

Improvisation and the Syrian Refugee Crisis: It's Worth the Risk

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To the guys that draw lines and make the borders real
But then bend the rules when there's more to drill
Don't turn away the stateless, think of the waste
If one in three refugees is a Lauryn Hill. (Shad)

On paper, Canada is the most multicultural place on the planet,¹ but while we might be the only country in the world with an official Multicultural Act, *we*—a pronoun that can draw you in or exclude you—repeatedly fall victim to *our* own fears about others who are somatically and/or culturally non-white. There are numerous case studies of xenophobic practices in Canada, including the genocide of First Nations peoples, slavery, segregation, Chinese Exclusion Acts, racist immigration policies to limit entry by undesirables,² Japanese internment camps, as well as the residual effects of residential schools and the dire need to inquire into thousands of missing and murdered Aboriginal women. Sadly, 2015 at times does not feel much different than 1939.³ The problem stems from what Bhausahub Ubale, drawing on his experience as Human Rights Commissioner (as well as Ontario's first Race Relations Commissioner), observed in 1992: "mainstream white English Canadians define themselves as Canadian and all others as immigrants or non-Canadians" (qtd. in Huggan 126). The current Syrian refugee crisis—the civil war and the displaced peoples that resulted from it, but also the crisis with respect to how Western countries have responded to it—affirms a renewed need to learn to deal with social dissonance. Real value can be found by allowing dissonant histories (those seen as being out of tune with mainstream society) to disturb "naturalized assumptions about social structures and categories" (Heble, *Wrong Note* 20). By including sounds and voices that have been placed outside of mainstream narratives, forms of social (and musical) dissonance challenge rigid categories of whose (or what) sounds belong in conceptions of social harmony (or disharmony).

This Think Piece discusses the ways in which social and musical improvisation can teach us about the merits of creative risk-taking in relation to the current Syrian refugee crisis, a form of social dissonance. Learning to improvise imbues citizens with the important notion that creative risk-taking makes for more exciting and, while unpredictable to a degree, egalitarian societies. It teaches us that borders, whether they are musically or socially formed, do more harm than good, and that change through forms of inventive improvisatory practices and understanding allows us to envision forms of social justice and community that would otherwise be impossible.⁴ Key theorists in critical improvisation studies have warned us that improvisation is not always liberating and that it is not necessarily an impromptu act (Fischlin and Heble), but the type of improvisatory practices I am interested in valorizing here as

¹ A few of the ideas in this Think Piece first appeared in my Ph.D. thesis, "Soundin' Canaan: Music, Resistance, and Citizenship in African Canadian Poetry" (<https://atrium.lib.uoguelph.ca/xmlui/handle/10214/8936>). I would also like to thank Mark Kaethler for his feedback and nuanced suggestions for revision.

² There have been a variety of racist immigration policies and Acts that emphasize Canada's desire to remain a white settler nation, including the following: *Canada West's Common Schools Act of 1850*, which reinforced segregated education; the *Immigration Act of 1906*, which prohibited the landing of the "feeble-minded," "beggars," etc.; the *Immigration Act of 1910*, which empowered the government to prohibit the entry of "any race deemed unsuited to the climate or requirements of Canada"; and the *Immigration Act of 1952*, which allowed the minister to prohibit the entry of any immigrant because of nationality, ethnic group, citizenship, occupation, class, climatic criterion, and so on. It was not until the 1940s that Canada began to undo some of the damage that its early racist policies had incurred. Acts such as the *Racial Discrimination Act of 1944*, which in Ontario prohibited any sign or publication that expressed racial or religious discrimination, demonstrated some effort to mend the social fabric. The West Indian Domestic Scheme of 1955-67 allowed Caribbean women to come to Canada, many of whom would go on to pursue other professions. The *Immigration Act of 1976* placed emphasis on family unification and settlement of refugees, leading to an influx of blacks in Canada. In 1971 the Pierre Elliott Trudeau government made an official proclamation that Canada was a multicultural country.

³ It is hard to fathom in 2015 that presidential candidate Donald Trump is running (successfully) on a platform that includes building a wall to keep Mexicans out of the United States and issuing special identification cards to Muslims in America (he has since clarified his position, suggesting that America deny entry to any Muslims). Trump's xenophobic fascism frighteningly echoes Nazism, but we must remember that during the Harper era scientists on this side of the border were asked to burn books ("Knowledge Massacre"), which scientists characterized as "libricide."

⁴ As Sun Ra once phrased it, "The possible has been tried and failed; now I want to try the impossible" (qtd. in Szwed 192).

modes for democratic thinking are immersed in the ethics of “cocreation” that Daniel Fischlin, Ajay Heble, and George Lipsitz champion in *The Fierce Urgency of Now*:

We believe not only that improvisation and rights can be connected but also that they must be connected, that improvisation is at its heart a democratic, humane, and emancipatory practice, and that securing rights of all sorts requires people to hone their capacities to act in the world, capacities that flow from improvisation. (xi)

Improvisation, at its best, and arguably at its core, is non-axiomatic and functions as a critical force of activism. That is, even if we view improvisation on merely aesthetic grounds, we see the democratic principle of freedom at work. The sounds of Coltrane’s pioneering *Ascension* provide an apt example of this social liberation; each soloist is free to improvise without having a predetermined style other than ending their solo with a crescendo.⁵

In much improvised music, the balancing act between the individual and the group is idealistically a call for collective freedom that is undefined, leaving ample space for new ideas to come into fruition. Improvisation promotes a future that is unknown, what Sun Ra calls “the other side of nowhere”; improvisation is full of risk but has unlimited democratic potential. Improvising musicians and their community of listeners are operating in a yet to be defined “non-space,” which speaks to the risk and power of improvised music. Improvisation is risk because we do not know how any given action might turn out. However, it is in taking this leap (akin to a kind of faith) that we can imagine and find empowering spaces where individual needs are balanced with group impulses. To limit change in society, particularly for those who want to belong, is to limit human rights, which should be as expansive as possible (without infringing upon the communal sheet music we have agreed upon, such as The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms). This thinking is in keeping with Muhal Richard Abrams’s definition of the ability to improvise as “a human right” that is practiced by people and cultures all over the world (“Human Right”).⁶ Creative expression, at its centre, is about embracing risk as a generative space of potential. Improvisation, especially in terms of social justice, is exciting and risky, because it involves cocreative and interrelational ethics with other people. As much as ever, we need to allow improvisation to help steer our social policies, especially in times of crisis.

While Canada’s refugee policies have been much more accepting than our neighbours to the South, we improvise with tactics of fear at times, such as Saskatchewan’s Premier Brad Wall, who asked Justin Trudeau to “suspend” the Syrian Refugee initiative (“Brad Wall”). Following the attacks in Paris, there have been numerous incidents of anti-Muslim sentiment and violence in Canada as well, including a hate crime in which perpetrators set fire to a mosque in Peterborough. To introduce risk and cocreative improvisation as a response to these moments where Canadians improvise with fear is to combat terror and inaction; it is to engage in a social practice formed in dynamic interrelational communities. While the ongoing Syrian civil war is outside the borders of Canada (although not really, given the interrelation effects of globalism, imperialism, and climate change [one of the factors of Syria’s civil war was drought]),⁷ it provides an apt opportunity to expand our notions of social justice as we respond in the moment by allowing displaced people into our borders. As Richard Iton asks: “What happens when the shadows are foregrounded and those not normally seen as citizens with full rights—the disposable—are brought more into the picture?” (136). Foregrounding the excluded functions as an improvisatory *modus operandus* to combat global terrorism as well as a way to trouble exclusionary politics by accepting others in times of turmoil. In principle, refugees, the disposed, and the exiled, are seen as outside the harmonious structure of the nation-state. By including these “dissonant” others, we get closer to achieving a Just Society.⁸

Ironically, Canada seems—at times—to be a country of immigrants and refugees who hate immigrants and refugees. We need to remember that with the exception of Aboriginal people in Canada, we are all immigrants and have no realistic alternative than to embrace difference; however, many of us give into our own myopic desire to protect a specific (predominately white and English) cultural narrative. In the summer of 1999, nearly 600 Chinese migrants arrived in British Columbia in four dilapidated boats and one shipping container. The majority had paid at least \$30,000 to smugglers for their passage, and many did not survive the trip. While every migrant received due process (although certainly not fair process), 444 of the 577 refugee claims were rejected. Would their claims for citizenship

⁵ As Coltrane once said, “The real risk is in not changing” (qtd. in Zimmerman).

⁶ This is echoed by postmodernist Jean-François Lytoard’s notion that “the capacity to speak to others is a human right” (“Other’s Rights” 184).

⁷ Popular scientist Bill Nye contends that it is “a very reasonable argument” to credit climate change with the recent terrorist attacks in Paris (Chasmar).

⁸ As Heble asks in “Sounds of Change: Dissonance, History, and Cultural Listening”: “whose histories count as knowledge and whose get disqualified as unpleasant and inharmonious noise?”

have been denied if they were French and white? This is not to equate the Syrian refugees with the response to the Chinese migrants as the same, but it is to suggest that our mainstream notions of who is genuinely Canadian are defined along an axis of power and whiteness, which was recently illustrated by Canada's abundant sympathy for France—the CN Tower, for instance, was lit the colours of the French flag—and by our general disregard at times and still today for tragedies in non-white countries such as Kenya, Beirut, and Iraq, among others.⁹ If we as Canadians are to continue to think of ourselves as crusaders for social equality and justice, we need to realize the essential fact that we are intrinsically at our roots a multicultural society (even if multicultural policy is at times used as a sedative politics to contain difference).¹⁰ This is why people seek Canada out, although they are often disappointed when they realize this is not necessarily the case. Even though Canada is accepting some 25,000 Syrian refugees, various surveys show a majority of around 60% of Canadians disagree with Trudeau's plan to accept Refugees (“Majority Opinion”), which parallels the response across the border where 31 states have refused refugees altogether. This response recalls surveys done during WWII that showed 67% of Americans (the numbers are similar in Canada) felt they should not take any Jewish refugees during the Holocaust (Woods). Despite our vast space and resources, Canada only accepted 5,000 European Jews (at one point we even turned away one boatload of 900 Jews) compared to 200,000 accepted by the United States (Bureau). Looking back at the millions we could have helped, as well as those we sent back to die, we see one of the great blunders of history, and it is ours.

Immigrants and refugees coming to this country are a big part of its make up. Canada brings in over 200,000 refugees and immigrants per year, as well as tens of thousands of students, temporary visitors, and workers, which add up to over two million refugees and immigrants over a ten-year period. To the best of my knowledge, none of these people have been involved in a terrorist attack, and terror incidents last year in Ottawa and Quebec were perpetrated by white Canadian-born people, thereby indicating that the definition of a “terrorist” is often a matter of perspective. In retrospect, First Nations people would have certainly viewed British colonists who took over their land as terrorists. In addition, while “terrorism” is a threat, it is a small one compared with hunger, disease, or climate change. Further, our immigration/refugee numbers are small compared to those of other countries (such as Lebanon, the smallest country in continental Asia, which took in over 1,100,000 Syrian refugees), and the number of refugees that Canada is bringing in is diminutive when we consider the millions of displaced people in relation to Canada's plentiful resources. Too often our response is that the issue is not our problem, or that we did not create these situations to begin with. It is here that improvisation (in terms of rights) has a vital role to play, as we envision more participatory forms of citizenry across borders and between nations. The most challenging shift is ideological: a move from inflexibility and permanence to spontaneous, immediate, and risk-based thinking. What led to the staggering number of missing and murdered Aboriginal women? What creates systemic police brutality and surveillance of young black bodies, thereby necessitating the #blacklivesmatter movement? What makes “terrorism” possible in the first place and what conditions in Iraq/Syria allowed for the voices of ISIS to come to power? And, how can we—collectively and individually—respond in the moment? Those who strap bombs to themselves and blow up innocent people along with themselves are engaging in a form of improvisatory terror, much like when Western countries indiscriminately drop bombs on sites that kill civilians. ISIS members are improvisers par excellence, but like fundamentalists of all kinds, they lack the ethics of cocreation essential to meaningful forms of improvisation.

When central powers set up puppet governments like the United States did in Iraq, they set the stage for horrible oppressive organizations like ISIS (Baraka Blue).¹¹ The leaders of ISIS met in a US prison in Iraq, and yet how often is this repeated on the nightly news? The larger war is ideological and comes from an “us” -vs- “them” mentality. We could just as easily draw a line between ISIS and the Koran as we could between the mystical love poet Rumi and the Koran. Similarly, we could draw a line between the Bible and the KKK and the Bible and Martin Luther King, Jr (Blue). Making a book or any ideological framework mean whatever we want is at the root of all forms of fundamentalism, including those who use atheism (e.g., new atheists like Bill Maher or Sam Harris) to justify state-sanctioned forms of imperialistic democracy. Terrorism, in its myriad forms, takes away a person's capacity to improvise in dynamic and critically responsive ways. What is so valuable about improvisation is that it embodies real-time decision making, risk-taking, and collaboration. It only works within a group context if we find ways to sound together (not necessarily in harmony) and allow multiple speaking voices to have their turn to solo (with whatever

⁹ For instance, when I did a search for #ParisAttacks (which left 130 dead) on Google, I got 2.5 million results. When I did a search for #KenyaAttacks (which left 147 people dead), I got about 3500 results.

¹⁰ For, as Jean-Luc Nancy argues in *Being Singular Plural*, multiculturalism exists wherever we find culture, which is essentially everywhere on this planet: “Every culture is in itself ‘multicultural,’ not only because there has always been a previous acculturation, and because there is no pure and simple origin [*provenance*], but at a deep level, because the gesture of culture is itself a mixed gesture: it is to affront, confront, transform, divert, develop, recompose, combine, rechannel” (152).

¹¹ Some of the ideas in this paragraph are drawn from the polemical tenure of rapper Baraka Blue's essay, “Beyond Selective Mourning.”

parameters we choose and adapt as we go). As I watched friends adjust their profile pictures on *Facebook* with the French flag filter, when such options were not provided after similar attacks occurred this year in places like Beirut, I am reminded of rapper Baraka Blue's observation: "we don't love all lives equally. We don't see all people as 'us.'" While improvisation cannot solve these problems for us, just as prayer without action cannot, consciously improvising (and getting out and doing the work) with the intent to build more cocreative and correlative communities is an affirmation of hope and love that tells us that risk-based endeavors can in fact change lives and can create more equitable notions of community in the process.

At present, and in the coming months, Syrian refugees will enter local communities across Canada. At first, Canada's Refugee Plan only included women, children, and families, but it has since expanded to include "members of sexual minorities and single men only if they are identified as gay, bisexual or transgender or are travelling as part of a family" (Levitz). This neoliberal approach (and invasive inspection of minority status) is problematic because it presumes that a single or unaccompanied man fleeing a war-torn region is suspect.¹² While the ratified plan speaks to a kind of inclusion, it does so by reifying the stereotype that single Middle Eastern men are terrorists. Of course, from the government's perspective, this approach is designed to mitigate risk, but as I have suggested, the risk (which always comes with the due process of carefully screening refugees) is worth it; risk is essential if we are to have a truly Just Society that works to undo and remake our conception of community in the process. We need to make additional room in Canada's enormous jazz parade for those who continue to undo community, particularly new immigrants and refugees, because they put, as philosopher Giorgio Agamben argues, "the originary fiction of modern sovereignty into crisis" and challenge us to rebuild more inclusive communities (131). We still, as Martin Luther King said over 45 years ago, need to "work passionately and unrelentingly for first-class citizenship" (76). There is not a unitary way to achieve this first-class citizenship for all, but improvisation—even though it can be concocted as a recalcitrant force by fundamentalists on both sides—allows us to respond in the moment to social dissonance by choosing hope over fear, and in the process, imagining the kind of Canada we want to call home.

As listeners, scholars, artists, and improvisers we have the capacity to act now and we must do so with a fierce urgency. With the holiday season approaching, we are reminded of the things we have in stark contrast with the things that many others lack. We can humanely enable safer spaces for Syrian refugees to improvise more fully. We can fight the insular mechanics of an improvisation of fear with an improvisation of hope that challenges the anxiety that refugees destroy borders and culture, as if these things are pure, static, given, unchanging, and authentic. There are those who fear that judicial civility is threatened and polarized by special interest campaigns, especially those that ask us to make more space for other voices to be heard. This apprehension speaks to many people's fear with forms of genuine multiculturalism or "discordant democracy" (Wolin); essentially, how do we all come together, if all cultures, groups, individuals, and political factions are equally part of the social mix? Such fears speak to the urgent need to use improvisation to expand what are often parochial attempts at a cohesive cultural narrative, which is more often than not statically white. As Kwame Anthony Appiah brilliantly puts it, "Cultures are made of continuities and changes, and the identity of a society can survive through these changes. Societies without change aren't authentic; they're just dead." It is time to let go of the false grip of authenticity—a vying for Fascism—and accept that when we change and learn to improvise with others, we open ourselves and our communities to a richer and more just vision of Canada. If Canada and Canadians can manage this, then citizenship will hold real value, particularly for the migrants, immigrants, and refugees who still actively seek such status. With a new Trudeau at the helm (who we need to ensure fills his election promises concerning issues of social justice),¹³ with serious talks about climate change on the tables (from governments and organizations, including the Pope's recent call to climate action), with new people entering our shared communities, and with our growing capacities to adapt to the changes, we need to put pressure on the structural frameworks that guide policy. Equitable Community comes from taking calculated and ethically based risks. Improvisation, like notions of what might comprise a truly Just Society, engages with the art of the possible. Accepting those who have been deemed disposable by their homelands' corrupted governments into our communities is nothing short of Sun Ra's difficult but essential endeavour to be in the "business [of] changing the

¹² In recent years, a number of artists have raised public consciousness about the hardships of refugees and the hypocrisy of nations that refuse to help resettle refugees. The epigraph from Canadian hip-hop artist, Shad—whose parents fled war-torn Rwanda—discusses the fictitious nature of borders, along with the enrichment that refugees bring to any society. In a video posted around the time of this piece, M.I.A, acclaimed rapper, singer, producer, and a refugee who escaped civil war in Sri Lanka, released the video "Borders," which shows people traversing deserts, climbing fences, and moving in boats across bodies of water. Poignantly, the video only features male refugees to humanize the people that Western countries often most stereotype as criminals and terrorists.

¹³ In fact, as I write this piece, Trudeau and his government gave arriving Syrian refugees a very warm welcome, meeting them in person as they arrived at Pearson International Airport. Over the last few days there have been very positive public responses with shows of solidarity and hospitality for arriving refugees on social media sites like *Twitter*.

planet” (qtd. in Szwed 84). Such a call for improvisatory thinking, both abstract and engaged in real emancipatory civil action, is as urgent as ever.

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