure outlined by the composition needs to be followed exactly by the performer with no off-page improvisation. Clay mentions that "Mac Low rightly insisted that the commentaries and instructions [on his scores] are integral to each piece" since Mac Low "lays bare the methods of composition without judgement and without theory" since "theory, for lack of a better word, is inseparable from the making of the work itself, which by extension is an absolute blossoming of Stein's sense of 'composition as explanation'" (14). For example, in the instructions for the piece "The Five Young Turtle Asymmetries," Mac Low writes:

Loudness is regulated by typography and some types of punctuation. Initial capitals call for moderately loud speech; italics, loud; solid capitals, quite loud; boldface, very loud; italic or boldface capitals, even louder. Parenthesis and quotation marks call for soft or moderately soft speech (according to the performance situation); parenthesis or quotation marks enclosing capitals, boldface type and/or italics call for "forcible" soft speech. (69)

This minute level of detail is very much a musical level of detail in that the musical score gives clear directions for all aspects of interpretation, including volume and metre (the speed at which a composition is to be played). Mac
Low’s compositions ultimately do not tell the performer how to use the score but gives him/her specific procedures to apply to the material. This makes Mac Low’s work “indeterminate” as Anne R. Witten discusses in her dissertation on sound poetry composition methods, since the outcome of the performance is dependent on how the performer chooses to fulfil the performative heuristic for the composition in the performance situation (141).

Mac Low’s explicit directions are readable by performers unaccustomed to performing in group situations. Mac Low's instructions often include details reminding performers to do what musicians would automatically do in a musical situation: to listen to the total sound produced by the group of five performers of "Turtle Asymmetries" and give utmost attention to making sure that all individual contributions to the performance contribute to the group sound. "Thus," Mac Low writes, the performer "... may prolong a silence, tone, or phoneme, or speak louder or softer, faster or slower, as he feels these actions will contribute most positively to the total sound" (70). The degree to which Mac Low sets up the parameters for his work, on the other hand, while they effectively create nonintentional writing from a literary and rhetorical point of view, directs musical intent towards the language rather than literary intent to the extent that it is possible to distinguish between these two things as such. That is, via Mac Low’s systems of language generation—various chance and non-chance operations—Mac Low gathers and collects language rather than choosing it for what it represents semantically. Although much of Mac Low’s writing does retain semantic content, it is unconventional in that Mac Low wants to isolate semantic
content itself from a context of use and meaning itself is part of the
improvisational material many of Mac Low's scores contain. In an interview with
Richard Kostelanetz, Mac Low emphasizes his interest in how words mean; for
Mac Low, "... every word, every speech sound, seems ... a matter of meaning
as of sound and that anything uttered, certainly any complete words, but even
fragments of words, have meaning. ... [I]f a human voice is going to produce a
sound, it has a meaning that is inescapably part of it. And in the case of words,
there are always the lexical meanings, the dictionary meanings of the words"
(159). This is an eclectic positioning of meaning as sound, or meaning as the
result of sound, rather than separating speech or "meaningful" sounds based on
whether or not sounds have semantic content in the sense that it does not
privilege the linguistic functions of sound and representation. Mac Low has an
unbiased interest in all kinds of language as material. In this view, meaning itself
can be sonologically divorced from its semantic content according to a general
sense of how linguistic units that make meaning sound as units of meaning.
Despite his commitment to using language as a source for sound, Mac Low does
not believe that language can fully break away from conventional meaning—the
use of language to point to something outside of itself—in order to focus and
centre on linguistic details and their relationships. Mac Low does not separate
language or any other human-generated sound from meaning. Rather, his
scores are non intentional literary works that use methods and procedures that
distance the act of writing from the conscious ego of the writer. He does this
through using chance operations procedures to create texts comprised by
language in itself. Mac Low states, in an interview during the preparation of his anthology of compositions *Doings*, that "I have thought of myself as making artworks that presented language as such rather than using language primarily to convey thoughts, emotions, etc. . . . I write what I write for its own sake rather than for extraneous reasons, political, religious, or aesthetic-theoretical" (14). What is crucial about chance operations procedures is how they embody everyday improvisation at the level of composition.

Chance operations are methods of generating poetry using a system of making word choices based on chance. Such systems include Jackson Mac Low's own "spelling through" technique, using a computer program to randomly select words, such as Charles O. Hartman's DIASTEX5 and DIASTEXT programs, using dice to select words, or using the I-Ching. "Spelling through" is a "diastic" reading procedure. "Diastic" is a term coined by Mac Low as an alternative to "acrostic" reading procedures. Acrostic procedures "spell out" words using the first letter of the word as a line. Diastic procedures "spell through" in that the writer chooses a word or phrase and a source text and uses the chosen phrase to collect language from the text. For example, using the phrase "blue beetle," the writer finds the first word in the source text that starts with "b" and writes that down. Next, the writer continues looking in the text starting where he/she leaves off until the writer finds a word with an "l" as the second letter in the word. The writer then finds a word with "u" as the third letter and so on. The resulting words are then written down in order, comprising the poem. Most chance operations techniques use a source text and a systematic
method of mining the text for language. The improvisational nature of chance operations is found in the fact that it uses a source text, much like improvisation draws on a set of materials and a way of drawing upon the source text for material according to a set of rules. Although procedural rules predetermine how a source text will be used, chance arises in the fact that procedures create an arbitrary reading of a text. I see the procedure as a heuristic for improvisation and the source text as an instance of improvisation generated through the heuristic. In this view, a text generated through procedurally determined, or "deterministic," writing, is a record of an instance of improvisation, although improvisation is rather applied to the source text through a representation of improvisational process encoded in the procedure.

In the introduction to Thing of Beauty, Anne Tardos notes that:

In the 1960s, when he first devised deterministic methods, he thought of them as kinds of chance operations. It was only in the early 1990s that he realized that such methods were fundamentally different from chance operations, because deterministic methods do not involve what could rightly be called "chance," unless one makes a mistake. That is, if one applies a deterministic text-selection method multiple times to the same source text and seed text, making no mistakes, the method's output will always be the same. . . . Nevertheless, even though deterministic methods don't involve chance, you cannot predict their output. (Tardos xix)

Tardos points out the fact that deterministic methods are not exactly a kind of chance operation because they prescribe a precise interaction with a text rather than a random one. For example, using the words "blue beetle" as the guiding phrase for a spelling through procedure directs all aspects of the interaction with the source text, whereas rolling a die to determine what page of the dictionary one will use as a source text is based on chance. Although deterministic
methods may not properly be chance operations, however, they apply an instance of chance to a text in their arbitrary nature. As Tardos states, deterministic methods have unpredictable outputs, at least in the first application of one particular source text, since a repetition of the same procedure on the same text would have the same outcome.

Mac Low's chance operations also represent how improvisation operates in situations of everyday improvisation in that chance operations create artificial parameters of time, context and choice of improvisational material that parallel how such factors come in to play in everyday situations such as having a conversation or making a sandwich from leftovers found in the refrigerator. More importantly, however, chance operations separate communication and semantic properties from language so the performer can focus on generating language sounds out of the words, letters and sentences that intention leaves behind.

Mac Low's "Fieldpiece 1," for example, "... comprises a 'field' of words, phrases and sentences that are meant to be spoken by two or more performers in the course of each performance" (Doings 236). The score presents a number of phrases in various fonts spread over eight pages; the pages can be read separately, "placed side by side, or otherwise arrayed" to suit the performer (Doings 236). The size, type and placement of the words and phrases on the page, as Mac Low notes, are meant to influence the performer's delivery of the lines but not direct the delivery too strenuously; the focus of the piece is not the language itself but "the ways the words are spoken ... [determined] by the speakers in accord with their in-performance choices, as influenced by all the
sounds they hear" (236). In *Fieldpiece*, chance operations are integral in generating language that has no apparent contextual meaning for the performer so that the performer can focus on delivery itself abstracted from the communicative language situation. Mac Low notes that "the words, phrases and sentences . . . were chosen from among those inverse lines specified by chance operations that selected them from the 4,000 lines of . . . "154 Forties," a manuscript comprising 154 forty-line stanzaic poems written [by Mac Low] in 1990-1995" (236). Further, Mac Low notes, chance operations also determined the font sizes and types for each set of words. Chance operations' freeing of the text from an apparent literary meaning opens up delivery itself to chance in that delivery is not required to communicate meaning as it is in typical speech situations.

"A Vocabulary for Annie Brigitte Gilles Tardos" uses an extensive process of chance operations to free context and literary intention from strings of sentences laid over several pages. The piece directs the performer to choose one of the sentences in the score to speak over and over alternating speaking of the phrase with playing the phrase on a musical instrument using a predetermined chart to sync up tempered instrumental pitches with letters. The sentences Mac Low uses throughout the piece are comprised of the same twelve letters found in the title and each of these letters ". . . is read as a symbol of one of the twelve notes . . . of the even-tempered [Western] chromatic scale" (*Doings* 147). On encountering the letter "A," for example, the performer plays the note "A;" for the letter "B," the performer plays a "B flat," and so on. Performers are
encouraged to improvise their own sentences, but Mac Low places "improvisation" in quotations throughout the instructions since "... each individual's choices are circumscribed by the procedural rules ... with perception, choice and action continuously conditioning and modifying each other" (146-147). The effect of chance operations and other procedures in this piece is to free the performers to focus on creating a collective ambient language sound, allowing them to concentrate on speaking the words clearly and "... understand the syntax of each sentence and speak it in such a way as to make the syntactical relations between its component words clear" (147-148). Thus, "A Vocabulary for Annie Brigitte Gilles Tardos" uses chance operations to free performers to focus on generating the sounds of words and the sounds of their syntactical relations apart from any communicative function.

The performer of a Mac Low score has a very restricted range of improvisational material. In the Mac Low score, the object of improvisation is to manifest the sonological possibilities bound in to the composition. The performer applies improvisation to the score according to the heuristic it presents. The relationship between the performer and the Mac Low score resembles the relationship between a saxophonist and a notational score in that Mac Low expects the performer to take the score's instructions seriously and work strictly within the parameters he indicates. Mac Low's performance pieces are dependent on the composer's expectations that the performer will read the score according to the standards Mac Low indicates for each score. Similarly, the musical composer expects the saxophonist to read the score in the standard
way, which is to play an "A" in the range, dynamic and duration indicated by the notation and not, for example, blow honks or squeals. Mac Low's object is to realize the pure sound of conventional language and much of the sound applied to conventional language manifests itself in the real time moment of language use according to the communicative needs of the rhetorical situation; the phonetic sounds required to form language are formed in real time and at speed in service of improvising a communicative, linguistically transparent meaning. So, although Mac Low's compositions do not foreground acts of improvisation, improvisation is built into them at both the level of composition through chance operations procedures and at the level of compositional material, the sounds of language.

Although I differentiate between sound poetry that foregrounds pure improvisation and sound poetry that is dependant upon applied improvisation, generally speaking, the general characteristic of sound poetry improvisation is its expression of excess through acts of linguistic improvisation. These acts of linguistic improvisation themselves exceed the everyday improvisation inherent to acts of communication, for example. An act of communication, from the point of view of the restricted economy, may use improvisation functionally as a material support, but the purpose of a communicative act is not to improvise. Sound poetry's primary material—linguistic sound divorced from communication and intention and in excess of speech—is waste, according to the restricted economy of language’s communicative function. This means that the applied improvisation inherent to language production is also part of the general
economy of language from which sound poetry draws since in the speech situation, speakers do not focus on elucidating the possibilities of sound inherent to a linguistic construction of some sort but rather are intent on using sound to communicate intention. Non-speech and other "pure" sounds, as McCaffery points out in his notion of the libidinal drive, are not without intention. Rather, it is the intentionality implicit in the act of improvisation that enables the performer to take up non-speech sounds as materials.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

"The main difference between European and North American culture is that European culture is process oriented. North American culture is product oriented." -Han Bennink, Dutch free improvisation/jazz drummer, at Vancouver Creative Music Institute, June 2009

Major Improvisational Strategies and Improvisers

My primary interest in this dissertation is to chart and explain how improvisation works as a technique and as a practice. I approach this project from the practitioner's—the writer or instrumentalist's—point of view, which asks the question, "How do I improvise with these materials?" or "How is improvisation done in a particular situation?" Much of my approach to theorizing improvisation is informed by my years as a practicing musician and what I have learned about practices and practicing over the years of studying the saxophone. I have tried to articulate a "way in" to a poetics of improvisation that emphasizes the literal doing of improvisation and takes into consideration how improvisational materials are handled depending on a specific improvisational situation. My analysis of improvisatory writing emphasizes two material aspects of language: speech and print, and figures them into my assessments; the literal relationship between the practitioner and material is the basis of my discussions of how poetic improvisation works in several situations.

The improvisational situations and strategies I have discussed range from the most iconic and successful instances to more emergent practices for two
reasons: first, these situations and strategies exemplify a literal doing of
improvisation and second, the texts generated in the improvisational situation
somehow continue to bear the marks of improvisation. Improvisational sound
poetry most obviously bears such marks in the sense that sound poetry erases
itself as it is produced; its existence and performance in real time make sound
poetry improvisation poetic improvisation’s most ideal case. In non-idiomatic
poetic improvisation, exemplified by William Carlos Williams, Andrew Levy and
Lyn Hejinian, improvisation occurs at a time and place separate from the final
printed poem; there is no real time as such left in a printed text, but rather,
improvisation exists as part of a generative strategy during the time of writing and
later at the productive moment of reading. The reader accesses the
improvisation embedded at the time of writing through a conceptual recognition
of the role of improvisation in the text; the reader becomes an interpreter of how
improvisation functioned during the time of writing. To discuss this aspect of
poetic, or writerly, improvisation, I developed the concept of a "continuum of
poetry" that envisions times of writing as branching off into pockets of time
distinct from linear clock time. A successfully improvised poem under the non-
idiomatic improvisation category must somehow embed improvisation into the
text. But, even though such a text may bear marks of improvisation, an
improvised text also requires the participation of a reader willing to read the text
as improvisational since the poem can be mistaken for a product-oriented work
due to the fact that poems are stored in print. I discuss David Antin’s talk poems
in this vein because although Antin performs the poems in real time, their
conventional oratorical structure and the fact that Antin records and transcribes the poems closely link them to print.

Idiomatic improvisation, as I discussed in Chapter 2, creates its relationship to improvisation through its connection to a particular idiom, meaning that the improvisation itself is heuristically limited to kinds of signification that comply with the idiom in question. In North American poetry, the phenomenon of jazz poetry is the strongest and most popularly known example of idiomatic improvisations. Jack Kerouac is an example of a jazz poet who both signifies on and uses jazz improvisation in his writing, particularly at the level of the sentence. Kerouac's writing is semantically rife with figures such as Charlie Parker and Thelonious Monk and references to specific tunes and onomatopoetic representations of soloing instruments, placing him solidly in a signifying mode. On the other hand, his compositional process involves conceptualizing the moment of writing as a moment of jazz improvisation in that for Kerozuac, the typewriter is a kind of piano. So, although improvisation exists in Kerouac's writing mostly through signification, he builds improvisation into the writing process through the materiality of its production and his textual methodology. The poetry of the Poetry-and-Jazz movement, on the other hand, locates improvisation in the moment of performance rather than the moment of writing; for Kenneth Patchen and Lawrence Rexroth, poetry and jazz come together in the loose scoring of the poem against the jazz trio or quartet accompanying the reader but the poetry itself is not improvised as such at any stage of the writing. Rather, jazz improvisation is left to the musicians. Nathaniel Mackey and Amiri
Baraka demonstrate a further engagement with jazz improvisation by using jazz improvisation as a concept for what I call, in Chapter 2, "cultural negotiation." Conceptually, cultural negotiation is an everyday process of inventing one's own identity against the backdrop of dominant cultures. For many African-American jazz poets, appending jazz to poetry by signifying jazz within the poem through mentioning specific luminary jazz musicians, instruments and songs, is a way of making a space for African-American writers and culture within the American-European Anglo-centric field of English poetry. Cultural negotiation as a concept can also be extended to everyday improvisation with regards to the negotiation of an individual's identity. From this point of view, cultural improvisation in Baraka and Mackey involves applying a form of everyday life improvisation to an aesthetic practice.

In Chapter 4 I argue that sound poetry's engagement with improvisation is the most "pure," to use Roger Smith and Hazel Dean's term, out of all the improvisational strategies I address in my dissertation. A sound poem is a real time event; whereas in the printed poem, the page and ink is the material support for language, the material support of the sound poem is the vocal apparatus. The vocal apparatus' material exists separately from the sound poem itself in that when the poem ends, the poem disappears into time, leaving behind the vocal apparatus. Often sound poetry uses a score or chart towards creating an iterable instance of sound poetry, but many sound poetry scoring techniques use visual symbols to represent possible sound events, leaving the performer to invent,
often during the moment of performance, via interpretation and individual response to the score, the particular sound suggested by the symbol.

Improvisation is an attractive poetic strategy across many communities and formations because it emphasizes processual development over product. One effect of improvisational strategies is to impart a feeling of "freedom" in spontaneously generating an improvisation, but as I have discussed, this "freedom" is a conceit of improvisation rather than a reality. Improvisers are free to make choices concerning what materials to manipulate during an improvisation and are free to focus on the process of and exact moment of the act of writing. In that way, improvisation is bound to process and exists only in relation to its material. Deliberate acts of improvisation in aesthetic contexts—as opposed to default acts of improvisation in the activities of daily life—foreground improvisational process as an end in itself, but are still dependent on materials in order for improvisation to manifest. I have defined "materials" in Chapter 1 as a complexity of ideas and concerns of the individual writer combined with the context of performance (either public, as in the sound poem, or privately, as part of the process of writing along the continuum of poetry) along with the materiality of the body, musical instrument, or writing implements, which also create limitations for improvisational development. Improvisation's neutrality is a basic process of daily life and it functions as a "clean slate" for potential engagement between one or more practices that are usually separated by the parameters of "discipline." Steve Lacy, for example, goes beyond the conventional means of using poetry as lyric song fodder by finding ways to engage poetry through form
as well as content and concept. Lacy's compositions function like jazz head charts in that they are vehicles for improvisation. But whereas jazz music predetermines rhythm and song length according to convention (songs are usually rhythmically symmetrical and are often 8, 12, 16, 20, or so bars long, in multiples of four, the rules of classical harmony inflected with jazz voicings in the chord changes determine the trajectory of a melody). Lacy's harmony is determined through poetry in that Lacy determines musical pitch by imitating the approximate pitch of the spoken word. This means that the types of sonorities present in the composed musical phrases are limited to what pitches the voice can produce.

**Improvisation and Cross-practice**

In Lacy's view, poetry provides the musician with a way to develop improvisational strategies outside of the "potted context" of overplayed jazz standards and tired musical clichés that inevitably occur as a particular iteration of a musical form—such as bebop—ages and is passed down from one generation of musicians to the next. Beyond this, however, I see Lacy's engagement with composition as an extension of an improvisational act since a notion of improvisation enables Lacy to openly combine features of music with features of language. In a sense, Lacy is an interdisciplinary musician because his work requires him to be fluent in music and in poetry to a certain degree. Lacy's particular practice means that he creates texts as a musician and through the medium of music. His delivery device for improvisation is ultimately sound occurring in real time. But his compositional process requires him to be engaged
with poetry in a nuanced way that is attentive to form as well as content. Lacy is not quite interdisciplinary in that he is not a poet, i.e. he does not write poetry, nor does he improvise through poetry. But rather, improvisation, taken as a site or platform for engagement between poetry and jazz, enables a practitioner's engagement with poetry and jazz rather than a master's. A practitioner of improvisational crossovers—or "cross-practice," as I term it—engages with both disciplines in a flexible, improvisational way that eschews mastery of both disciplines. Rather, cross-practice emphasizes the process of exploration and the process of inventing cross-disciplinary texts and strategies. For the cross practitioner, especially in the performance situation, technical mastery of the delivery device is an obvious necessity for improvisationally successful and compelling performances; Lacy possesses technical mastery of the saxophone and techniques of musical improvisation which are informed by his engagement with poetry. But Lacy is also a practitioner of poetics in his understanding of poetic language and the poetic function of language, which he applies to his musical compositions.

**Improvisation and Utopian Force**

Improvisation itself is a platform of infinite possibility with regards to what materials it can handle. For Lacy, improvisation becomes the site, a kind of open and blank starting place for interdisciplinary engagement made possible because improvisation is a material fact of everyday life, which, I have argued, is not particular to aesthetic practices but rather is a thing shared by activities as diverse as improvising on a saxophone to having a phone conversation. I began
my dissertation by pointing out that improvisation is under-articulated in the field of poetics and also in North American culture in general; it is often represented tropologically as a mysterious process of spontaneous generation that neglects attention to its material qualities. The "Improvisation, Community and Social Practice" (ICASP) project based at the University of Guelph in Guelph, Ontario, is a network of academic researchers in improvisation from a variety of disciplines, including law, philosophy, musicology, political philosophy, ethnomusicology and sociology, along with independent musician researchers interested in developing the field of research around improvisation as a model for social interactions. As I read it, however, Ajay Heble, the project director, views the relationship between improvisation and the everyday as a special case, whereas my argument is that musical improvisation and aesthetic acts of improvisation of any kind require, at bottom, everyday improvisation in order to be possible. Below, Heble discusses the ICASP project's philosophy which I quote in its entirety to demonstrate the group’s ideology around using improvisation as an investigative tool for culture in general:

The project’s core hypothesis is that musical improvisation is a crucial model for political, cultural and ethical dialogue and action. Taking as a point of departure performance practices that cannot readily be scripted, predicted, or compelled into orthodoxy, we argue that the innovative working models of improvisation developed by creative practitioners have helped to promote a dynamic exchange of cultural forms and to encourage new, socially responsive forms of community building across national, cultural and artistic boundaries. Improvisation, in short, has much to tell us about the ways in which communities based on such forms are politically and materially pertinent to envisioning and sounding alternative ways of knowing and being in the world. Improvisation demands shared responsibility for participation in community, an ability to negotiate differences and a willingness to accept the
challenges of risk and contingency. Furthermore, in an era when diverse peoples and communities of interest struggle to forge historically new forms of affiliation across cultural divides, the participatory and civic virtues of engagement, dialogue, respect and community-building inculcated through improvisatory practices take on a particular urgency. (<www.improvcommunity.ca/about>)

From the perspective I have built in this dissertation, it is backwards to use musical improvisation as a model for political, cultural and social dialogue and action when improvisation is, at the base, an integral component of manifold processes inherent to everyday life, such as talking on the telephone or driving a vehicle. At the outset of the passage, Heble proposes that musical improvisation is useful as a model for studying other forms of improvisation because practitioner’s discourse around musical improvisation is much more developed than discourse around the improvisational moment inherent to a conversation between two friends in a chance meeting on the street. Gertrude Stein makes a similar move in "Composition as Explanation" by linking composition and war as two of many possible acts that human beings are able to commit by their nature. She sees compositional process inherent in war and vice versa. Heble states above, however, that the ICASP project not only takes musical improvisation as a model but views musical improvisation and all creative improvisation, as having a broader effect on the everyday processes of improvisation at work in a society as a whole. He then moves on to say that the group is interested in "... ways in which communities based on such forms are politically and materially pertinent to envisioning and sounding alternative ways of knowing and being in the world."

The world that Heble refers to in this sentence, however, is the narrower world of artists or other people who are influenced by artists and cultural practices;
effectively, Heble limits improvisation as a social form to communities that recognize artistic practice as a way of life, which describes very few communities in any country. Improvisation, I would argue, however, is present at levels of social organization in all human communities, not only arts communities; for example, "negotiating difference" could describe any number of social interactions in any community. He further goes on to say that improvisation is important in an era characterized by diverse peoples attempting to cross cultural divides. I am suspect of the term "negotiating difference," as Heble develops it out of an understanding of negotiation as an improvisational process influenced by music. Although improvisation, broadly, is indeed part of crossing "cultural divides" the act of negotiating always already contains its own modes of improvisation independent from musical improvisation, therefore referring to music as a model for contemporary instances of social improvisation is a mistake of substituting causes for effects.

What could musical improvisation actually lend to "participatory and civic virtues of engagement, dialogue, respect and community-building"? Musicians already operate in communities of mutual practice, for example, the community of free improvisers in Vancouver are socially and culturally linked via a shared notion of improvisational practice and a sense of a tradition built from a combination of the European free improvisers and the American free jazz musicians. Although the prototypical jazz band's group interactions during a performance do take on the properties of a mini-society with respect to instrumental roles and the social relationships among the band members,
musical improvisation is an act of improvisation that foregrounds improvisational skill in a particular idiom. In non-idiomatic scenarios, improvisation involves honed skill in listening and interacting with fellow musicians and a well-invented, articulately delivered improvisational vocabulary. I do not see “community building” as an act of improvisation, but rather an everyday act that is tacitly dependent on improvisation. Heble’s discussion of improvisation is simply too broad and attributes too many possibilities to musical improvisation as a potential model for what seems to be a loose sociological study of human interactions.

Although as I have shown, improvisation is not a mystical or mysterious phenomenon, it has the character of existing outside of itself in that we can conceptualize it separately from its materials. In Improvisation, Derek Bailey describes improvisation as always outrunning the improviser, always just out of the improviser’s totalizing reach. This means that improvisation does have an important relationship with larger, capitalist forces, undermining the ability of capitalism to reify everyday thinking and living into easily digestible commodities, which is general economy. Improvisation, Richard Quinn suggests, is a utopian force in its emphasis of processual creation as opposed to product oriented creation:

Like oscillation, improvisation disinters movement, creativity and activity from the artefacts arrayed before us like so many boxes on supermarket shelves. The musical text comes to life as a developing creation rather than as a commodity to be consumed. In large part, . . . improvisation [is] a utopian force, one which foregrounds hidden labour and serves as a tool for fighting against our alienation from that which we produce. (Quinn 611-612).
For the writer improviser, improvisation creates a situation where writing both occupies and escapes print's stasis in both real, literal ways via the conscious process of improvising, but also has an effect on the world beyond the individual improviser through undermining conventional notions of writing. It frees the printed poem from the hierarchy of canonized ways of reading due to the fact that improvisation stands as a signifier through which to read the poem and thus re-energizes the writing such that the listener must also expend energy in reading the poem rather than simply accepting the poem as having a finished form. Improvisation insists that print does not arrest change and does not deny that other permutations are and were always possible.
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