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IMPROVISATION MATTERS

THE VISION,
SCHOLARSHIP,
AND LEGACY
OF AJAY NEBLE



Improvisation Matters: The Vision, Scholarship, and Legacy of Ajay Heble

A welcome from the editors of
*Critical Studies in Improvisation /
Études critiques en improvisation*

Dr. Ajay Heble's work has now lived alongside us for decades. As we reflect upon his practice, who he is and how he works, we note how his voice—as critic and creator, as teacher and collaborator—is marked by a consistent set of tactics and preoccupations: resistance and resilience; hope and community-making; intervention and urgency; vitality and transformation. “I still want to hold on to the conviction,” he writes in the introduction to *Classroom Action: Human Rights, Critical Activism, and Community-Based Education*, “that art matters, that it can function as a vital agent of social and cultural change” (12).

Ajay's practice in all of its moments involves a shared aesthetics of being present, of encouraging himself and his readers to take the initiative, as immediately as we can manage, “to do something about struggles for social justice” (10) and to imagine moving beyond the confines of our societal and institutional constraints to begin to foster a better world, somehow, and to live better with others.



What's compelling for us about how Ajay works is the way in which this conviction, this holding on, is also a form of release, of letting go. It's well worth noting that what often sounds in his writing like definitive self-assertion, articulated for instance through a first-person pronoun that seems both to secure and to initiate sentences like the one quoted above (“I still want . . .”), is also immediately, deliberately, and inherently bound up in its own co-creative undoing, even—perhaps especially—in an academic context.

He's giving us clues, in a sense, about how to start to make and do things, which demands, foremost, releasing ourselves into the collaborative.

We're not suggesting that the creative or critical or pedagogical ego need dismantle itself entirely, but that the speaking subject does need, following Ajay, to begin to find ways to recognize its foundational intersubjectivity, engaging in versions of what Lisbeth Lipari calls "interlistening" (504): the solo voice finds itself always already enmeshed in a chorus of other voices, textures, and positions—voicings—and its task, our primal and primary task, is not to overcome that plurality but still to speak or to sing or to play alongside it, with it, to live aloud together. Reading Ajay, we start to uncover openings into that enmeshment—in quotations and conversations, in collaborations and co-authorships—that inspire and challenge, sustained by a generosity of spirit and a deep desire to listen both warmly and well.

This special issue, published to coincide with Dr. Ajay Heble receiving the title of University Professor Emeritus at the University of Guelph, includes a kaleidoscopic array of reflections on his ongoing legacy. Many of these contributions showcase Ajay's commitment to embracing this "interlistening." In his contribution to this issue, George Lipsitz articulates how Ajay's work as a leader, in his correlated academic and community work, mirrors Duke Ellington's ability to create community through his music, by "tapping into and amplifying the specific voicings, abilities, and aspirations of band members." Jesse Stewart similarly reflects on Ajay's collaborative spirit: "Improvisers and friends alike depend crucially on each other, trusting that no matter where the music—or life—takes us, our accomplices will be there to support and encourage us, and to challenge us when we need challenging. Few friends have supported, encouraged, and challenged me as Ajay has." In his essay, Joel Bakan showcases the vital importance of Ajay's steadfast commitment to others as he underlines two current, pressing threats to justice—neoliberalism and illiberalism—and emphasizes the importance of conceptualizing freedom as relational. As much of Ajay's work attests, freedom is never an individual process; it is a collective path.

The theme of interconnection emerges through many contributions in this collection, particularly when researchers describe how the interdisciplinarity inherent to Critical Studies in Improvisation influenced how they conceptualize their research. Benjamín Mayer-Foulkes writes of having a "double epiphany" upon reading Alain Derbez's Spanish translation of Ajay's book *Landing on the Wrong Note: Jazz, Dissonance and Critical Practice*, realizing the improvisational nature of his work as a psychoanalyst and understanding that he "related to 17, Instituto [the Institute Mayer-Foulkes directs] as a musical instrument, one with which to free-jazz alongside a host of surrounding players." It was

Ajay's application of improvisation as social practice that led Sara Ramshaw to "recognize that both law and (musical) improvisation share the same structural tension in that their meaning rests on the aporetic relation between singularity and generality, repetition, and alteration—what I call in my work 'the law of the extempore' or 'justice as improvisation.'" Similarly, Bakan celebrates Ajay's "brilliant and inspiring insight into how improvisation connects to politics, social relations, and resistance."

When this issue highlights Ajay's academic achievements and the ongoing impacts of *Critical Studies in Improvisation*, it also naturally invites us to consider his role in the community. Rather than segregating his life and work, Ajay's research, music-making, community-building, activism, and friendship are profoundly, intentionally interrelated. In this spirit, contributors offer fond memories of experiences with Ajay, whether in classrooms, on walks, in audiences, or on stage. Heartwarming glimpses into Ajay's character emerge: Kimberley McLeod highlights his "innate curiosity"; Justine Richardson praises his embodiment of joy as a transgressive and political act; Ajay's PhD student Ben Finley reflects on his "patient perseverance." Musicians share how they were inspired by Ajay: Dong-Won Kim mentions how he helped him "experience what freedom through music is," while Scott Merritt thanks Ajay for inspiring him to "re-think how he approaches different musical environments."

The more quotidian qualities of Ajay are also praised in this issue. Paul Watkins attests that, indeed, the rumours are true: Ajay really is *that* good at table tennis. Brent Rowan, who had the pleasure of teaching music lessons to Ajay's children, highlights how their kindness, eagerness to learn, and good senses of humour reflect their father's positive impact as a parent. Brent also gives a nod to the oft-overlooked fact that Ajay is a style icon, the beret his timeless signature piece. Sam Boer reflects on Ajay's commitment to showing up—epitomized in his legendary ability to stay awake for multiple days at a time when there's art to be witnessed (perhaps his skills with the espresso maker have something to do with this?), but also in his devotion to being wherever the music's happening.

In that spirit, this issue would not be complete without its artistic contributions. The musical offerings to this issue—including performances by Matt Brubeck, Marianne Trudel, Jesse Stewart, Reza Yazdanpanah, and Jane Bunnett—are delightfully eclectic, providing a snapshot into the diversity of musical approaches that Ajay has participated in and presented over the years. Poetry winds its way through this issue, with editors Daniel Fischlin and Kevin McNeilly offering profound reflections on their relationships with Ajay. Friends of Ajay and his wife, Sheila O'Reilly, understand the special place Gaspésie holds in their hearts, and several contributors help capture the magic of *Coin-du-Banc* in this issue, from

Works Cited

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- Lipari, Lisbeth. "On interlistening and the idea of dialogue." *Theory & Psychology*, vol. 24, no. 4, 2014. *Sage Journals*, doi.org/10.1177/0959354314540766.

Stacey Bliss's haiku to João França's photo book. And long-time IICSI collaborator Douglas Ewart's vibrant artwork colourfully bookends the issue.

This issue is only a snapshot of Ajay's legacy: « un legs qui s'est constitué avec soin, au rythme des rencontres et toujours en phase avec les enjeux du moment, » as IICSI Director Eric Fillion writes in this issue's final piece. Just as an album of recorded music is merely a record of a particular confluence of musicians in time, this issue is merely a record of Ajay Heble, offered on this occasion by a constellation of colleagues, friends, collaborators, students, and community members who have been inspired by him. Though a mere drop in the ocean, we hope these essays, stories, and artistic offerings provide you a sense of just how far the ripples go.

Thresholds (for Ajay)

Daniel Fischlin

Nothing more famished than a stray
Word looking
For a poem

And all things captured in
The foretelling of
A poem yet to be written
On the threshold of sounding

If ever forced to take the colours
Out of a rainbow—let me begin with a word that means
All things are poems before they turn
From light
To dust

All things begin where I want to
find rest

The translucent silver of
Spring water a thousand millennia old
The refracted fractal before it touches
Your lips always
On that threshold,
Like a sliver of time,
A distant sun burned to ash
Yet to be water

For the poet who looks in the mirror
And does not see a poet:

Do words pass through hard surfaces
And turn them into air?

Is there a name for the sound
Fellow travelers hear as their voyage comes to an end?
Why worry about purpose when
Roots struggle to tether to stone and shallow mulch?
When the wind blows leaves down and crows
Chase each other above the river, why bother with meaning?
There is much yet to come in the forgetting.

Composing Community: Improvising with Ajay Heble

George Lipsitz

This special issue offers an opportunity to express the admiration, appreciation, and gratitude that so many of us feel for Ajay Heble. Whenever our work involves improvisation, we know we are walking in his footsteps even if we cannot fill his shoes. While he fully deserves all the praise and recognition that has come his way through award of the Killam Prize and designation as a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, I think the best way to honour him is to understand and try to replicate all that he has done to foreground improvisation as a broad social practice rather than as a narrow aesthetic choice and in the process create ever-expanding circles of convivial co-creation.

When I think of Heble's impact and importance for the study and practice of improvisation I am reminded of the great Duke Ellington's role in changing music and its contexts of creation, performance, and reception. Ellington complemented his work as a brilliant composer, songwriter, and arranger with innovative achievements as a pianist, band leader, promoter, and public intellectual. Yet critics often claimed that Ellington's true instrument was the orchestra. His compositions created communities. They tapped into and amplified the specific voicings, abilities, and aspirations of band members. Ellington's orchestra composed collectively. Routinely he presented the musicians with an idea and invited them to work together and improvise their roles. When new musicians joined the band he asked them to listen for what might be missing and to experiment with how to fill in the spaces. Ellington invented and adjusted the tempos of his songs by watching and responding to how audience members danced and moved. He derived the themes of his songs from the quotidian experiences of African American life—from the conversations heard in a Harlem air shaft, from the gait of a man walking down a road in East St. Louis, from the solemnity of a Sunday morning church service. Perhaps most important, Ellington rejected an "art for

art's sake" approach to jazz music, viewing it as an active social force, as a form of ethical public witness to the resilience and creativity of Black people. Music was forever different after Ellington, not just because of his personal virtuosity but because he showed how the social relations of music making could be changed and improved.



Ajay Heble's achievements resonate with the commitments to individual excellence paired with convivial co-creation that characterized Ellington's life in music. Through his scholarly writing, teaching, mentorship, program building, and his direction of the Guelph Jazz Festival, Heble has achieved a level of extraordinary distinction. He has produced influential and impactful single and co-authored books on jazz poetics and improvisation, and edited definitive collections including the widely used and highly regarded *Improvisation Studies Reader*. He provided the core concepts and devised the narrative trajectory of the book *The Fierce Urgency of Now*, which I co-authored with him and Daniel Fischlin. Because Heble's evidence, ideas, and arguments win widespread peer validation, the International Institute for Critical Studies in Improvisation (IICSI) has attracted the participation of some of the most distinguished musicologists in the world, has informed and been informed by the enthusiastic participation of scholars across the disciplines, and has engaged musicians and other creative artists bringing their specialized knowledge into dialogue with scholars. The value of these projects appears clearly in the thousands of books, articles, projects, and conferences that have emerged from them, thanks in no small measure to the significant

external funding that Heble has secured for the Institute. He is singularly responsible for creating a new scholarly field grounded in the study of improvisation as both an aesthetic device and a social practice. At the same time, his work has enabled and informed the creation of an active and engaged public sphere in civil society in which improvisation stands at the center of building collegial and convivial projects of co-creation.

Just as music was never the same after Ellington, improvisation has a new meaning and a new influence in the world because of Heble. IICSI has become a crossroads where strangers meet and improvise new destinies. Artists, activists, and academics working with IICSI have explored and developed new pedagogies and new practices in projects of convivial co-creation throughout Canada, the US, Northern Ireland, Mexico, Greece, Singapore, and South Korea. IICSI has played a role in advancing improvisation as a key mechanism for art-based community making in Indigenous theater productions on Indigenous lands in Saskatchewan, in song writing workshops among impoverished immigrants in East Los Angeles, in the improvisation pedagogy deployed by formerly incarcerated people in New Orleans, and in the improvising across abilities that characterizes music making among children and adults designated as having disabilities in Lawrence, Kansas, and Guelph, Ontario.

Inside the audit culture of academic recognition and reward, approval flows toward scholars who give us things to know, things to feel, and things to think, but only rarely to those who guide us toward things to do. As Pauline Oliveros observed, artists and academics are encouraged to create careers when what we really need to create are communities. In his scholarly work and teaching, Heble gives us many moments to know, feel, and think. But similar to Ellington, the communities Heble finds, creates, supports, and amplifies expand the possibilities of the work we can and have to do. When audiences listened to recordings and radio performances by the Ellington Orchestra and when they attended its performances in person, they came away as different people, as thinkers and doers cognizant of the possibilities of creating other worlds. When people today encounter the direct and ripple effects of the kinds of improvisation that Heble has helped to envision and enact, the oppressive conditions of their lives get smaller—rendered relative, provisional, and contingent—and they become eclipsed by the greatness of possibility and collective co-creation.

Improvisation and Freedom

Joel Bakan

February 17, 2025

I first met Ajay about 40 years ago, by chance, at Dalhousie University. We were students in a French class, and somehow—I cannot remember how—we realized we both were jazz players. We jammed together a few times (I remember playing “Lullaby of Birdland,” but not much else), and, as tends to happen, we vowed to stay in touch, but didn’t.

Thirty years later, I heard from Ajay. Though out of touch with him for all that time, I had been reading his work, and learning from it. It invited me to consider how my own work, in socio-legal theory, might be connected to jazz, my long-time passion. In particular, I learned from Ajay that jazz is part of a larger tradition of “identifiable and radical form[s] of improvisational practices” marked by “alternative community formation, social activism, rehistoricization of minority cultures, and critical modes of resistance and dialogue” (3). Over the years, Ajay had also been reading my work, and seeing connections, which is what caused him to reach out to me, and led to my becoming involved with IICSI.

This essay is an homage to Ajay, and inspired by his work. I am—we are all—indebted to Ajay for his brilliant and inspiring insight into how improvisation connects to politics, social relations, and resistance (and also for his tireless cultivation and curation of others’ work on these themes). In that spirit, I offer some broad thoughts about how improvisation relates to two current and synergistic threats to democracy and justice: neoliberalism and illiberalism. My argument is that improvisation, through its ethos, practice, and study, can powerfully resist these two threats because it embodies a vision of freedom that radically refutes both of them.

Freedom is essential to democratic governance and justice, but it can also be a corrosive force when reduced and reified into an unfettered right of individuals to do what they want, and a resulting injunction against collective enablement, action, and constraint. Such a reductionist conception of freedom is essential to illiberalism, particularly movements of the “alt-right” and “far right” which advance it to attack and cultivate distrust towards institutions and practices necessary for promoting justice. Among those targeted are institutions and practices that: 1) mediate truth and facilitate consensus about facts (journalism, legal processes, scholarship, science, and education); 2) promote equality and inclusion (human rights regimes, social programs and regulation, and legal protection of migrants, minorities, and women); and 3) enable democratic governance (free, informed and civil public debate, free and fair elections, consensus-driven politics, and an independent civil service). Relying on reductionist freedom

Work Cited

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narratives, illiberal movements undermine such institutions and practices in myriad ways, including by collapsing freedom of belief into freedom to ignore and disparage scientific facts; invoking freedom of speech to protect hate and misinformation; insisting freedom demands exclusion of migrants, bans on trans-friendly policies, and ownership of assault weapons; and, most generally, cultivating fundamental distrust of government and public institutions.

With respect to neoliberalism, business groups and governments (including illiberal ones) invoke reductionist freedom narratives—typically under the rubric of “free markets”—to call for diminished democratic regulation of capital and corporations. Invoking such narratives, they condemn legal constraints on private economic activity and property rights, and lobby governments, successfully since the early 1980s, to pursue market-prioritizing policies. As a result, governments at all levels retreat from laws and policies designed to promote social equality and safeguard important public interests. Resulting inequality and social insecurity undermine social cohesion, drive polarization, and threaten democracy. That is because when governments abandon policies designed to improve people’s lives, they undermine faith in democratic governance as a positive force, and widen the appeal of grievance-led demagogues. In this way, neoliberalism, fuelled by reductionist freedom narratives, creates fertile ground for illiberalism, which then promotes neoliberalism’s market-prioritizing policies (though typically within nations, not among them).

Reductionist freedom narratives thus animate, help mobilize, and legitimate neoliberalism and illiberalism, which, in turn, are fueling converging crises of democracy, inequality, and climate. Resisting these narratives, as part of a larger resistance to these political movements and the consequences they foment, is crucial. Articulating and mobilizing counter-narratives of freedom can help do this, which is why improvisation and critical thinking about it—which necessarily raise questions about what it means to be free—hold important potential for resistance. It is no exaggeration to say that improvisation is primarily about freedom. Understood simply, it entails freeing performers from scripts and scores, and thus enabling them to create spontaneously and without constraint. This account can, however, collapse into reductionism if freedom is equated, in simple terms, to absence of constraint. More is needed. Which underlines the importance of *critical* improvisational studies.

The latter avoids reductionist collapse by developing (at least) two lines of critique. First, that constraint is always present in improvisation, meaning freedom cannot be the same as absence of constraint. Even when scripts and scores are abandoned, social and historical identities and structures—positional (race, gender, class, ability, sexuality, and so on), communal, political, legal, material, physical, technical, traditional, and so on—constrain improvisers.

These constraints are navigated and negotiated by improvisers, but not transcended. A simple illustration (which I discuss more fully elsewhere) is corporate decision-makers who improvise decisions. Though free of managerial scripts, they nonetheless remain bound by broader structures, in particular the constitutive legal imperative of corporations to prioritize wealth-creation for shareholders. Improvisation might free decision-makers to be more creative and innovative, and thereby better serve the corporation's overarching imperative. It cannot free them *from* that imperative, however, nor shift their efforts to other imperatives, such as social or environmental ones.

The point is—and it is a point of great significance when we consider broader webs of intersecting social and historical structures and identities, along with the power relations they create—that while improvisation transcends scripts and scores, it does not, cannot, transcend social and historical context. No doubt, it can *resist* oppressive elements of such context, and promote community, dialogue, and some measure of justice within such contexts—as Ajay's work so brilliantly demonstrates—but even then, it does not escape those contexts. It negotiates with and navigates among them.

A second critical point about improvisation is that social and historical context *enables* freedom, as much as, *per* the first point, it constrains it. In a music ensemble, for example, improvisers' freedom to create depends on their being in relationship with each other, and in relation with broader contexts. The players provide and are provided supporting sounds for soloing, on instruments and in venues produced by others through particular modes of production, intelligible to each other through shared sensibilities, language, techniques, trainings, and grammars, listening deeply to one another, and responding in kind, presuming equality, despite differences among participants, and creating collective sounds through individual contributions. There can be no "freedom" detached from all of that community.

In this way, improvisation enacts a model of freedom that radically refutes reductionist ones. Freedom is relational rather than individualistic, enabling rather than isolating, contextual rather than formal. It depends upon, rather than being antagonistic towards, community and its human connections. This is a model that, if broadened to society as a whole, prescribes, contrary to reductionist accounts, that freedom is found in communal support and collective endeavour, not in unconstrained individualism. Just as improvisers become free through, rather than against, an ensemble's needs and supports, so too does freedom, in broader society, require collective and communal provision of material needs (health, education, and welfare), mechanisms for communication and decision-making (including language itself), and cultures through which people define meaning and purpose, love,

and friendship, and hope and fulfilment. We need all of that to be truly free.

Two insights about freedom thus come out of critical improvisation practice and scholarship: first, that social and historical structures continue to constrain, even when immediate constraints (scores and scripts) are lifted; and second, that freedom depends upon communal support and human connection, not their absence. Together, these insights powerfully refute the reductionist conceptions of freedom that animate and legitimate illiberalism and neoliberalism. Both illiberalism and neoliberalism rely on such conceptions to obscure how social and historical structures—whether of capitalism, colonialism, racism, patriarchy, heteronormativity, or ableism—constrain freedom; and to deny how collective endeavour—such as environmental regulation, social programs, affirmative action, and EDI (Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion) initiatives—promote freedom. By developing and enacting relational conceptions of freedom that challenge reductionist ones, critical improvisation practice and scholarship can provide a broader critique of these dangerous trends and a path towards a better world. All of which underlines just how profound a contribution Ajay has made.

Building Community

Kimberley McLeod

When I think of Ajay, I think of the community he built, and brought me into. I moved to Guelph in 2017, and Ajay was one of my first colleagues to reach out, welcome me, and see how I was settling in. Ajay has such an innate curiosity—he genuinely wanted to understand who I am and what I'm passionate about, and then generously see what he could do personally and through the community he's built to help me stretch my creativity. When I arrived, I knew little about the artistic community here in Guelph. Quickly, however, it became clear to me how much Ajay had done for the community and for the city, from the Guelph Jazz Festival to continual International Institute for Critical Studies in Improvisation (IICSI) events.

It has been such a privilege to be able to attend so many events that come out of Ajay's connections and collaborations, and from so many different types of artists and community partners. It is also particularly remarkable to me how much Ajay has done to connect the University, the city, and the community, creating networks of creative collaboration and expression. Connectors and instigators like Ajay give this place meaning, vibrancy, and life.

I have had the pleasure of teaching alongside Ajay as a member of the School of Theatre, English, and Creative Writing at the University of Guelph and in the Critical Studies in Improvisation

graduate program. On campus, I have again been amazed by his incredible work as a community builder. Students often describe to me how Ajay carefully curates his pedagogical spaces. I have witnessed the sense of care and support he brings to his work with graduate students, as he helps them build out work from their own research interests while also introducing them to new critical concepts. And of course this stretches far beyond the classroom. Ajay generously and passionately supports graduate students as a mentor and advocate.

The success and momentum of IICSI has truly grown from the spark he started, and the steady tending he has provided. Ajay's generous spirit of collaboration and guidance will be sorely missed on campus. Ajay, you're a builder—and we're all deeply in debt for the legacy you have created for the University and community of Guelph.

Improvisation for Ajay Matt Brubeck



Click here to access audio file.



Glisten and Glint: the Ajay Way Mervyn Horgan

Setting: 4th floor of a brutalist building on a university campus. A nervous newly-hired junior faculty member knocks hesitantly on a slightly ajar office door. Inside, a senior professor is slightly obscured as he works behind a desk covered in teetering piles of books and papers.

“Hello? Hi, come in, please.”

“Hi there, just thought I'd pop by to say ‘hi’ and introduce myself—I'm new faculty in Sociology and Anthropology upstairs.”

“Hi! Welcome to Guelph.”

“Thanks, I'm a sociologist, but my interests are more interdisciplinary. I'm a jazz fan and I looked at some of the stuff you're doing and it's fascinating, so, uhhhhh, just saying hello.”

“Oh, thanks, that's nice of you to say, tell me more about what you do.”

Coltrane, Davis, and Mingus aside, the “jazz fan” part was only partially true. I figured that I should have some kind of ruse as a pre-tenure social scientist randomly knocking on the office door of a senior colleague in the humanities. I had recently taken up a position at the University and found myself in a department undergoing major generational transition, where, at that time, precious few departmental colleagues openly expressed interest in radical critique, creative improvisation, and prospects for emancipation. Some like their social sciences siloed. Not me. Feeling somewhat intellectually dislocated, I combed the university listings, announcements, and faculty web pages for colleagues doing interesting, innovative, interdisciplinary things. The most intriguing rabbit holes that I went down kept leading me to one name: Ajay Heble. I needed an in to talk to somebody who was doing not only interesting things on campus, but who was making waves in academic and arts scenes internationally. Besides, who the heck has the will, the gall, the *chutzpah*, to invent a whole new field of academic study and practice? I just had to introduce myself to this Ajay guy.

Ajay’s office was in the same corridor as Dionne Brand and Thomas King, and more recently, Lawrence Hill and Canisia Lubrin, some of the most innovative and important writers, not only in Canadian literature, but globally. To be honest I was (and am still) having trouble believing that I work in the same building, never mind the same university, as writers and thinkers of this calibre.

We chat across Ajay’s wildly messy desk, books and papers tumbling in every direction. His desk looks pretty much like mine will look once I’ve settled into my new job for a month or two (beware of anyone with a tidy desk). As we chat, he is fully present and interested in what I have to say. I riff on my approach to sociology, not necessarily shared by all sociologists, which is to treat everyday interaction as a form of improvisation. I catch a glint in Ajay’s eye as I talk about how lots of ideas could translate between the worlds of musical improvisation and improvisation in the practice of everyday life. He nods excitedly in agreement, his eyes glimmering, encouraging me to continue. We chat for fifteen minutes or so before our respective classrooms call. We part ways agreeing to keep in touch.

A day or two later, I mention to a colleague in another department that I had had a great chat with Ajay. She smiled warmly, saying, “did he have a glint in his eye as you spoke?”

“Funny you should mention,” I say, “I thought I was imagining things, but yes, totally!”

She pipes back without missing a beat: “Watch out! Ajay’ll start recruiting you to get more involved.”

Fast forward close to a decade after my initial encounter with the glint in Ajay’s eye, and I find myself in regular meetings with networks of scholars and artists from around the world,

brainstorming ideas for what would become the *Improvising Futures* SSHRC Partnership Grant, where I now lead a series of interrelated research projects on improvisation, public space, and the practice of everyday life. On foot of that initial tentative knock on Ajay's office door, I have given and attended dozens of talks, co-organized events, served on a range of committees, and met colleagues around the world all in the general orbit of the International Institute for Critical Studies in Improvisation. Just as I had been warned, the glint in Ajay's eye has transformed into a wide range of opportunities, collaborations, community-making, and, truthfully, a whole lot of fun.

Sure, the "yes, and . . ." of stage improvisation has become something of a cliché, but this doesn't diminish its power. Ajay has been central to the cultivation of a community, both local and global, where each shared idea, each creative gesture, each act of reaching is treated not only with respect, but as both an offering and an invitation, an opportunity to riff and to expand. If someone has the guts to put something out there, to share an idea, to offer a riff, a gesture, then, for Ajay, that in itself means that whatever they put out is worthy. It is rare to be gifted time and presence with a person whose every doing, every breath is so fully oriented to surfacing collaborative possibilities, to community, and to the persistent generation and renewal of a we-ness that both draws on and transcends variation, difference, and conflict.

From that first encounter in a cramped campus office, I still can't believe my luck in getting to know Ajay, a savvy sailor through the weirdness of university bureaucracy, an outstanding and visionary scholar, a good human being, and a deeply valued friend. Us academics do a fine job of talking community, but *doing* community is a heck of a lot more time consuming and infinitely more worthwhile. With that unique gift of making a home for thinking, for experimentation, for community, for the elevation of each by way of all, Ajay walks the walk. Long may the Ajay Way glisten and glint.

Video Performance

Jesse Stewart



Click here to access audio file.



Encouragement, Patient Perseverance, Community, and Surprise: Four Entangled Lessons from my Advisor, Dr. Ajay Heble

Ben Finley

I continue to learn more from Ajay than can possibly be written down. Where to start with someone whose infectious, kind, and committed passion seems limitless? I feel lucky to have Dr. Heble as my advisor for my doctoral work with the Critical Studies in Improvisation program at the University of Guelph—a program he co-founded along with an incredible team of collaborators. His influence on me, both as a continually developing human being and in my work, has been, to put it lightly, vast!

Maybe I can start by backing up to where I first encountered his work. I can't remember exactly how it found my hands, but around a decade ago, I ended up with a copy of *The Fierce Urgency of Now: Improvisation, Rights, and the Ethics of Cocreation*. Reading Ajay Heble and his co-authors, Daniel Fischlin and George Lipsitz, my orange highlighter and I went on a field trip. Let's say my version of the book became well lived-in! As a bassist playing in cocreative ensemble music, I continued to mull over the implications of the authors' ideas of improvisation as stimulating an "ethics of cocreation" and "a critical form of agency," as fostering communities in which "individualism does not have to degenerate into selfishness and where collectivity does not have to dissolve into conformity," (242) and as a way to learn how to enact the possibilities that this practice might envision. As I researched more about the International Institute for Critical Studies in Improvisation and its predecessor, Improvisation, Community and Social Practice, I learned about their deep commitment to improvisation not solely being an "object" of scholarly inquiry but as a powerful social and community-engaged practice to approach the issues of our time—through the arts and beyond. Who was behind this? Ajay would be the first to credit the many team members involved in the life of these organizations.

I want to share here four lessons that Ajay continues to teach me, which shed a small light on the immense role he has played in these organizations; the countless empowering impacts he has made on his many colleagues, community partners, and students (including me); and his undeniable role in the field of Critical Studies in Improvisation (CSI).

What I have learned from Ajay and the impacts he's had on me cannot be easily summarized into lists. Like improvisation, each lesson is interconnected with others. Working with him feels like playing music together; whether through discussing ideas about cocreation, organizing artistic spaces and community-engaged

spaces, or playing bass and piano together, I have always appreciated Ajay's caring openness to collaborative possibility with support for "personal voicings." If I were to whittle this down to a lesson, it might be about *encouragement*. His writings have profoundly inspired me in their articulation and vision of the value of cocreation through the arts and beyond, but in the everyday, I try to also learn from the incredible ways in which he encourages and builds up communities around him. I don't know how, but he finds a way to support so many around him with opportunities to do/dream. For me, this has often been in an empowering invitational approach that encourages agency—the opportunity might be there to take or leave, and Ajay imbues a tremendous faith, belief, enthusiasm, and gentle encouragement in the process.



Following this, another lesson is *patient perseverance*. Many ideas of all shapes and sizes might come and go. I appreciate how Ajay considers a variety of perspectives with loving patience and discernment, thoughtful contribution, and commitment to realization. I think of the ways Ajay reliably completes the nitty gritty unseen work to awaken incredible dreams for so many, the dear kindness and thoughtfulness with which Ajay writes (including in his emails!), and the consistent, unrushed, loving humanity he gives throughout it all.

Lessons three and four: *engaging community* and *believing in and realizing creative/critical work in unexpected places*. In addition to Ajay's work in the field of CSI, his pedagogical commitment to thinking beyond the classroom and with the community continues to leave a big mark on me. His many works in this area—such as *Jamming the Classroom* with Jesse Stewart; *Classroom Action: Human Rights, Critical Activism, and Community-Based Education*, which contains chapters written by his students; *Improvisation and Music Education* with Mark Laver; and the "Improvisation and Pedagogy" issue of *Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études*

critiques en improvisation (Vol. 3, No. 2, 2007), edited alongside Ellen Waterman, inspire countless ways of playing, learning, and reflecting beyond where we might expect creative and critical collaborations and interventions to happen. The same goes for Ajay's Arts-based Community-Making course, from which I continue to process the many learnings of what it means to improvise ethical community engagement and cocreative responses to community needs.

I have also been deeply inspired by his energy and commitment to curating improvisational artistic practices in unexpected places through his arts-organizing work. As the founder of the Guelph Jazz Festival in the small(ish) city of Guelph, he created an international locus for bridging critical dialogues with cocreative musical practices. Also, with his musical organizing in the coastal village of Coin-du-Banc, Gaspésie near the town of Percé, Ajay taught me that with vibrant community partnerships, co-creative artistry can be fostered anywhere. As I have now moved to a rural location, where I write these notes of impact, this lesson has been an energizing gift of a lifetime.

Still, as a student of Ajay, I feel grateful to know him beyond his exceptional accomplishments. Knowing him as a friend has been the vastest gift. I am keen to share the creative and generous love that he shares with this world—as it is and what it could be.

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INEXHAUSTIBLE Vertical Squirrels

This piece was originally screened during IF 2022. Videography art by Aimee Copping. Vertical Squirrels is Daniel Fischlin, Ajay Heble, Lewis Melville, and Ted Warren.



[Click here to access video file.](#)



Message for Ajay Dong-Won Kim

Since I first met you during your lecture at the University of Toronto in 2010, you have bestowed so much upon me. You have given me numerous opportunities to perform at the Guelph Jazz Festival, and through you, I have met and collaborated with many remarkable musicians. In 2014, you invited me to the Improviser-in-Residence program, allowing me to create some of the best improvisational works of my life and to communicate with the community, for which I am truly grateful. Most importantly, you have truly helped me to experience what freedom through music is. I am always thankful. I hope to meet you on a good day in Gaspé!
Stay healthy always.



Two Haiku for Ajay & Sheila Stacey Bliss

I.

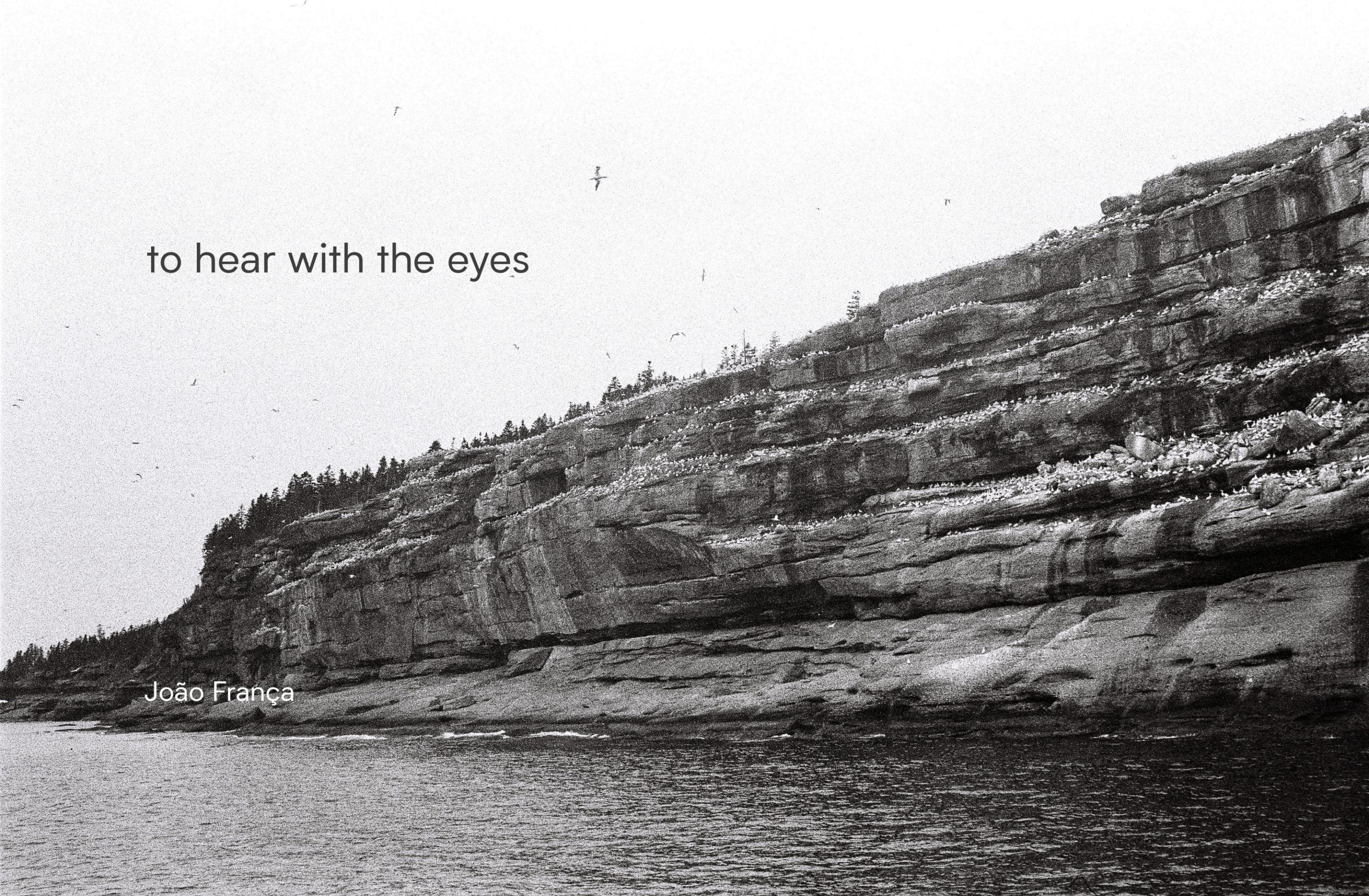
IICSI at Land's End
beach front of my music mind
sound body unwind

II.

Silvia's forte
notes of warmth, earthly comforts
waves lapping in sync

to hear with the eyes

João França



A visual improvisation from the summer
of 2016 on The Gaspé coast.

Dedicated to Ajay Heble.







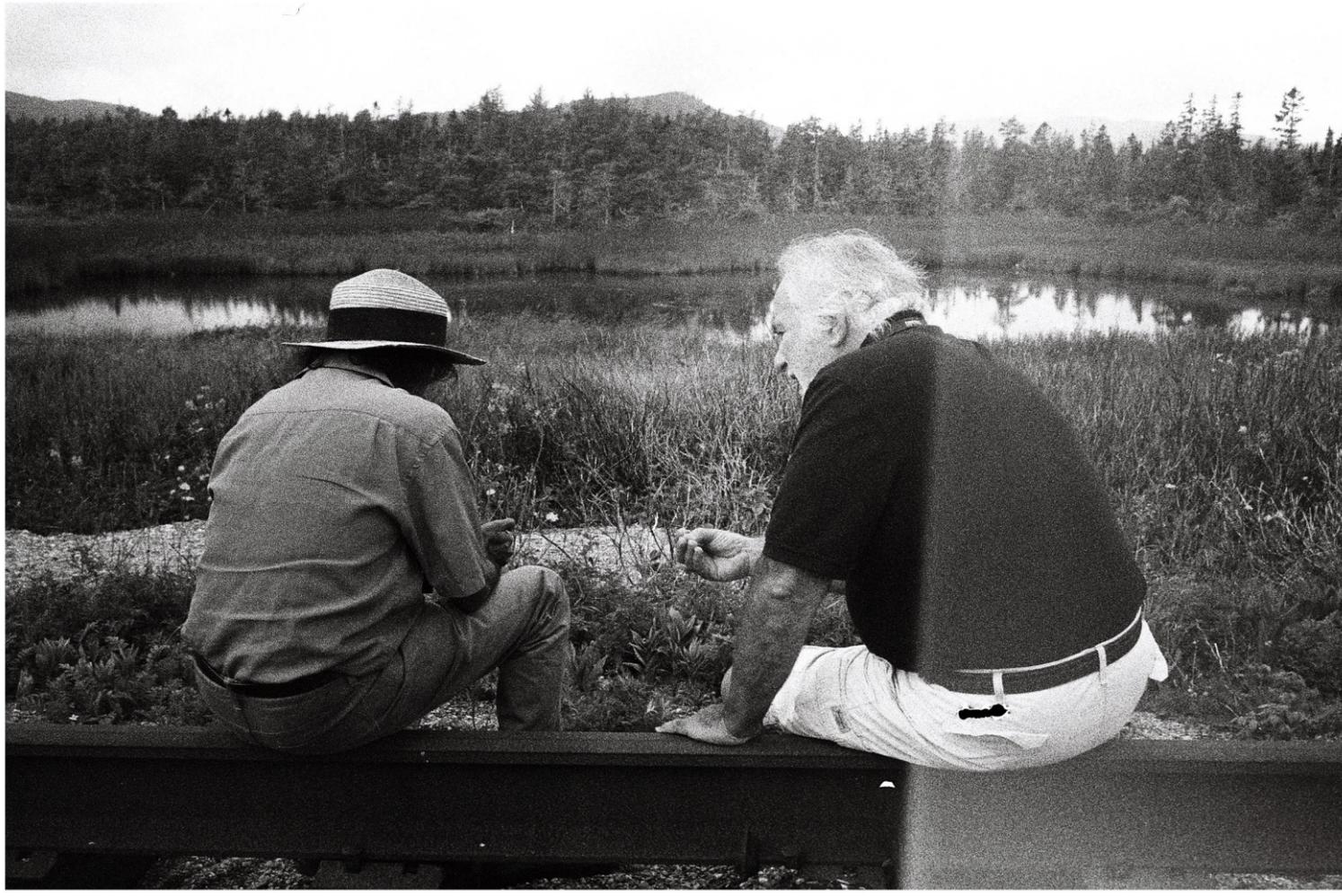






















The Bare Sensitivity That Lies at the Heart of Improvisation

Benjamin Mayer-Foulkes

I appreciate the opportunity to briefly recount the impact that Ajay Heble's work and persona have had on me, as well as on 17, Instituto de Estudios Críticos, Mexico, of which I am the founder. I hope my personal account will illustrate its subtlety and depth.

In my youth, I was a jazz musician for a time. My brother Daniel, ten years older than I, introduced me to improvisation when I was a child. I had not yet mastered "Für Elise" on the piano when my sibling's playful spirit beckoned me to cross that threshold which all of us who cultivate some form of improvisation recognize as decisive in our lives. The experience is not so different from learning to ride a bicycle.

Over the years, my musical abilities grew, always accompanied by improvisation. I even considered pursuing a career as a musician. I was fortunate to experience the jazz scene promoted in Mexico City by Francisco Téllez, who had successfully founded the country's first Bachelor's degree program in jazz. I learned, met admirable musicians, and played gigs of all kinds.

Yet, I increasingly experienced a sense of estrangement. As much as I loved music and musicians, I longed for more words and critical engagement. Not without pain, I eventually left music altogether. I then trained in the humanities and became a psychoanalyst. I committed myself to language and devoted my energies to a sequence of community-building initiatives.

I founded a program in semiotics, which later became the seed of 17, Instituto de Estudios Críticos: a post-university established in 2001. The idea first came to me, in the course of my own analysis, in the form of a "Silence-Producing Machine."

Many years later, it was thanks to Alain Derbez that I first came to know of Ajay Heble. Alain had translated Ajay Heble's *Landing on the Wrong Note: Jazz, Dissonance and Critical Practice* into Spanish. Its impact on me was profound and immediate. It brought about a double epiphany: I realized that my experience of the psychoanalytic session was improvisational, and it allowed me to understand that I related to 17, Instituto as a musical instrument, one with which to free-jazz alongside a host of surrounding players.

Ajay's work thus brought about an essential reconciliation within me—between the musical and the non-musical—through the transversal element of improvisation. A true personal milestone: thanks to him, I came to understand that, even though I had left my bike behind, I still knew how to ride.

The consequences were significant. With broad consensus, our Institute offered Ajay an Honorary Doctorate, which he

generously accepted in 2019. When I first spoke to him in the car after picking him and his wife Sheila O'Reilly up at the airport, I felt permanently bonded to him. What followed was the deepening of our collaborations with the International Institute for Critical Studies in Improvisation (IICSI).

Grateful for everything I encountered in Ajay and at IICSI, I committed to promoting in Spanish what he and his colleagues had managed to establish: the very field of Critical Studies in Improvisation. With their support and that of many others, in particular Ricardo Lomnitz-Soto, Gonzalo Biffarella, Wade Matthews, Ana Ruiz, and Ana Ruiz-Valencia, we convened our Institute's XXXVIII International Colloquium, incorporating IICSI's Improvisation Festival 2024, held outside Canada for the first time. Under the title *Silence-Producing Machine: Improvisation In and Beyond Music and the Arts*, it featured 70 performers and scholars, including Eric Fillion, just days after he was announced as Ajay's successor at the helm of IICSI.

This memorable event marked a watershed moment—musically, culturally, and intellectually—in Mexico and the wider Spanish-speaking world. It also confirmed that the post-university is, through and through, improvisational. Following the colloquium and festival, we launched a series of initiatives to strengthen the field of Improvisation Studies in the Spanish-speaking world. Among them, we established the web portal 17impro.org, designed to serve as its epicenter.

The projected impact of all these efforts is vast, and will play out in many different countries. What is at stake is not merely renewed attention toward an artistic “technique,” but rather the development of a performative ontology—and its praxis—of particular relevance in our turbulent times. As my colleague Jorge Alonso aptly put it: “Perhaps improvisation as a concept will succeed that of the event in the horizon of contemporary thought.”

None of this would have been possible without Ajay. Yet when you interact with him personally, you are struck by the contrast between the scale of his contributions and his personal demeanor. Ajay is a deeply committed artistic, intellectual, and social leader—clear and firm when needed—but also notably gentle and humble. I have never sensed in him the self-importance or excess of confidence one might naturally associate with someone of his stature.

Despite his formidable workload and the countless initiatives he carries forward, Ajay still finds time for the thoughtful comment and the warm gesture. *He truly listens*. It is as if he embodies the bare sensitivity that lies at the heart of improvisation. Such a striking contrast between the towering figure and the private person. I am thus doubly moved by him and celebrate him twice over.

Thank you, Ajay—comrade, friend—for the incommensurable gifts you have extended to so many of us, and also for affording us the privilege of passing them unto others. They are incandescent.

Video Performance

Jane Bunnett

 [Click here to access video file.](#)



And After Landing Wrong?

Mark Lomanno

Around twenty years ago—in the early 2000s—my work schedule consisted of piano gigs six out of seven nights every week. Excepting the occasional afternoon wedding gig over the weekend, my workday began around the time most everyone else's ended. Growing up, my days had most often wound down with reading and listening to legendary Boston-based broadcaster Eric Jackson's nightly radio program. (In southern New Hampshire, there weren't many gigs to be had, so I spent my nights listening to the radio and working through the pile of books I would bring home from my part-time job at the town library.) Now, in my early 20s, my schedule had inverted: after the late-morning coffees, my listening and reading sessions were the day's warm-up to the night shifts at various venues around Richmond, Virginia.

By most measures of a young, professional musician, I had landed well. Just a few years removed from completing my undergraduate studies, I was subsisting off my liberal arts music degree (and the generous portion sizes at the Italian restaurant where I led ensembles four out of those six nights per week). The more time passed from commencement, though, the stronger my sense of disillusionment grew with that gig schedule. The music I was making was neither like the music I was listening to nor like what I wanted to be making. And, when I read about the musicians making the music I wanted to be making, I realized that what I was reading about those musicians didn't match up with what I had learned so far on the bandstand. Truths I knew to be true in the most visceral sense were missing from the page—and, in some cases, I was reading false, misleading, or misguided assertions where those deeply felt truths ought to have been.

The gap between the piano keyboard and the written page seemed more like a gulf.

My move into that gulf—and away from my well-landed, post-graduation gig schedule—started with the (academic, not performance) work of three other pianists. From my spacious house rental on picturesque Grove Avenue in Richmond, accompanying those late-morning coffees, I began working my way through David Ake's *Jazz Cultures* and Ajay Heble's *Landing on the*

Wrong Note. Finally, amid academic writing and citational practices that stretched my ears the way that virtuosic recordings by jazz master's did, I glimpsed possible ways forward across this perceived gulf between the piano and typing keyboards. Here were writers who knew what I knew. Who had sensed from the piano something akin to what I did and had translated those sensations not only into thoughtful prose, but into written language that evoked the music-making experience. After reading those books, I knew I wanted in. That realization led me to the third pianist, Lewis Porter, in whose jazz history Master's program I enrolled for the Fall 2005 semester at Rutgers University Newark after making the move from Grove Avenue in Richmond to a much smaller rental underneath the Astoria Boulevard subway station in Queens, New York.

Twenty years later, I don't even play six gigs per semester. However, my choice to pursue a career in jazz studies was never—and has never been—about trading one keyboard for another, but rather about bridging that gulf between the two. I have spent the last twenty years—and will spend at least the next twenty—trying to traverse that distance as gracefully as possible. I have since encountered many more performer-scholars (including some of my students) from whose work I draw continuous inspiration. Porter remains a friend and mentor to this day; Ake and I are now colleagues at the University of Miami's Frost School of Music. And with this writing I'm delighted to pay homage to the third of those three pianists, Ajay Heble, on the occasion of his retirement from the University of Guelph, while also celebrating the book he wrote twenty-five years ago that has helped to propel me to (academic and performance) work at both keyboards that I could not have fathomed two decades ago.

When Eric Fillion, the new director of the International Institute for Critical Studies in Improvisation (IICSI) that Ajay founded in Guelph, asked me to contribute to this special issue honouring Ajay, I hesitated at first. The truth is that, unlike Porter and Ake, I don't know Ajay that well. Since I found *Landing on the Wrong Note* twenty years ago, Ajay and I have only been in the same room on three or four occasions that I can recall. I can't speak to or write about Ajay as a pianist, classroom teacher, or mentor, nor in any substantive way about Ajay as a person: I don't know what he likes to eat, anything about his sense of humor, or how big his family is. Though I've been following the Guelph scene for twenty years, it's mainly been from afar: I'm a relative outsider. I ultimately accepted Eric's invitation, though, because, first, it's an honour to be asked, and, second, because I trusted that Eric knew what he was doing when he asked. Trusting that there might be something there even when I could not see it at first, I decided that accepting the invitation would be a provocative opportunity to revisit *Landing on the Wrong Note* a couple decades after I

had first encountered it—and from a totally different professional vantage point than when I first read it. How would the book stack up now that I’ve landed the type of gig I couldn’t have dreamt of then?

So, lacking most first-hand knowledge of Ajay, I’m opting instead for my first-hand experience with Ajay’s work—not just the publications or the institutional labor, but also all they’ve inspired. From my vantage point, like most working improvising pianists, Ajay has proven himself a well attuned accompanist in his academic and performance work. And, like most thoughtful pedagogues, he has laid out frameworks for learners to adapt in ways he could not have anticipated, offering support without necessarily directing the path forward or predetermining the outcome.

There have been plenty of times over the past two decades when I had hoped that I might be a little closer to Guelph, had more opportunities to work with Ajay and the international community of performer-scholars assembled around the Institute. Continually inspired by all the work that was produced there, landing in Guelph had seemed like the right path forward for me. Except it never really happened the way that I envisioned. I can’t actually remember how many postdoc and job applications I sent to Guelph, but they all resulted in rejections. And, as many early-career scholars do, I took it personally at first. With my newly minted PhD in hand, working among the community that had inspired my journey into academia seemed like a logical step toward continued growth; but, as I bounced around between other positions, Guelph remained out of reach. “What was I doing wrong?”, I wondered, forgetting what I had read at the very beginning of *Landing on the Wrong Note*: “There were no wrong notes on his pi-a-no.”¹

One aspect of Ajay’s *Landing on the Wrong Note* that continues to strike me twenty years later is his admission of failure at the beginning of the book: “I must confess to some regret for not having had the foresight to consider conducting interviews as part of the methodology of my current project.” (2) (Who starts a scholarly monograph like that?!) However, what follows outlines how acknowledging failure does not necessarily entail admitting defeat. Over a decade after *Landing on the Wrong Note* was published, Jack Halberstam wrote about the subversive potential of “low theory” built around failure. A few years after that, Sarah Lewis would call failure a gift, pointing specifically to improvising musicians’ practices as models for how to productively and responsively engage with it. As he did with so many other aspects of *Landing on the Wrong Note*, by gesturing to multiple methodologies for his chosen topics at the book’s outset and in such a self-effacing manner, Ajay outlined new discursive spaces for “New Jazz Studies”: in this case, to forms of authorship that could undermine established conventions of scholarly rigour and writerly authority by opening up to critical dialogue, iterative writing practices, and

Notes

1. This quote comes from Chris Raschka’s children’s book *Mysterious Thelonious* (Orchard Books, 1997).
2. For further engagement with this question see especially Albright 2019; Siddall and Waterman 2016; and de Spain 2014.

imaginative (re)interpretations. When I first read this passage in the early 2000s, I interpreted it as if this author whom I'd never met had extended a personal invitation to me to imagine how I might step up into this space that he acknowledged he hadn't filled up. Of course, after receiving a few of those too-thin-to-be-an-acceptance envelopes from Guelph, I had my doubts that I was moving in the right direction.

Oddly enough, the first time I met Ajay was at a conference where I talked about failure (and embodied performance practice). In 2017, IICSI hosted a conference on Improvisation and Mobility at the University of Regina. I was five years removed from the end of my PhD studies and in yet another precariously employed position, trying to sustain viable candidacy for more stable jobs by upholding some semblance of a research profile while also balancing a heavy teaching load. My presentation and presence were so warmly received and welcomed, including by Ajay, whom I could finally thank—more than ten years on at that point—for the initial inspiration he had provided. I would see him later that same year at the Guelph Jazz Festival Colloquium, where again I experienced some of the hard-fought affirmation young scholars tend to chase amid their deeply felt states of precarity. It may not have been in the way I had planned or hoped, but I moved forward through my perceived professional failures and left leaving those two encounters at least a bit assured that I wasn't totally off-track.

Most recently, I saw Ajay this past April, once again at the University of Guelph. Now retired, Ajay was in attendance as an audience member at a book launch event sponsored by the Institute for *The Improviser's Classroom*, a volume that I co-edited along with Ajay's long-time collaborator and colleague, Daniel Fischlin. Throughout the day's activities I couldn't help but think again of landing well. Just about twenty years on from my move away from Richmond, I was welcomed at the Institute that had produced so many inspiring publications to co-host an event for one of mine. In my written contribution to *The Improviser's Classroom*, I wrote about the importance of accompaniment in teaching practices, and through the book's production process I learned a lot about how editing requires a similar approach, noting how the volume offered so much more than what I could have written alone. You might think that after twenty years this personal moment of arrival inspired a long-delayed sense of personal affirmation. Yet for me the most impactful takeaway from that encounter wasn't that at all, but rather deep senses of gratitude and wonder at how the graduate students in Guelph's Critical Studies in Improvisation program were adapting and (re)imagining *The Improviser's Classroom*.

Now the distance between the piano and typing keyboards has shrunk. What was once a gulf I couldn't bridge is now closer than the sixteen steps down the hallway between my office and David

Ake's. It's even closer than the seven steps inside my office from the computer monitors to my Fender Rhodes. As I continue to try to navigate this distance with grace and gratitude, I can't help but do so with a growing sense of disillusionment. Though it seems as if I've finally landed comfortably, it may only be within the small confines of my office. And even then, maybe just in this moment. Or perhaps neither.

In some ways, things feel much more precarious than they did twenty years ago. What does "landing well" mean when the ground shifts below us?² When truths we know to be true in the most visceral ways are missing from our media feeds and our lives? And, in some cases, replaced with false, misleading, or misguided assertions where those deeply felt truths ought to be?

Invoking Sarah Lewis again, I would say that the gift of (apparent) failure—or, in Ajay's terms, "landing on the wrong note"—is, in part, that it offers an invitation to begin again. To invite dialogue without admitting defeat. To step up into whatever space—on whatever ground or piano key—we find ourselves and imagine something new, trusting that there might just be something there even if we can't see it at first. To consider things from a different vantage point in the hopes of finding something that we couldn't have dreamt of. And, as we're doing our best to navigate all of that with grace and gratitude, to make sure we're creating space for others along the way.



“Dandelion seeds, billowing across space and time”: An improvised Audio Collage for Ajay Heble

Sam Boer



Click here to access audio file.

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Ajay's Law

Sara Ramshaw

It is extremely difficult to put into words the significance and impact that Ajay Heble has had not only on my own career and life, but also on those of so many others as well. Ajay, quite literally, changed the entire trajectory of my career. This is no exaggeration. I first became acquainted with Ajay's groundbreaking research as one of the pioneers of the field of scholarship known now as Critical Studies in Improvisation (CSI) while completing my PhD at the University of London (Birkbeck School of Law) in England. My thesis examined the legal regulation of jazz musicians in New York City (1940–1967) through the lens of poststructural theory informed by feminism and critical race theory. After reading Ajay's 2004 co-authored chapter (with Daniel Fischlin) "The Other Side of Nowhere: Jazz, Improvisation, and Communities in Dialogue," (which introduces the Wesleyan University Press book of the same name), my doctoral research took an unexpected turn. Adopting and adapting Ajay's groundbreaking work, I began to explore improvisation as a social practice that applies not only to the spheres of music and the creative arts, but to a range of overlapping fields of inquiry, such as Law.

Following Ajay (as well as Jacques Derrida and my PhD supervisor, Peter Fitzpatrick), my PhD thesis morphed into an examination of the fundamentally improvisatory nature of the Common Law as compared to its typical conceptualisation in contemporary society as stable, certain, and devoid of creativity or newness. As no two legal actions can be exactly the same, each judicial application of existing rules or past precedents to new facts creates, in fact, a new and improvised law. And it is the very nature of legal judgment that elicits a negotiation between the singularity of a particular case and the pre-existing rules or laws to which it must adhere or follow. Thus, my PhD (and the monograph that followed: *Justice as Improvisation: The Law of the Extempore*) called for increased recognition of the improvised creativity that is at the heart of legal reasoning. Thanks to Ajay, I was able to recognise that both law and (musical) improvisation share the same structural tension in that their meaning rests on the aporetic relation between singularity and generality, repetition, and alteration—what I call in my work "the law of the extempore" or "justice as improvisation."

After my PhD, I had the extreme good fortune of meeting Ajay in person when I was awarded a Postdoctoral Fellowship during the 2008–09 academic year with the Improvisation, Community and Social Practice (ICASP) project at the Centre de recherche en éthique de l'Université de Montréal (CRÉUM). I was, in fact, in full-time employment at the time as an assistant professor in Law at Queen's University Belfast (QUB) in Northern Ireland. However, I took an unpaid leave to take up this position as it was

an opportunity to work with Ajay and other critical improvisation scholars that I could not pass up.

In his role as mentor, Ajay was generous and kind, pushing students to think and write carefully and rigorously with an open and questioning mind. It was to a large extent because of Ajay's mentorship that I found myself being published as a legal scholar in *Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études critiques en improvisation (CSI-ÉCI)*, one of the first peer-reviewed open-access online journals, a journal launched by Ajay himself (alongside Frédérique Arroyas and Ellen Waterman). From the publication of this article, "Deconstructin(g) Jazz Improvisation: Derrida and the Law of the Singular Event," in 2006, I ended up meeting someone who would become a long-time collaborator (and friend), namely music academic and musician, professor Paul Stapleton. Paul, who is based at the Sonic Arts Research Centre (SARC) at QUB and is now very involved in the International Institute for Critical Studies in Improvisation and their latest SSHRC grant, *Improvising Futures*, saw my article in *CSI-ÉCI* and, after reading it, realised that I was working just down the road from him at QUB. He reached out, asking if I wanted to give a talk at SARC. The rest is history.

In May 2014, Paul and I were able to find funding to get Ajay to Belfast for the Translating Improvisation: Beyond Disciplines, Beyond Borders Colloquium and Concert, which took place at SARC in Belfast. Re-watching Ajay's talk on "The Future of Translating Musical Improvisation Across the Humanities" panel, I am reminded once again of the vital role Ajay played in the trajectory of my research and academic career. As I introduced Ajay to the colloquium audience, I noted how fitting it was to have Ajay as the final speaker of the event because it was due to him and his work that the event actually happened. He began his talk, entitled "Sounding Futures: Improvising for Change, Translating for Hope," with the following provocation:

[I]magine a world where artists are at the centre of broad public debate and vital policy decisions that shape the way we understand and the way we live our lives. Imagine a world where artists are recognized as leaders, not only in the cultural arena but, perhaps more suggestively, in reconfiguring the social relations of knowledge, in blending old and new forms of expertise, in crossing boundaries that have traditionally kept peoples' genres, disciplines, expressive forms, and indeed ways of thinking separated from one another. Imagine a world where people listen to one another, a world where there is trust, goodwill, humility, a sense of social responsibility, a world where people, well, yes, a world where people get along. Imagine that.

This passage, to me, best signifies Ajay's Law. Throughout his prestigious and highly celebrated academic career, Ajay has

taught us the importance of hope, community, social responsibility, cocreation, and listening attentively to others and otherness in our desire to find a way out of no way, the other side of nowhere. It is hard to imagine an academic world without Ajay, but rest assured he has given us the language, tools, and convictions (hope) necessary to imagine—and (co)create—a better world for a more just future. For that, and for so much more, I am, and will always be, extremely grateful. On behalf of Paul Stapleton and myself, thanks, Ajay, for everything you have gifted us. Now, please, go get some much-deserved rest!



Note for Ajay Scott Merritt

Ajay,

I am tremendously thankful for having had the chance to attend a good number of the shows that you've curated over the years for Guelph Jazz Festival and IICSI. Although the musicians involved often set an impossibly high bar with their technical abilities and artfulness, most all of these events have provided me with some compelling kind of wonder or other and offered some precious guide posts along the way.

There is little doubt in my mind that those guideposts have proven valuable both within the world of music and outside of it, often allowing me ways to re-think and approach the way I engage with both environments.

It has been of particular interest to me how the sounds of some of these performances have interacted with the ambiances of or near the performance spaces that you had chosen. I'm thinking for instance of the converging sounds at some of these events, whether in a hall, across a river, or in a narrow high walled street, or, more simply, in a particularly reverberant church.

To hear musicians responding to a given space that they're playing in, in real time, has often left me with some strange new kind

of awe. I am particularly fond of when rests *between* notes have slowly led me toward all the other sounds forever at work around us—often, at first, as an added dimension of the music, but then slowly as a kind of continuation of it after the playing has stopped. Not simply by reverberation, but sometimes via other more unruly elements gradually reappearing; cars wheels on wet pavement, airplanes, jack hammers somewhere, wind through an open window . . . by involving “outside” elements, these performers have often had the ability to point me toward all the endless converging music forever going on out there. The stuff that might have appeared once as a kind of *noise* or *interruption*, begins a new life as a kind of ongoing *music*.

To be invited into that continuing, much wider, performance this way seems to me not just a kind of welcome evolution, but also a kind of mercy. And quite a wheel for one person to have set in motion.

—S



Audio Performance: Papillon Marianne Trudel



Click here to access audio file.

Do All Jazz Musicians Wear Berets? Brent Rowan

January 15, 2025

In the early 2000s a private saxophone student of mine returned from a family holiday with a gift for me. We had been studying jazz improvisation for a little while and he said he wanted to give me a jazz gift. That gift was a beret which in his mind symbolized jazz in our community. Of course, he was referring to Dr. Ajay Heble, the founding Artistic Director of the Guelph Jazz Festival, who was rarely seen without his beret. Like my student, I only knew Ajay as the man who founded an innovative and cutting-edge jazz festival in our town. However, I did know something about that festival was drawing me to engage at a deeper level than just attending a few shows.

When I finished my jazz performance degree at Humber College in Toronto, I stayed rooted in Guelph, developing my freelance jazz saxophone career through private teaching and various gigs. I

also started volunteering for the jazz festival mainly in hospitality as I thought I could connect well with the artists. Given that Ajay was often checking in with the artists, I was able to observe how he interacted with these artists. He always had the artists' best interests in mind as he knew they were critical to the success of the festival. This seemed to come naturally to Ajay and exposed me to how caring and compassionate he is toward other humans.



A change in our relationship happened when I released my first CD of original jazz music. Ajay hired me to play on the main stage of the Guelph Jazz Festival at the downtown tent. Prior to that I was part of the local scene that filled up the restaurants, bars, and cafés with live music which showcased the vibrant and talented local scene for the patrons, many of whom would be visiting Guelph for the jazz festival. He programmed new and innovative music, often with artists from the cutting-edge scenes of Montreal and Europe, which drew tourists to Guelph and added to the cultural capital of our community. The festival also had an artist-in-residence program that provided youth of Guelph the opportunity to work with out-of-town world-class musicians. It was through this programming that the Guelph Youth Jazz Ensemble—which I had recently founded as a place for youth in the community to learn about and explore the language of jazz improvisation—worked with artists such as Jean Derome, William Parker, Nicole Mitchell, and Lori Freedman. As a local musician I truly began to appreciate what Ajay brought to our community. My creative practices were positively influenced by the out-of-town artists which helped to keep the music in our community fresh all year long.

Again, my relationship with Ajay changed when his children started taking lessons with me. First, I taught his daughter flute lessons and got to know Ajay the father. Next, his son joined the Guelph Youth Jazz Ensemble as a drummer. His children took the lessons seriously, were very well-mannered, and had good senses of humour. This is indicative of the type of parent Ajay seemed

to be. It was around this time that I met with Ajay for some advice on graduate studies at the University of Guelph. I was a new parent and did not really understand how I could fit more things into my day, nor did I enjoy reading and writing enough to take on an English Master's. However, I had just presented a paper at the Jazz Festival Colloquium and Ajay was very supportive of the work I was doing. Learning about Ajay the father and giver of advice gave me a glimpse into the passion, enthusiasm, and care Ajay shared with everyone.

Fast-forward roughly ten years and I learn about a new program called Critical Studies in Improvisation, in which I could research my career and end up with a PhD! Again, I have a conversation with Ajay about graduate work at the University of Guelph, the difference now being the program and the topics the course work would focus on. Ajay agreed to be my advisor and our relationship expanded once more as student and teacher. Now Ajay was not merely the father of former students, a local jazz festival icon, and a familiar face of our community, but I experienced Ajay the guru of the English language and critical thinking.

In my time with Ajay the professor I learned how encouraging and motivating he is with students. I also learned that perfection does not exist. There will always be a "comma here," a "rephrase this," or a "could you expand on that comment." Ajay meets you where you are, expects a high level of work and commitment, and pushes you to learn and think outside of your comfort zone. As a freelance jazz musician, I have always felt that some part—or all—of my career has been a gigantic improvisation. Through hiring me to play at "his" festival, asking me to teach his children, supervising me through graduate school, and being a model community citizen, Ajay has helped me feel vindicated in my career. While the beret is still part of my hat collection, I haven't worn it. I leave the wearing of the beret to Ajay, but I will carry with me his influence, guidance, teaching, friendship, and mentoring. I hope these words have conveyed the impact Ajay has had on my life's journey—but suffice it to say, thank you Ajay.



Pursuance Étude (Piano), for Ajay Heble Kevin McNeilly

Deep time seems to muster
its shared imperatives
in the gatherings and interstices
of this late-stage world's large,
illegible fakebook.
Study becomes a tactics to outfox
the given limits of
your social instrument,
to re-learn the fleet contours that inhere
in each quick-breaking moment's
fugitive debris,
if not sight-read the fierce insurgencies
that take alike the just
and the unjust to task
in the warm tumult of what can't be stayed.

Overlapped lines open
their rich contingencies.
Who could refute such urgent intervals?
How but by dint of hope
could any human sound
afford not to lay bare its future tense?

Video Performance Reza Yazdanpanah and Jesse Stewart

 [Click here to access video file.](#)



Three for Ajay: Learning at “The Other Side of Nowhere”

Paul Watkins

I.

Starting grad school, especially with a move across the country, is an improvisation of overwhelm—a dance of finding new footing. It isn't just lugging ten boxes of books, fifteen more boxes of records, or learning the soundscape of a new city. It's about trying to land on the right notes in a new place, or so I thought. I soon realized that sometimes you want to land on the wrong notes.

Within days of arrival, I found myself at the Guelph Jazz Colloquium, performing, and cuing samples on my MPC 1000, tracing the continuum from jazz to hip hop. It wasn't just a performance; it felt like an audition, with my soon-to-be PhD supervisor in the front row: a beret-clad figure with a cool, gentle gravitas.

What drew me to Ajay's academic work—the risk-taking, the play, the deep listening—came alive that day in the talks, the listenings, the improvised moments, and the way a community could come together from an idea. By the end, not only did Ajay welcome me as a student, but he also extended an invitation to the Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice (ICASP) project. It felt like stepping through a sonic portal into a world full of unexpected possibilities.

II.

Grad school involves plenty of time researching in the library, writing papers at home and in cafés, and sipping cheap beer at the grad lounge. There are long conversations about Foucault, Butler, or Adorno. But for me, the biggest revelations were largely elsewhere.

At ICASP, my work unfolded at the crossroads of literature, poetry, and music, with Ajay nudging me deeper into the fold. That meant interviews and performances with the poets I was studying, joining the board of the Guelph Jazz Festival, and even serving as interim President. Few ever say no to Ajay. This is not due to rigid obligation, but out of a desire to create alongside him. You join because you want to play your part in the sprawling, unpredictable jazz collective. Looking back, I hear Ajay's curation in a symphony of moments: street parades, intimate jam sessions, colloquiums, and impromptu communal making.

I remember one afternoon Ajay came over, not to discuss my PhD work, but to listen to Coltrane and play table tennis. He was every bit as good as rumoured, though I can't recall who won. What I do remember is the feeling: Rashied Ali and Coltrane trading sonic consciousness, a game of sound volleyed in unison. Then there were the *Nuit Blanches*. Somehow Ajay, at least twenty years my senior, would last the entire night. Not to be outdone, I dragged

myself along, savouring the music in the space between wakefulness and dreams. I'll never forget William Parker's solo bass, played as the sun rose—a purifying moment to guide us on our way.

III.

Like everyone, I had to find my own way forward. In the ten years since, I can look back on my accomplishments—a move back across the country, raising a family, gaining a regular faculty position at a university, mentoring students of my own, and recently turning my dissertation into a book—and trace so much of it back to the transformative time I spent in Guelph/Toronto under Ajay's guidance. Without question, he is one of the kindest and most generous academics I've ever had the pleasure of working with. While some supervisors obsessed over commas, Ajay met you with a hug, balancing rigor with encouragement: a grammar of care.

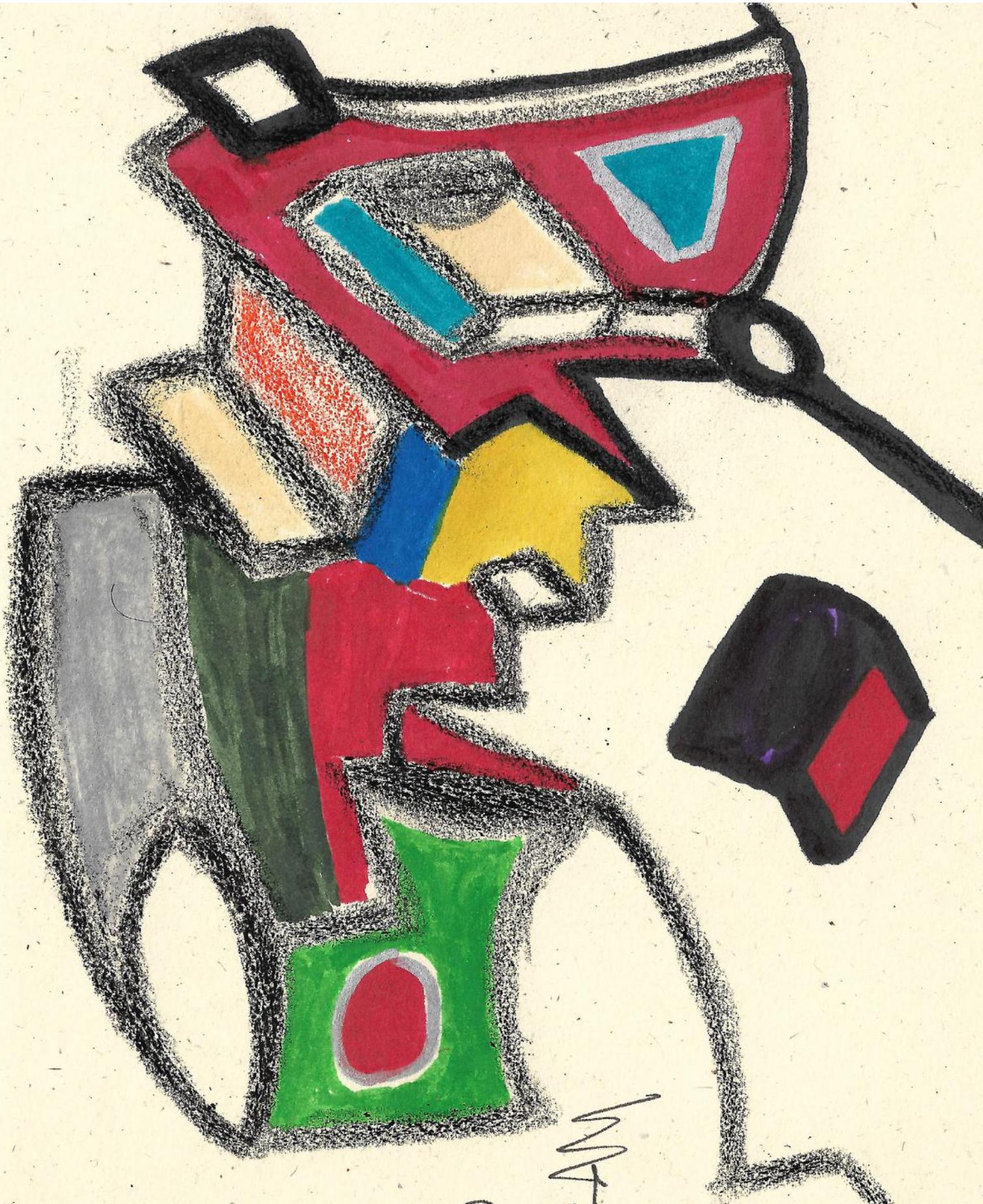
Kindness matters. It's easy to retreat in fear of the unexpected, especially in a world that often forgets how to deeply listen. But Ajay taught me otherwise. When COVID struck, I didn't just withdraw into solitary creativity (although there was more than some of that)—I learned how to sound with others, safely and in the spirit of mutual understanding. Improvisational kindness became my compass: in learning, teaching, parenting, protesting. It humbles me, but I carry it forward, knowing it was in part shaped by a teacher who embodied it in praxis. In his writing, organizing, and at the piano, as I would listen, awe-struck by his talent, he would coax the keys to dance with vertical possibilities.

Not even a pandemic could stop the music. Ajay brought it to life through the 24-hour online Improvisation Festival (which has since shifted to in-person performances), and that same spirit continues in those stepping into the roles Ajay once held. It persists in the work of the International Institute for Critical Studies in Improvisation.

One final reflection: We both love Sun Ra, and I think Ajay effectively channels the Arkestra's energy—balancing individual creativity with the needs of the collective, venturing toward the unknowable edge—what Sun Ra called “the other side of nowhere.”¹ It's an imperfect comparison, of course. No two people are alike in their wholeness, and Ajay's presence is entirely his own. Even so, we would all do well to aspire to their way of being: sonically open, forward-thinking, daring in their risks, and generously revealing the essential truth that we're at our best when we improvise together.

Note

1. As quoted in *Sun Ra: A Joyful Noise*, the 1980 documentary by Robert Mugge.



Douglas R. Ewart

Showing Up, or, Ajay as Accompanist

Sam Boer

I never have to ask if Ajay will be there. If he can, he will. And it's a great sign if Ajay is in the audience; it means you're in the place to be.

Before I fully understood Ajay as one of Guelph's premier community-builders or as researcher extraordinaire, I knew him as the warm presence at all of Guelph's best arts events. Ajay was humble and friendly, and I got the sense—even as a scatterbrained teenager—that he had his finger on the pulse of something extraordinary. I understood Ajay and his amazing team were making Guelph Jazz Festival and Nuit Blanche events happen in my hometown, but it was seeing Ajay at these events—radiating with enthusiasm for arts performances in community—that stuck.

One vital way in which Ajay showed up in my life was when I was creating music in high school in a seven piece prog-folk band called Bedsheets (so named because we started out only performing covers!). As we began performing original, collaborative songs at our concerts in Guelph, we were grateful for the friends and family members who supported our antics (I made a point of jumping off the highest point near the stage after one of our songs at every show, for which my knees will never forgive me), and Ajay was a vital part of that tapestry. I do not have Ajay's finely-tuned memory, but I do recall his presence at these shows in impressionistic collage: the black tip of his beret catching the breeze behind The Boathouse beside Guelph's Speed River; him and Sheila offering their full attention as I sweat through many layers of clothes in some industrial space or another; his smile gleaming from behind a throng of our teenage friends. In his heartfelt comments after shows, Ajay made me feel like Bedsheets weren't just messing around but were creating something artistically special.

It was Ajay who connected our band with local legend Scott Merritt, who (to our amazement) felt that our music was worth recording. Bridging that connection, Ajay facilitated a tremendous turning point in my life. It's not just that I felt validated as a musician myself, but I recognized the sacredness of free-flowing, dedicated creation in community. The scrappy musical teens that comprised Bedsheets had divergent musical training—from participation in jazz groups to orchestras to rock bands—but together we felt empowered to make music that sounded like us, felt good to play, and made our friends—and their parents—dance. Ajay gifted me the radical notion that the feeling we created together was not merely a youthful whim, but rather an artistic, social goal to be pursued throughout life and embraced when it presents itself.

Now that I have worked with Ajay for several years—first as a

staff member at IICSI, and now as the managing editor of *Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études critiques en improvisation*—I understand how Ajay’s ability to bring people together and see the beauty in the world starts with showing up. A 24-hour improvisation festival? Ajay’s up all night, basking in it. Kamasi Washington is playing on a weeknight in Toronto? Guess who’s on the train? A former student has an exhibition opening? He’s there taking it in. A charitable cause needs support? Ajay’s birthday party becomes a fundraiser. Embodied presence is a key tenet of improvisation, and one that Ajay lives and breathes.

While re-reading *The Fierce Urgency of now: Improvisation, Rights, and the Ethics of Cocreation*, this quote stuck out to me: “We have been taught to elevate individual virtuosity over accompaniment—at the expense of broader conceptions of musical community and social practice” (Fischlin, Heble, and Lipsitz 236). While this journal issue rightfully pays tribute to Ajay’s virtuosity, I want to begin by acknowledging his role as an accompanist, the one who shows up and brings out the best in others. Everything starts with showing up.

William Parker sums it all up best in this quote from an interview at the 2013 Guelph Jazz Festival: “You meet somebody, you communicate with them, and they help you change your life. You change their life, just by being yourself. And music is just a vibration of that; ultimately, it’s a vibration of people getting closer to loving each other and having compassion for each other.”¹

We gratefully show up for Ajay, just as Ajay has shown up for us. The beautiful cycle continues.

Work Cited

Fischlin, Daniel, Ajay Heble, and George Lipsitz. *The Fierce Urgency of now: Improvisation, Rights, and the Ethics of Cocreation*. Duke UP, 2013.

Note

1. Parker said this when he was interviewed by Rogers TV for the program “Fabulous Festivals: The Guelph Jazz Festival” in 2013 (produced by Jan Hamilton).

Improvising Joy (January 2020)

Justine Richardson

One little-celebrated through-line of Ajay’s transformative leadership is as a joyful and compassionate administrator. He has led millions of dollars of research funding and hundreds of people and partners over the years, and he has done it with clarity, focus, and—truly—joy.

As a staff member, I felt deeply motivated by his joyful dedication to our shared work. He always focused beyond any immediate frustrations or roadblocks and continuously re-set our efforts toward the effects on people and communities, and to making meaningful creative work toward a vision of a just and equitable world, where people experience joy in daily living. Some who study this may call it quiet, compassionate leadership, and I am truly in awe of how Ajay continues to bring this joy. At a time in 2025 when frustration and grievance across society are being exploited toward authoritarian and fascist aims, *joy is a transgressive*



and political act.

My contribution to this volume is a moment recorded one early morning, as I was coming into work, when Ajay—always the early riser—was filling our offices with this improvised joy.

(Click here to watch the video.)

Improvising Friendship

Jesse Stewart

January 2025

It has become something of a truism to say that improvisation is germane to many facets of daily life in addition to its importance in the performing arts. This insight has been central, if implicit, in much of the work that has emerged out of the International Institute for Critical Studies in Improvisation (IICSI) and the Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice (ICASP) project that preceded it, both of which were founded by Ajay Heble.

It is no exaggeration to say that Ajay has left an indelible mark on the interdisciplinary field of improvisation studies. Reflecting on Ajay's impact on the cultural and scholarly landscape—and on our friendship over the past thirty years—I am struck by the extent to which friendship itself is an improvisatory process. Rarely, if ever, do we know in advance how a friendship will develop. Rather, friendships progress much like musical improvisations, wending their way through a variety of shared experiences and “negotiated moments”¹ that are largely unforeseen.

Of course, Ajay has been far more to me than just a friend; he is also a deeply valued mentor, a musical collaborator, and a co-author. But of the many hats he wears (including his ever-present beret), the one I associate most fully with Ajay is that of a dear friend. So, in celebration of Ajay's retirement from the University of Guelph and in honour of his extraordinary career, I would like to offer a few thoughts on friendship vis-à-vis musical improvisation, considering some of their similarities and the lessons they might hold for one another.

In both musical improvisation and friendship, listening is crucial. Just as improvising musicians must listen closely to one another to engage in musical dialogue, friendships are forged largely through listening. Anyone who has spent time with Ajay knows that he is a consummate listener. Indeed, he doesn't say much in most social settings, preferring instead to create and hold space for others, listening attentively for opportune moments to contribute meaningfully to the conversation.

Ajay has created space for others in many ways: by mentoring countless students at the University of Guelph; by founding and directing the ground-breaking Guelph Jazz Festival and Guelph

Note

1. *Negotiated Moments* is the title of a 2016 book edited by Ellen Waterman and Gillian Siddall, one of the myriad publications to have emerged out of the ICASP and IICSI projects.

Jazz Festival Colloquium; through the establishment of the aforementioned ICASP and IICSI projects; and through the creation of this very journal. With the ImprovLab at the University of Guelph, Ajay has established a physical space to further the study and practice of improvisation for generations to come. He would be the first to say that many others contributed significantly to each of these initiatives, but it is doubtful that any of them would have come to fruition without Ajay's vision and steadfast support.

In addition to listening and holding space, steadfastness and trust are integral to friendship and musical improvisation, and these too are qualities that Ajay embodies at a deep level. Improvisers and friends alike depend crucially on each other, trusting that no matter where the music—or life—takes us, our accomplices will be there to support and encourage us, and to challenge us when we need challenging.

Few friends have supported, encouraged, and challenged me as Ajay has. His trust in others and his commitment to community, social justice, and the transformative potential of education and the arts permeates everything he does: his research, writing, teaching, arts curation, and the way he treats those of us who are lucky enough to know him and call him a friend.

Congratulations, Ajay, on your well-earned retirement. Our friendship has been one of the longest improvisations of my life, and certainly among the most impactful. I look forward to seeing—and hearing—where it will go next.

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Siddall, Gillian, and Ellen Waterman, editors. *Negotiated Moments: Improvisation, Sounds, and Subjectivity*. Duke UP, 2016.



CODA

Eric Fillion

Vous me direz que c'est peu original : je vous propose une coda pour clore ce numéro de la revue *Études critiques en improvisation*. J'aime bien ce mot qui nous provient du latin cauda par l'intermédiaire de l'italien, ce mot coda étant demeuré essentiellement le même en anglais comme en français. Vous me direz aussi que je mets un bémol à ce numéro en y accolant un texte dans une langue autre que celle à laquelle le lectorat est habitué. Je vous répons que je suis dans le ton.

Je vous explique. J'ai pris au hasard deux livres signés Ajay Heble dans ma bibliothèque ce matin. « Il est vrai qu'il m'est difficile de conclure un livre », affirme Ajay dans *Landing on the Wrong Note* (229). *Classroom Action* aussi, concède-t-il, se termine de manière imprécise : « Impossible d'en rédiger les derniers chapitres (145) ».

Je m'inspire en quelque sorte de ces conclusions qui n'en sont pas pour tomber, moi aussi, sur ce qui, pour certains, constitue une mauvaise note, c'est-à-dire une importunité. Il y a certainement là quelque chose d'à-propos, voire d'« utile » (*Landing on the Wrong Note* 237), pour reprendre les mots d'Ajay. Une conclusion ouverte, dissidente même, c'est un peu comme dire « Oui, et . . . ».

Ajay et moi conversons parfois en français parce qu'il aime bien le cinéaste de la Rive gauche Chris Marker et parce que nous partageons un intérêt commun pour *Le Trésor de la langue*, un album de René Lussier s'apparentant à une « sorte de road movie sonore » (Velasco-Pufleau 65). C'est aussi, je crois, une invitation récurrente et ouverte à prendre la route avec lui vers la Gaspésie, là où chaque été (ou presque) se tient le camp d'improvisation Coin-du-Banc en folie. J'y suis finalement allé cet été.

Je citais à Ajay le polymathe jazzophile français Boris Vian lors d'une soirée de célébrations l'année dernière. J'en remets en me tournant cette fois vers André Breton, figure marquante du surréalisme dans lequel Vian et plusieurs autres artistes et intellectuel-le-s ont baigné à partir des années 1920.

Pour être plus précis, je m'arrête le temps d'une citation sur *Arcane 17*, un texte empreint de poésie qui se rapproche du récit de voyage sans toutefois en être un. L'auteur l'a écrit en 1944, du 20 août au 20 octobre, période coïncidant avec son passage en Gaspésie, loin de la France occupée qu'il avait fuie. Breton vivait alors la vie d'exilé à New York. Médusé face au paysage gaspésien, il explique dans *Arcane 17* :

On a pu parler de symphonie à propos de l'ensemble rocheux qui domine Percé, mais c'est là une image qui ne prend de force qu'à partir de l'instant où l'on découvre que le repos des oiseaux épouse les anfractuosités de cette muraille à pic, en sorte que le rythme organique se



superpose ici de justesse au rythme inorganique comme s'il avait besoin de se consolider sur lui pour s'entretenir. (8)

Il y a dans cette image quelque chose qui, pour moi, évoque la vitalité et l'indélébilité des croisements qui ont eu lieu à Coin-du-Banc en folie l'été dernier. Je dirais même que cette image renvoie à l'ensemble du legs de notre collègue, ami et mentor Ajay, un legs qui s'est constitué avec soin, au rythme des rencontres et toujours en phase avec les enjeux du moment.

C'est Ajay qui m'a conseillé de plonger les yeux dans *Arcane 17*. J'y trouve naturellement matière à réflexion. Je pose la question comme ça : l'Institut international pour les études critiques en improvisation, ce n'est pas un peu l'ensemble rocheux de Percé et tout son écosystème, tel que décrit Breton? Il n'est peut-être pas avisé de transposer ainsi cette image d'un paysage gaspésien. Je m'emballe, oui, mais c'est que les mots me viennent difficilement pour témoigner du respect et de la gratitude que j'ai envers celui qu'il faut considérer comme responsable de l'émergence et l'épanouissement d'un nouveau champ d'études. Un champ d'études ayant comme objet l'improvisation et sa capacité à renforcer les liens interpersonnels, à cultiver le bien-être et à soutenir, voire à promulguer, hier comme aujourd'hui, l'espoir d'un futur plus inclusif, coopératif et durable pour tou·te·s.

Je me souviens avoir puisé beaucoup de mon inspiration dans *The Fierce Urgency of Now* (qu'Ajay a coécrit avec Daniel Fischlin et George Lipsitz) et les deux tomes de *Rebel Musics* (qu'il a codirigés avec Daniel Fischlin) tout au long de mes recherches sur le Jazz libre du Québec. Ces livres, issus de collaborations exemplaires, mettent en œuvre cette vision d'un futur possible, en plus de lui donner de la substance. Idem pour cet autre ouvrage collectif à paraître que je codirige avec Ajay, un livre sur les festivals de musique intitulé *Ripple Effects*. «*Spoiler alert*», notre conclusion n'en est pas une. Il en est de même pour le texte que vous lisez présentement. Comment peut-il servir de conclusion alors qu'il s'ouvre sur une autre langue (ou plusieurs), sur la quête d'autres rencontres et sur la conviction que celles-ci seront fécondes et innovantes, à l'image de l'héritage qui nous est légué?

There is a lot of important work left to be done.

Queda mucho trabajo importante por hacer.

Ainda há muito trabalho importante a ser feito.

Le travail qui reste à faire est trop important.

Merci, Ajay.

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