

Big Ideas in Improvisation Lecture: Fred Moten and Vijay Iyer in Conversation (May 28, 2021)

Transcription by Joe Sorbara and Sam Boer

This transcript is based on a video recording of this event that is publicly available through this link: <https://vimeo.com/563391101>

Ajay Heble: Thanks so much for joining us this evening—here in Guelph, it's evening—thanks for joining us for the inaugural edition of our Big Ideas in Improvisation lecture.

My name is Ajay Heble and I'm the director of the International Institute for Critical Studies in Improvisation, or IICSI [pronounced "icy"], as we call it. We're so grateful to you all, wherever you may be, for tuning in. Big Ideas in Improvisation is an annual lecture series presented by IICSI and Musagetes. The lecture series seeks to showcase provocative thinkers and creative practitioners in a public forum as they share ideas and insights about the power, expansive force, and urgency of improvisation. The talks will encourage us to consider how the artistic practices of improvisation that have been developed by creative practitioners can translate into broader spheres of influence and action; how improvisational practices can put pressure on unquestioned assumptions, help us discover new ways of being, and, perhaps, put into action potential solutions to some pressing contemporary global challenges.

We are so honoured to be joined today by our very special guests Fred Moten and Vijay Iyer as we launch the series. Before we introduce our speakers, I'd like to take a moment to thank the ArtsEverywhere Festival for co-presenting today's talk and to acknowledge the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for their generous support of our Institute through their Partnership Grant program. Thank you also to the School of English and Theatre Studies here at the University of Guelph and to Jade Ferguson for supporting tonight's event. Finally, I want to offer huge shout-outs to our organizing team at IICSI, especially Rachel Collins, Sam Boer, and Ann Westbere, and to our dear friends and partners at Musagetes, especially Shawn Van Sluys and Marva Wisdom. You'll meet Marva in a moment.

Before I turn things over to Marva for a land acknowledgement and an introduction of our speakers, I also want to take a moment to encourage people to "save the date" for another big event that we at IICSI are organizing in partnership with Musagetes. On August 13th and 14th this year, we will be holding the second edition of our 24-hour online improvisation festival. It's called IF 2021. We'll be featuring over 150 improvising artists from around the world over that 24-hour period on August 13th and 14th, so please stay tuned for more details and mark your calendars: August 13th and 14th for IF 2021. You can visit improvfest.ca for details as they get posted.

Now, I'm delighted to introduce Marva Wisdom. Marva Wisdom is a community leader who has built a life on passion, social justice, and inclusivity. In addition to being the festival director for the ArtsEverywhere Festival—our co-presenter this evening—she has done many things, but among them, she is the director for the Black Experience Project and the founding chair of the Guelph Black Heritage Foundation. It's always a genuine pleasure to work with Marva and I'm thrilled that she's offered to introduce our speakers and to moderate questions from the audience. So, over to you Marva.

Marva Wisdom: "Marva, you're on mute." That is one of the mantras that has become my little mantra. Can everyone hear me okay? Yeah? We're good? Wonderful. Great to see so many

faces on the screen, and I know there are other screens that I might not get to tonight. I hope I get to all the screens.

Thank you so much, Ajay. Thank you for your exemplary vision and your creativity leading this institute in all it entails; Rachel; and, of course, the Institute team that you mentioned, for bringing this to us—our special, special guests.

So, bonsoir, hello, bienvenu, and a hearty welcome. I am pleased to be your moderator this evening, as a member of the ArtsEverywhere Festival team—and, again, my hats off to my team members: Anna Bowen and as well as Curtis (and you don't see Curtis necessarily here—he's probably . . . I'm sure that he's here somewhere), and we have Sean and we have Elwood and we have Eleni. And all of those folks are the ones that are just driving the ArtsEverywhere Festival; and, of course, Musagetes, the parent piece.

So, let me start with a land acknowledgement. That's really important. It might be a tiny bit longer than you are used to, but please bear with me. I think this is really important in terms of how we ground the work that it is that we are doing.

The International Institute for Critical Studies in Improvisation (IICSI, of course) is located at the University of Guelph and Musagetes' ArtsEverywhere Festival is based in Guelph, Ontario, which is situated on treaty land that is steeped in rich Indigenous history and home to many First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people today. We are situated on Treaty Three territory, the traditional lands of the Mississaugas of the Credit. This treaty is called the Between the Lakes Purchase, which was first made in 1784, then redone and signed *under force* in 1792 between the Haudenosaunee, the Mississaugas of the Credit, and the British Loyalists.

But the history of this place, importantly, goes back further to the times before colonizers arrived. The Iroquois Confederacy and the Anishinaabeg peoples shared a law for hundreds of years called the “Dish with One Spoon,” an agreement to share resources peacefully and with reciprocity, to take from the land only what is needed. We acknowledge all the beings of the land, the other-than-human that are forced to suffer as a result of humanity's insistence on modernity and notions of progress. We're convening online today, and with that global connectivity, let us acknowledge our complicity in this devastation. From mining of rare metals for the devices that we use, to the massive carbon footprint of travel, to the separability gaps that our digital world widens in our alienation from nature, we acknowledge all of these things, and we seek ways to mitigate their impacts. We must reaffirm our commitment and responsibility in improving our own understanding of local Indigenous culture wherever we are situated this evening. And when we understand, we must seek to learn more and explore what action we must take to advance truth and reconciliation.

So, let me share a bit about the festival . . . And I just want to have my hat off to my colleague Shawn Van Sluys for the land acknowledgement. We're always revising and making sure that we've included as much as possible as we learn more, because the learning continues, and it is a long journey. And I am on that journey, and so are all of us—that's why we're here today.

So, a bit about the ArtsEverywhere Festival really quickly: As Ajay mentioned, it is the festival that is taking place right now and we are partnered in this. It is a four-day event, this virtual event. Normally it's over a weekend when we see each other in person. We hope to have get back to that in 2022. And it is a wonderful event. It is a platform, the ArtsEverywhere platform for artistic experimentation and exploration of the fault lines of modernity that I referred to earlier. It is a mandate that's closely aligned with its host organization, Musagetes, and it seeks to make

the arts more central and meaningful in peoples' lives and in our communities. And we do appreciate our community partners. And we're always really thrilled and excited to partner with IICSI because we know the relevant transformative and social justice-focused message in whatever the performance is presented. And tonight is a huge example of that, this inaugural Big Ideas improv lecture. It is going to be compelling, and I've been really looking forward to it. I pinch myself to be asked to moderate this and I'm thrilled and excited.

So, very quickly with our housekeeping: Please put your questions in the chat—or comments, anything that you have—there. We're going to try to filter that out and make sure we get to as many questions as possible. We are going to be cutting off at 8:30. We're going to try to make it 8:30 sharp because we want to be respectful of your time, and certainly the time of our presenters. We want to remind you that this is being recorded, and I think you had a little message before for your approval for the recording happening, but we want to remind you again and be respectful again of the process that we're going through. And the format is that I will introduce our . . . one of our first guests, I'm going to introduce Vijay first, and then he's going to do his presentation. And then after that I will be introducing Fred Moten, and then Fred will do his presentation. And then these two amazing presenters will have a conversation. And after the conversation, we're going to have a question-and-answer period where we'll answer the questions that you're dropping in the chat. If there is time, certainly put your hand up. And I think you all know where the hand function is by now, all of you are probably get . . . gotten used to online. So, if you click on the little smiley face, I believe that's it, or is the participants—I go from one online thing to the next, program to the next—either one. You will be able to see the function to raise your hand or you can just wave madly at me if I don't see your hand, and I know that the team is going to help me if I'm missing anyone.

So, with that, is there any burning question that anyone have before I introduce Vijay Iyer? No? Okay, I see a “thumbs up” there, and someone will stop me if I'm missing a hand that's going up.

And now it is really a great pleasure to introduce the person that's leading off tonight: Vijay Iyer. He is no stranger to our audiences here in Guelph and, as a pianist he was appeared over the years at the Guelph Jazz Festival, gifting us with several memorable performances. And as a scholar, he has been a contributor to conferences hosted by IICSI (for Critical [Studies in Improvisation], of course . . . you know that). And he's also . . . teamed with the Institute in terms of publications.

He's described by *The New York Times* as a “social conscience, multimedia collaborator, system builder, rhapsodist, historical thinker and multicultural gateway.” He has carved out a unique path as an influential and prolific, shape-shifting presence in twenty-first-century music. A composer and pianist and scholar active across multiple musical and academic communities, he has created a consistently innovative and emotionally resonant body of work over the last twenty-five years (Vijay, I think you're too young for it to be 25 years, you're too young-looking—maybe you'll explain that to us when you're talking). He received the MacArthur Fellowship, Doris Duke Performing Artist Award, a United States Artist Fellowship, a Grammy nomination, the Alpert Award in the Arts, and two German “Echo” awards, and was voted *Downbeat Magazine's* Jazz Artist of the Year four times in the last decade—I want to know a little bit more about that!

Iyer's musical language is grounded in the rhythmic traditions of South Asia and West Africa, the African American Creative Music movement of the 60s and 70s—yay yay—and the lineage of composer-pianists from Duke Ellington and Thelonious Monk to Alice Coltrane and Geri

Allen. He has released twenty-four albums of music, most recently *UnEasy*, which is on the prestigious ECM label, in 2021.

An active composer for classical ensembles and soloists, he has had works commissioned by numerous ensembles and orchestras. He's also written big band music for Arturo O'Farrill and Darcy James Argue, remixed classic recordings of Talvin Singh and Meredith Monk, joined forces with legendary musicians Henry Threadgill and Reggie Workman, Zakir Hussain, and L. Subramanian, and developed interdisciplinary work with several artists. Lastly, he recently served as composer-in-residence at London's Wigmore Hall, music director of the Ojai Music Festival, and artist-in-residence in New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. And in 2014 he joined Harvard University as the Franklin D. and Florence Rosenblatt Professor of the Arts in the Department of Music, where he founded its Doctoral Program in Cross-Disciplinary Music.

So, ladies and gentlemen, and wonderful people, welcome Vijay Iyer.

Vijay Iyer: Thank you. Thanks for that probably too-long introduction, but I'm very flattered that you read it all [laughs]. I'm really, really honored to be here to be part of this beautiful event with all these beautiful people, including all of you. Many names that I have known for a long time, some people from different phases of my life. From . . . yeah, so, I'm going to be 50 this year, to answer your question, Marva, I'm not that young. But today, I'm just glad to be alive and kicking with you all.

I'm speaking to you from Munsee Lenape and Wappinger land, also known as Harlem, on the Island of Manahatta, and I want to thank Ajay and Marva and the whole team for organizing this event with my dear brother Fred Moten.

I first became acquainted with Fred around the turn of the millennium, in the context of the Jazz Study Group, an interdisciplinary consortium of scholars from around the US that met periodically at Columbia University. Convened by Professor Robert O'Meally and comprising members like Farah Jasmine Griffin, Brent Edwards, Robin D.G. Kelly, Ingrid Monson, David Lionel Smith, Sherrie Tucker, Celine Washington, William J. Harris, Daphne Brooks, Greg Tate, Garnett Cadogan, George Lewis. This was a space for dialogue, debate, celebration, critique, reparative study, and the envisioning of possible lines of future inquiry that are now, twenty years later, quite active in our present.

Fred, then as now a professor in performance studies at NYU, would often . . . he would have the last word in our conversations, only because those words invariably left us stunned speechless, his soft voice and gentle cadence always concealed a conceptual sneak attack. Perhaps he would find a trap door in one modest area of inquiry that would suddenly lead to a radical reconsideration of humanness. He might rework a word or phrase uttered hours earlier to uncork a spontaneous exegesis that drew the whole conversation together. Or he might simply synthesize the day's ideas, ignite them, and laconically launch them into space. He was the genius among us: an intellectual superhero using his powers for good. Then as now, I draw inspiration from his every utterance.

I'm not here today to offer a "big idea" about, on, or for improvisation. I'm more likely to try to push against or borough under or undo or even abolish the term. My agonism is partly inspired by some remarks made by my dear friend, and hero, and teacher, and collaborator, the great Wadada Leo Smith. A few years ago, during a pre-concert Q & A when we were playing in Chicago, our interlocutor asked us one of those usual questions about the balance of composition and improvisation in our work. Mr. Smith shot me a glance, and he said, "Watch my

back.” Then, into the mic, he declared: “Not so long ago, I took that word ‘improvisation’ out into my backyard, and I beat it to death. In the end, there was nothing left but dust.” That’s what he said.

So, what might have prompted his annihilation of improvisation as a category?

I just found out that Rinaldo Walcott is here today. Today—there must be something going on every Friday over there, because I always see on Twitter a whole bunch of jewel-like phrases from Rinaldo and Christina Sharpe and others in that community—so today, someone live-tweeted what must have been a lecture by the Afro-Caribbean Canadian theorist Rinaldo Walcott, and I’m just going to quote a few lines that I caught:

“Black people had to be made valueless so that others could find value in themselves. At the same time, Black people had to become valuable as commodities. That’s the double bind.”

“To think the problem of value as something more than economic.”

“Value is violence, then it is not. Value is violence; then, it is form.”

So, those words somehow matter for me today in what I’m trying to say.

Improvisation, that category of fugitive actions that evade any physical archive, occupies a strange and unstable position in Western music, as if it were the source of an anxiety. Neither composition nor performance, improvisation is relatively scarce in official music histories; not because it’s actually rare in musical cultures, but indeed because it is dangerously omnipresent. By the 20th century it had become one of Western music’s principal others, constructed as a kind of epistemological antithesis to composition. Improvisation enjoys a status of literally zero value in the Western economy of musical works.

It’s no coincidence, then, that improvisation has that class of expressions that accrue no value, and is routinely and violently associated with Black culture, Black aesthetics, Black sound, and Black being.

Improvisation’s ill-fated opposing traits—ubiquity, unknowability, zero-value, maximum influence—set up together a chaotic field of signifying relations. The word is not an ordinary noun with a closed meaning, but a charged dangerous performative designation.

In my own study and planning, I’ve been involved in an ongoing attempt not to master the category of improvisation, but to unthink it, to reach beneath it or to push against it. This is what I attempted a couple of years back in a book chapter called “Beneath Improvisation,” both a feverish annihilation of the category and a semi-sober examination of its ingredients.

I’m using the ontological formulation of an object as that boundary between what a thing contains, and what that thing does. As a category, the object called improvisation does things—it acts on the world—and it also contains things—it is made of various simpler elements, perhaps. Among the things the category of improvisation does in the world—the Western world, at least—significantly, it revokes value. It diminishes mattering. This, in turn, enables rehabilitative gestures—indeed, like this very gathering—which, in purporting to rescue improvisation from the condition of valuelessness, chiefly generates more value for our hosting institutions.

So, what's improvisation made of? What does this category contain? Nothing less than all the things you are—being, sensing, feeling, thinking, doing, speaking, acting, moving—or, in their corresponding academic keywords to those eight gerunds I just rattled off: subjectivity, phenomenology, affect, cognition, practice, discourse, agency, migration. Crucially, none of these sub-niches differentially vulnerable to forces around it. Hence the common pairing of agency with structure, which is a term that does precisely what Walcott described: it re-labels violence as form.

These are the very mechanisms of difference, the processes through which lived experience shows up differently for different populations: the well and the sick, the privileged and the precarious, Western man and his racialized others.

So, here's where I ultimately land with this chapter—and I'm just quoting the last few lines of it: “. . . the transparency of the machineries beneath improvisation—being / doing / acting / sensing / feeling / etc.—cannot be taken for granted while Black, or while brown, or while non-male, or while queer, or undocumented, or disabled, or precarious. These mechanisms' theoretical manifestations—subjectivity, practice, agency, phenomenology, affect and so forth—seem not to operate equally in the universe of constrained affordances and potentialities that characterize non-normative, othered bodies.”

We cannot theorize improvisation uniformly across incommensurate domains of experience without accounting endlessly for freedom itself. Indeed, the presumed separability of the humanities was always a consequence of humanity's massively unequal distribution of freedom. The separations and differentiations imposed by humanity on itself; or, quoting Moten himself—that's Fred—and I was actually trying to find the source of this and I realized it was an email that he sent me, because, like I said, every utterance has something that you need in it—the line that I grabbed from that was “the paradox is all about what it is to want to escape the history of freedom or the history of the struggle for freedom.”

Fred and I talked about just talking for, like, five minutes each and then kicking off some kind of . . . rumble? [laughs] But I just wanted to say something else that maybe is more constructive and can actually lead us into something else, who knows, maybe it will provoke a renaming or a reassessment.

Constructively then, against or beneath for un-toward improvisation, I have become interested in musicality itself as a critical category. Recently, aiming to pry this word loose, I posed a question on Twitter following the form of a popular meme: “What's not music but feels like music to *you*?”

Some of you answered, I think, some of you are here. This post received an avalanche of responses. Here are a few of them:

cooking,
a really good conversation,
longing,
dancing,
weather,
grandparents,
people being insulted in Yoruba
water droplets,
door creaks,
astrological planet alignments

white noise
difference tones
my youngest son's gentle snore
my oldest son's footsteps,
my daughter's laughter,
the wind through desiccating leaves
the unfolding of an exquisite meal
shafts of sunlight through slow moving clouds,
astrology,
astrophysics,
poetry,
the crunch of leaves on a crisp Chicago autumn day,
looking deeply into the eyes of a lover,
traffic,
the groove a washing machine or dishwasher gets into,
the ocean,
love,
memories,
rollercoasters,
touch,
thought,
everything.

Hundreds of people from around the planet offered examples of what feels like music, illuminating the contested edges of that category, tracing out a larger space of musical mattering: affectively charged attending to phenomenological experience. These included human and non-human actions, complex sensations, emotions, thoughts, and meaningful social relations. The category of music encompasses many behaviors, but it is also surrounded by a vast sea of experiences that feel like they belong in the category too.

Needless to say, feelings are real somatic activations at the intersection of physiology and culture. As the tweets revealed, virtually any experience can feel like music to somebody. And they cannot be proven wrong, for music is felt into being. We must therefore treat the category of music not as one that closes or coheres, but instead as a sphere of experience and relation. We need not imagine a single transcendent musicality, but instead innumerable musicalities remade anew every day like hope, opening out endlessly to human possibility. Can we then challenge ourselves to accommodate musicalities across cultures, classes, continents, and epochs, as well as new musicalities that challenge and remake our understanding of the category?

I'll close with this. This semester, the composer and saxophonist Yosvany Terry and I co-taught a course titled "Composer-Performers of the African Diaspora" in which we studied the creative work of visiting artists Henry Threadgill, Cécile McLorin Salvant, Esperanza Spalding, Gonzalo Rubalcaba, Nicole Mitchell, and TyShawn Sorey. We deliberately omitted the "I" word from our language, trying instead to listen for these artists' methods of self-definition. At the end of term, we asked our students to reflect on any common tendencies they noticed across these artists' work. And I just want to spotlight one of our graduating seniors, Joy Nesbitt. Here are some words of hers:

"I'm fascinated by the lineage of the diaspora between these artists. I know this might seem vague, but I think there's this ineffable, uniquely Black curiosity inherent to all of this work. I

think some of it might actually be passed down from the ancestors, and that part of Black creativity is excavating other cultures and locations for a sense of identity that was robbed within the creation of the diaspora.” End quote.

So, might we then hear Black music-making as a ritual space for Black speculative musicalities, sonically disruptive practices that posit other ways of becoming musical, ancient to the future, other-wise possibilities for Black life and Black subjectivities, and radical futurities for what our dear Fred Moten has called “the philosophy of the human being”? If today’s critical humanities interrogate the category of the human across these histories, might we similarly ask for a critical musicalities in order to collectively feel our way through the emergence and contingency and historicity and relationality and sheer fragility of human sonic relation, and how we might remake it anew every day in our present and our shared futures?

Thank you, I hope that was audible and intelligible, and I'm going to kick it over to my brother, Fred.

Marva Wisdom: Thank you so much, Vijay. We really appreciate that. Very very well said, very well spoken, and I am going to introduce Fred now. And I’m going to introduce him much more briefly than I did you—and I hope Fred doesn’t mind—so that we can have a chance to hear more from him. So, Fred Moten is a poet, a critic and theorist whose work has been profoundly influential in shaping contemporary thinking. He works in the department of performance studies in the Tisch School of the Arts, New York University, and he's interested in social movements, aesthetic experiment, and the poetics of Black study. Over the last 30 years he has addressed this concern as part of the Harris Moten Quartet. Professor Moten is the recipient of numerous prizes and awards, and he was recently awarded a MacArthur “Genius Grant,” recognizing his work of creating new conceptual spaces to accommodate emerging forms of Black aesthetics. And he was awarded a Guggenheim fellowship and the Stephen Henderson Award for outstanding achievement in poetry by the African American Legislature and Cultural Society. And, when I was doing a bit of research for Fred—the last part I saw say about him, I’ll skip over a fair bit—there was an excerpt from an article that was published in the New Yorker where he gave an interview, and they said that in-person, though his way of thinking and speaking feels like an intuitive way of seeing the world, he was born in 1962 and he grew up in Las Vegas in a thriving Black community that took root after the great migration. His mother a schoolteacher, and books were always present in the house, and through all of that it has helped to really shape him. And Fred says, “I like to read, and I like to be involved in reading,” and he said, “for me, writing is part of what it is to be involved in reading.” So, with his writing, his reading, his music, his poetry, I give you Professor Moten.

Fred Moten: Thank you very much, Marva. It's a pleasure to be here with everybody and it's an honour and a pleasure to be here with my friend, Vijay, and I want to also, you know, along with him, acknowledge the generative force of the Jazz Study Group and the sort of ethics of welcome and of open inquiry that Bob O’Mealey, you know, established in that group. Sherrie Tucker is here tonight and she's part of it. It's just been, you know, the most important intellectual, you know, experience of my life. And I'm thankful for it every day. So, he's not here, but I want to thank Bob, and Farah, Brent Edwards . . . everybody who was a part of it. It just opened everything up for me.

And, you know, I'm thinking today of a time when I was at Duke University and we were recruiting Nate Mackey to come to Duke and he happened to be giving a job talk on the same day that Vijay was there giving a talk—and it's kind of great because I believe that the topic Vijay was giving was, for some reason, for some absolutely legitimate and absolutely important

and clear reason, was given somewhere on the other side of the University that I was used to going to, it was in the sciences somewhere. Like maybe chemistry or physics or something. And and I said to Nate, “Man, Vijay is here giving a talk,” he said: “Oh, let’s go,” you know, and I remember Vijay talking about diversion of mystic groove that your trio did on the album *Historicity*, and you tried to explain the temporal . . . amazing, unfolding temporal anomaly of that recording and I’m still trying to think about it, I’m still trying to figure it out. I still haven’t caught up with it yet, I know I never will. [Fred Moten checks the Zoom chat, where Vijay Iyer has written “applied math”] Yeah, and applied math. And in a lot of ways, I think back to that day because maybe some of what I want to try to talk about today has to do with a certain set of applications of mathematics—maybe some topological problems that emerge around the question of improvisation.

I don’t want to keep going in a kind of informal way. I have some notes that I sent to Vijay, and I realized I’m not going to try to read all of them. It’s about seven pages, and I’m going to skip some parts, but I am going to read them—and the reason that I feel emboldened to read them, in some sense at least, is because today we were emailing back and forth and Vijay reminded me that, on a beautiful record it that he did with Craig Taborn, the second cut on that record is called “Sensorium,” and it’s dedicated to the painter, the amazing painter, Jack Whitten.

And, and I think—for whatever reason, I don’t know why—so much of what I think I’m trying to say, maybe about improvisation, or through improvisation, or beneath improvisation (as Vijay teaches us to do, to go) is kind of connected to painting these days. Or at least to visual art. And maybe, more specifically than anyone, to Jack Whitten. Although there’s also a nod to the extraordinarily deep and interesting and important painter, and also, I guess I would say, organizer—I won’t call him a curator, but I will call him a curate, because he was truly and deeply engaged in practices of care—and that’s Noah Davis.

And so, what I want to write—what I want to say today, some of what I will say—is connected to them. So let me try to read as fast as I can. And I acknowledge fully, you know, that these are notes. And that means a very kind of really nebulous space between poetry and criticism, or between poetry and prose, and it just seems like maybe that’s where I’m living these days for the most part. So, if they’re just silly and ridiculous to you, I totally understand and I apologize in advance.

Jack Whitten says there’s a cross carrying art on its back.
Mosaic as geodic palimpsest,
as if an elongated rounding had unfolded,
like a scroll lined with natural jewels
whose texture, the extension and arrangement of the jewels,
invites touch like braille.
These are pieces to be seen by hand
or, in having been played, heard.

Jack Whitten and Edward Witten,
they found a medal in the field and took it to the field museum.
These amazing unfolded or unrolled books,
he used the term totems and masks.
I guess, because I love the texture and the topography of flatness,
I fall in love being present with something I have only seen in the ways that books misrepresent:
the depth and diversity of flatness.

This makes me think about Alma Thomas again,
the mosaic quality she sometimes gets in her circles,
like something Moroccan she might be making at or of her kitchen table.
In Titian, too. I guess I'm just still enthralled by the mysteries of the application of paint,
the blur of pigment, medium, and platform.
"I can't get out of the art world if the art world is where I keep falling in love,"
as with Whitten's really beautiful and interesting combination of outpouring and cutting,
this flooding and then tilling of the canvas.

"Flecks,"
one wants to say "tiles,"
as if tile were equivalent to the effect of dog or stroke or blue.
But of course, it's cut—a cut of blue,
not like a cut of meat,
though it is an effect of cutting,
whether the cut of an eye, a glance.
A glance of blue or red in the totems for 'Trane and Kenny Dorham,
almost fully muted in the one for Amadou Diallo.
You have to get up so close to see the glance and shine
that you get too close to see the glance and shine,
so that you have to see *with* glance and shine,
éclat et cligner.

What if gravity is *A Gathering of Matter / A Matter of Gathering*,
as Dawn Lundy Martin says?
This is a Jack Whitten question for Edward Witten,
and it's all about building out of outpouring and cutting,
a violent working in which the work is made of unmaking.

That's part of it.
And maybe it's about Bill Frank Whitten, too.
Maybe there's a certain affinity for the sequel.
Whitten's rolled fabric in which matter is gathered
—warp and weft, but without weaving—
into an intermittence of shine.
Both brothers worked with fabric that had been distressed by decorative weight.
What stories shirts tell.

As with Sam Gilliam,
fuck the separation of painting and sculpture.
But the cut, and even the rolling of his scarred and tumored canvases,
makes one wants to save it.
Cinema can't be made separate either,
by way of
but also through cubism's smooth two-dimensionality.
It's just that the sculpturality,
both in Whitten and Gilliam,
need not be understood as seeking after three-dimensionality;
rather, this till-tiled surfacing injures and abjures the smooth and flat,
disrespecting or distressing our orientation.

The Mask for Ronald Brown is [aerial] grounding,
a topographical map made topographical
as if a little ornament or monument to Borges.
In memory site, the map is scuffed,
has been under duress.
There's a textural slur that's, in the end, musical.
Over-microtonal abrasion.
Cosmo-topographical wound.

This tilling enlimbing in Whitten is a kind of Hellenistic pan-Africanism.
This, at least, is what I imagine Emily Greenwood might say of the precise irregularities of his
ana-mosaic gestures.
I like how, with the totems, you can see through to the shadowed wall
—more depth than—
and how, in the mingle altarpiece,
the tame of the piece gives a blue hint or gaze.
Cinematic insofar as the paintings are built by cutting.
Fabricated in a way,
as Gilliam's draping or as Bill Frank Whitten's sewing,
sewing fo' sho', fo' sho', fo' sho'.
Built up from the canvas then cut to the quick.
The rough edge
or hedge
of these hieroglyphs,
along with their being supple enough to furl,
brings scrolls to mind.
But the cuts and grooves invoke a piano roll.
What ingenious mechanical device might allow us,
one afternoon,
not to break Whitten's code,
but rather to differ it, in and with his elegiac non-chronic,
or ana-chronic,
or the-ends-of-man-chronic
or pan-chronic practice.

For criticism is grounded,
cryptographic differing and deciphering is separation's cryptologic overview.
It ain't got to be either/or if refused inhabitation of crisis is how we roll,
in something kind of like linen's pan-freefall and [left aeration].

In Henry Geldzahler's essay in The Studio Museum catalog,
he quotes Whitten talking about seeing and hearing 'Trane
and talking with him a little bit at Club Cornet in Brooklyn in 1965
—but it must have been '64 because he mentions Dolphy, too, who was gone by '65.
Whitten talks about 'Trane talking about sheets.
'Trane, maybe having taken,
or taken back the sheets of sound metaphor from Ira Gitler,
having taken it back or taken it out past metaphor,
so that we can think of waves of paint,
outpourings of it that Witten,
as he later says,

cuts, freezes, boils, laminates.

Quote: “The sound you hear in his music comes at you in waves. He catches it when it comes by, and he'll grab at as much of it as he needs or can grasp. I think that, in plastic terms, translating from sound, I was sensing sheets, waves of light, a sheet of light passing. That's how I was seeing light. That's why I refer to these paintings as energy fields.” End quote.

Making a way in and out of 'Trane's way,
sheets of paint in the non-space,
but in between painting and sculpture,
not in between the sheets is the Isley's don't quite say.
He illuminates 'Trane's use of the musical material.
It makes me want to go back and re-read Adorno on some relationship between painting and music.

If you go back and look at Annunciation [XVIII] from 1979,
having hung with Totem 2000 VI Annunciation,
—though I can't go back and look,
can't really see the texture,
can't really feel or walk around in its flatness—
it feels like you're also seeing Whitten hearing and feeling 'Trane:
a twenty-year cross-section of a long meditation on Annunciation,
perhaps by way of going bone-deep
or having fallen into and in love with “Ascension.”

This whole question of vibratory circles:
of flesh,
of what it means to feel, dig, knead
—to need there, not be in there—
the materiality of what it is to be a compressionist, as Whitten says.
Compression,
surfacing,
hapticality,
enfleshment.

On April 6th, 2000, Whitten says of the second Annunciation:
“the shit vibrates.”
What's not in between vibration and compression?
To sacrilize surface or to sense its sacredness.
Sacrilization, I think, because the surface as instrument,
or as the refusal of the distinction between instrument and material,
is played.
It's not that 'Trane wasn't playing the sax
—it's that, in playing the sax, he was really playing sound,
ensacrilizing arrangement of the musical material
which Witten then approaches in painting.
This is the monasticism of the woodshed,
and it's always cenobitic.

On February 12, 1979,
Whitten announces his freedom from art history.

Two months later,
he declares a breakthrough from the gravitational field of art history.
Witten's field theory is feel theory.
I wish Samiya Bashir were hear.
Whitten's sonic proximity to Witten as a transcendental clue.
I don't know if Witten is a painter,
but Whitten is definitely a physicist.

There's no specific reference in the notes to Annunciation,
but there is reference to assertion and poverty.
What's the difference between assertion and annunciation?
What's the announcement of the incarnation?
An animation of flesh will have occurred,
a vibration of circles.
The subtle shift from laying claim and lining up
to some kind of proclamatory and non-declamatory hymnodic lining-out,
bringing news and noise,
some kind of Greco-Alabaman shout.
Incantation and incarnation.
Whitten's surfacing
—a map drawn on and of the city.
Whitten's subway, his paths,
his A Train and High Line,
his palimpsestic trail,
his Alabama Mediterranean,
his tessellated forge,
his branding alphabet.

B-day in the studio.
Noel Anderson and Charisse Pearlina Weston.
Tapestry: wall floor to walk on or look at,
which makes the enclosed circular interplay and vertical and horizontal attitude in the relay of
actionable and represented surface-tied electrical image.

Chauvin stomped, kneed, kneeled on his flesh,
as if his flesh were the ground.
The way I look at you, is the way I stomp on you, he says.

From the vertical plane of representation to the very cup of trembling.
It's all a modality of arrest,
which Sora Han says is a death sentence.
At stake in the interplay of Noel Anderson and Charisse Pearlina Weston
is the inraction of textuality and texturality,
reflection and fragility,
all that distressed surface tinged by writing or in weaving,
and the curved, knotted distress of surfacing.
It's all in our hands and feet,
for little edges don't line up and irregulars converge.

The phenomenological attitude doesn't just stand against it;
it also stands over.

The virtuous relationality of the horizontal is strained and tainted by verticality.
The problem is distance,
separation.

[. . .]

These are notes on the third part of the third mention,
Julian being Eastman's avatar.

Basic-ness,
fundamental-ness,
the ground,
as opposed to the superficial or elegant.
The Otolith Group show how looking makes possible four-handedness
and *vorhandenheit*.
Is there a presence to hand
and of hand and feet
that cuts the here and now?
It would involve ways for information to remain in difference,
in differential basic-ness.
Double four-handedness is a kind of refusal of the separable entity,
a question of attitude.
Is our attitude towards the piano vertical or horizontal, eh Benjamin?

Evil nigga is tentacular in his continual relay.
The militant preservation of all the information,
even in its deliberate winnowing or burning.
That thing,
which is fundamental to attain to, to reach for: the ground.
That coordination of hand, foot, and eye
—to retain and attain without grasping for an anti-metaphysics of presence,
of leveling,
of grounding.

I just got to stop—Vijay, man, I'm just trying to add to your verbs, right? I'm trying to work with
your verbs. I mean, you know, okay . . .

Notes for Readings in Improvisation 1

The dimensional attitude
—and this problem of attitude is a Fumi Okiji question—
of the angel of history,
that zero-degree of social conceptualization,
flying and having fallen backwards,
is swarm and grand.

If this were a talk, and if it had a title,
it would be:
“The Angle of History: A Defense of Pre-Formative, Pre-Demonstrative, Pan-African Pre-
Dimensionality.”

But also, what is our dimensional attitude towards the angel and her angle?

Do we look down on them in looking across from them,
interrogatively,
from some third or 90th degree
in which the distinction between verticality and horizontality doesn't really signify?

Reading in improvisation versus reading at sight.
John's purusha,
his second coming,
John's ongoing coming as a kind of pursuance,
this entanglement of return and departure.
And something also in the play of the epiphanic and the apophantic,
all of which I think allows us to begin to see the difference
between looking at, looking inside, and looking through;
not to the essence of the thing,
but in and with and for no-thing's existential field and feel.

There is still always this question of attitude,
which generally becomes a matter of altitude.
That improvisation is opposed,
not only to composition,
but also to a certain attitude towards composition,
it is stuck in performance by one who reads.

What's the relation between reading and sight, and sightreading?

The end of technique is the entanglement of adornment in discomposition.
That's improvisation: careful, reckless, selflessness.

What's the relation between mysticism and skepticism?

Perfor.
Prefer.
Perform.

Notes on Whitten

Attitude, altitude, atunement.
Modes of divination.

The history of my eye is such that,
looking at these paintings folds into looking with them:
entrance by way of blur or swirl,
what embrace is mistaken for.
A lot like Emma McNally's stuff.
And then there's the alphabet,
its relation to divination,
and to Emily Greenwood and Dan-el Peralta and Okiji.

What do the Greeks say about divination?
Whitten cultivates meta-Caribbean, MetaCaribbean blur.
What mode of divination is that?

The extraordinary compression of palimpsest in these paintings
is accompanied somehow by their vastness as atmosphere.
I think this is a function of the entanglement of pour and cut,
but what's the analog of atmosphere that corresponds to curve and surface rather than Globe?
It's the vastness of a little patch of ground
—of grounding, patching, tilling, limbing, limbed, alphabet, divination.

Nodding between 1975 and 1978, what music was in play?
In spite of being collected,
and of being for collection,
the paintings hold and bear the uncollectable.
Can they release the scoring from the score?
How would Braxton or Wadada play these paintings?
An album is announced in something like yarn and loom against looming.
The vertical plane of representation is neither fruited
nor marble
nor fluted
for lingering.

The tactile, textilic thing in these paintings,
their harping, scuff, gouge, engorge,
gorgeous etymology is explosion pattern.
The natural disaster of language is non- or extra-Euclidean.

And their refusal of [. . .]
overview fantastically laid with Whitten's paintings in the margins,
so that look becomes hearing, touch,
and loom becomes loom-as-hill or mogul
and tilling becomes reading.

Blemish, in effect of what it is to rub, to burn, to shine.
Activating, in the name of beauty, these burnished incompletions of the grid.
Something to write with,
for distressed syllables,
for what William Parker might play,
or what Jean Lee might say.

The chordal painting as string instrument.
Vocal cord and greeting card, from different angles,
blemish or gap or erasure becomes its own shade or shadow,
the shadow gouge makes.

Recessive shade.
Trace.
Blackboard holding chalk.
Paper bearing graphite.
Swarm's post-erasive, post-caressive refusal of erasure in caress.

The graphic loss and echo of esoteric lesson,
secret hidden in exposure,
which is not a cryptographic thing,

but a sociographic thing,
as Winter would say.
But against deciphering's grain, cipher remaining,
engrained and blown.

It's not about Jack Whitten: Artist,
and it's not about Jack Whitten Inc.
To make a living at the nexus of being what you are
while doing what you do
is nightmarish.

What if the fundamental moral and ethical problem of art isn't exclusion, but extraction?
This is a question concerning procreation,
to which the discourse of appropriation is inadequate.
For some inappropriate anathema propria
continually moving forward by looking back in freefall
at the ongoing openness in which we're held.
[. . .]

A Defensive of Two-Dimensionality, for Noah Davis

Clement Greenberg's discourse on flatness was always about the three-dimensionality of the beholder, who stands over against the flat, mirror-like surface of the painting. The two-dimensionality I want to defend intimates a different attitude, or a low-down an-altitudinal refusal of attitude. What's at stake is also a refusal of the distinctions between surface and depth, figure and ground, which the thickness, the fatness of surface allows and requires.

There's a palimpsestic, poly-rhythmic shuffle at work in a painting, like the great anti-portrait by Noah Davis of Leni Riefenstahl. But this book-like sociality in the painting is not about a reestablishment of personality. It's not about portraiture or about the establishment of the three-dimensionality of the portrayed. In this regard, it differs from altitudinal and attitudinal aspirations that Greenberg or [Friede] might assign to the fantasy of the beholder, or from identical and also oppositional aspirations, as some contemporary Black artists and critics will have assigned to the terrible, and beautiful, and fantastical reality of the beheld. Rather, surfaces crowded with planes, with strands and fields and plains, contrapuntal plainsong surfaces. Cecilian surfaces.

Cecilia, patron saint of musicians, whose name indicates a question concerning the way of the blind, which blurs the forces of naming and meaning. Certain questions of insight and improvisation want to emerge for the beheld whose looking isn't down, and whose looking exudes debris not from above, but in and as a kind of spreading, in cutting, in mounding, in impasto and incision, enbrailled, braided rhythmic feel. A Cecilian surfacing and surfature of fugitive plains. This continual carrying-out of the unbuilt and the rebuilt in un-beheld building an anti-buildup.

Quote my old friend [Hakan Dibel] said about Leni Riefenstahl—that her visual signature is an effect of her wanting to fuck everything—is absolutely given and arranged in Noah Davis' painting. A devious on ground, Cyril Elizabeth Lewis prepares or repairs improvisation and synthesis, which is an inadequate word for sensitivity.

Helen Molesworth writes of Davis that he is a master of sophisticated compositions. He had a knack for establishing three-dimensional space, while remaining highly attuned to the flatness of the canvas. His paint application is dry, Rothko-like in that the pigment appears to be mixed with as little medium as technically possible. His figures often seem to float, as if in a nimbus. They are in the picture, but not tethered to it by gravity. Look carefully and you'll see there is rarely a pool of shadow to indicate the weight around the feet of his figures.

Attitude. Altitude. Attune. Know, they are and make the gravity as part of the general field of feel.

Davis's physics anticipatorily cuts the normal metaphysics. The feet are just off the ground, angels flying at too-close angles, brushing on the aridity of the wreck. That dryness creates new alchemical richness and madness and realness, as if the muck or the mud is dry because enlivening breath has been blown, is being blown, enlivening, but eviscerating, too. The paradisiacal storm of the purple paradisaical guard. There is no existential aloneness. The paintings don't show individuation; they show difference without separation, because even when we are apart, we are not alone in the [interfacial] layer.

There's a residual conceptuality, a necessarily bad attitude, at the nexus of Blackness, Earth, and improvisation, in and from which approaching, surfacing, in hesitant sociality release onto Felicity Street, whose concerns are the socio-physical interminacy of the soloist, the entanglement of joy and pain and wealth and poverty and the practices of militant preservation, absolution, and foregiven-ness.

Excuse me while I disappear, but the angel, who Vijay rightly says is Geri Allen, has eyes in the back of her head. In the mothership, we are disoriented. Flying and walking are indeterminate in approaching and surfacing. We keep checking our history to retain an impossible flowering in and out of devaluation that will have only been tolerable in a general abolition of value—a general invaluability.

Improvisation is playing with the eyes in the back of your head closed, your tentacles brushing the keyboard wreckage like fingers feeling for the notes in words they leave in being blown, bussed, thrown, sailed, trained out and back from paradise. That's a Mackey variation, and it means to say that platitudes about improvisation and freedom, especially my own, are all but unbearable to me now.

That's all. Sorry I went so long.

Vijay Iyer: All right [laughs]. Yes, sir [applauds]. Ahh. Well, I need to sit for a second to steady myself in the delirium [laughs]. You know, so much . . . so much of it is about sound, which—I mean, I've known this about your work all along, but I remember, five years ago, when I asked you to write some program notes for us for this festival and you came up to Harvard and you were on a panel with me and Wadada and Danielle Freeman and Daphne . . . and I remember after you spoke, Wadada turned to me and he said: "He writes like I play." [laughs]. So, I don't know if you overheard him say that, but that's . . . that's it.

And actually, there was a moment—what I was going to say also is that I remember you sent me a recording of yourself reading a poem and you said that that's how you know when it's done, is when it sounds a certain way, when there's a certain . . . so it's like, when I use the word musicality, or musicalities, it seems like that's what you're doing, too, is like, you're tapping into something beneath and among the words that is sense and sensation at the same time.

So, what is that to you? What is musicality to you?

Fred Moten: I mean, the thing is, man, it's like: the only reason—ordinarily I would never—and we . . . I know I did something different than what we even talked about . . . I had no . . . the only reason I was deluding myself into thinking that I should read that was because of reading “Beneath Improvisation” today. And also listening to the music that you sent me, and especially listening to “Requiem X,” but also going back and listening to *Sensorium* again and realizing that it was connected to Jack Whitten, that it was dedicated to Whitten, and I guess, I was thinking, maybe, about Cecil [Taylor], you know, and thinking about that formulation he makes, you know, where he says, “Anything is music as long it is organized according to certain principles.” But maybe on the most basic level it's like: I just have been so in love, you know, with the music. And, not being able to play the music, I've always just been wondering how I could play with the music and play with musicians.

And I just have to say, you know, I don't . . . you know, the . . . I just want to . . . Yeah, I just, I want to imagine—you know, it's not lost on me, you know, that the . . . Sometimes, I can delude myself into thinking that I play keyboards too, you know? My only instrument is the computer, you know? I can't . . . You know what I'm saying? So, I appreciate that sometimes it feels like you welcome me to play along with you, you know, in the way that sometimes it felt like Cecil [Taylor] was welcoming me to play along with him.

And, you know, but all of this is still . . . I feel like, you know, this sort of blush of happiness, that we can sometimes give ourselves. But the issues that you raise and in “Beneath Improvisation” and the issues that you raise tonight, Vijay, are still always demanding us to go back and really think hard about, you know, the unlivable conditions in which we manage to carve out a little beauty for ourselves sometimes. And, particularly with regard to this . . . these questions about value, you know, and maybe even sometimes, you know, these questions about, maybe on the most basic level, these sort of grammatical questions about the relationship between verbs and nouns. You know, between . . . between . . . between . . . yeah.

Vijay Iyer: Subject and object. Yeah. Well, there's this way that you draw together these sensory strands across modalities to . . . you know, well, especially like the image of the cut, or the kind of motif of the cut, or motif of cutting or of, well, layering and then cutting through layers. It seems to do that kind of discursive work that you're talking about to sort of, um... Well, both the horizontal and the vertical, right? Or, I guess the space of time danced through [laughs]. And then, you know the . . . like you said, the angel or the angle of history.

Fred Moten: Yeah, I mean . . . Man, I was looking at, you know, reading Benjamin, but then what I was really thinking of was . . . well, reading three readers of Benjamin, you know: so Kodwo Eshun, and Nate [Mackey], you know, and Fumi Okiji. . . I wish she was here, you know. But there's that thing where, you know, Kodwo talks about it really clearly, in *The Last Angel of History*, you know, in the film, in the John Akomfrah film, and talks about it in relation to the great cover of Parliament Funkadelic's *Mothership Connection*, you know, where George Clinton's being drawn back into the spaceship, you know? And Kodwo just makes that connection between that image and the Paul Klee, you know, the *Angelus Novus*.

And, you know, we're blown, you know, by the storm, by the wind of paradise into this, you know, brutal modernity. And so this question is, like . . . what's the relationship between our movement—you know, which is walking and floating, sailing, grounding, you know, on the water, like, how do we . . . what's the relationship between that movement and . . . and what it

means for us to move . . . Like, I was totally struck yesterday when you told me that you play with your eyes closed, you know? And I was thinking about that in connection with Geri Allen and that record, which I've been listening to again, all day, since you hipped me to it, about *Eyes in the Back of Your Head*, right? Again, the eyes in the back of our head are closed. How do we proceed through this shit, you know? How do we move through this, you know? And how do we move by way of a vision that's in some sense given to us because we refuse to see like them and because we refuse to subordinate our seeing—we refuse to subordinate our feeling to our seeing. And . . . and I guess I just feel like, man, I just hear that in your music, you know, and again, I was especially feeling it in that song, "Sensorium," you know, and feeling it in relation to Whitten, you know, and in relation to his practice as a painter which is, again, so bound up with pouring and cutting; not brushing, you know? And he's making surfaces, you know? He's making surfaces, you know? And it just feels like, you know—anyway, I'm just . . . I'm blathering, man, I'm blathering.

Vijay Iyer: No, you're not. I mean—making surfaces about, like, it's about, like, creating sediments, right? Creating, you know, not just moments or gestures or actions but—and that's the weird thing about his work is that it's not always the work of the hand exactly.

Fred Moten: Yeah.

Vijay Iyer: It seems to map back to a different part of the body than what we associate with painting, or, is there is there one body? Is it somehow a multitude? And this is kind of, um . . . that reminds me of . . . the way you talk about a sort of distributing or exploding of subjectivity in the ensemble. And the . . . the sort of like . . . in a way, the way that you've been persistently, over the years, sort of speaking against individuation or against the individual as the sort of heroic figure of modernity, right? And thinking instead about the ensemble as a model of collectivity and of collective expression. Or of . . . Which means that often you cannot locate an individual hand or an individual effector or a limb or something, right? It's sort of like you get this wave, like you said: a sheet. It comes at you as sheets or in waves.

Fred Moten: You know, I was thinking about this a little bit earlier today. Man, have you ever heard . . . of something that I got, I noticed by way of Daphne Brooks, in the sort of wonderful liner notes she wrote to those . . . the early, you know those Columbia records that Aretha Franklin recorded in the, kind of, Aretha before Aretha became Aretha kind of years? And, man, there's this amazing version of this song "Skylark," the old Hoagy Carmichael song, which is a crazy-ass song, right? And she sings the shit, man . . . like, there's a story, I guess, in the New Yorker, I read, where Sarah Vaughn—who had at a certain point taken to singing "Skylark"—runs into Etta James on the street and Etta's said, and Etta's like, "Did you hear her? Did you hear that girl singing 'Skylark'?" And Sarah's like, "I'll never sing it again," you know. And if you listen to the recordings, if you listen the . . . because they got all the different varied versions of it, she . . . there's a noise that the recording engineer hears, right? And that noise that the recording engineer hears is something that . . . so, it's this moment where Aretha does this octave thing, she goes up . . . it's crazy, like, it's impossible to sing, and she sings it like all easy and shit, right? And the guy's like, "Well, Aretha, could you do the last part, the last part of the song again, because we got a noise." And she says, "Okay, I'll sing it." Like . . . and she does a whole completely different version of it! And at the end of the different version of it, he says, "Yeah, you got to be careful when you're striking a match, because we can pick all that up." And then you realize, she's fucking smoking! Right? She's smoking a cigarette while she's singing this shit, right? Okay?

But here's the thing. So, "Skylark" is all about this bird—this individual bird and this individual bird's flight, okay? And I'm thinking about the fact that . . . and it made me think of *Carmen*. Like, there's this beautiful Leontyne Price version of *Carmen*. With the Berlin Philharmonic and von Karajan is conducting. And what *Carmen* . . . and, you know, so, you listen to the "Habanera," and, you know, "love is like a rebellious bird," right? And I'm thinking about Aretha and the rebellious bird, and the smoking, and the women coming out of the cigarette factory in Seville, you know, which is impossible, you know, without the tobacco of Cuba. And all that shit is connected, right? And what it lets you know, is that however much we want to valorize the absolute impossibility of Aretha Franklin, right? The only way we can come to understand that impossibility is the fact that, every time we hear Aretha, we don't hear a rebellious bird, we hear a swarm of rebellious birds, right? And, obviously, of course, this swarming, right, this chorus—that's what Saidiya [Hartman] is talking about, you know, in *Wayward Lies*. And that's what Barbara Christian was talking about when she writes about, you know, Toni Morrison in relation to, in relation to Virginia Woolf and . . . and it's that . . . that's just a refusal of . . . even in the . . . however . . . like, I couldn't possibly say how much I love and revere Aretha. But in the most basic . . . the fundamental basic-ness, to quote Julius Eastman, right—the fundamental, basic field negro-ish-ness, you know, of Aretha, is all bound up in this swarm, right? In the . . . the innumerability of Aretha.

You know? And . . . Now, how do we activate that shit, you know? Right? And how do we work against the grain, you know, of . . . of the way in which they constantly trying to make this us be soloists all the damn time?

Vijay Iyer: And to make definitive recordings of something, or like, this is the take, the chosen take, you know? Even knowing that each take is its own instantiation, its own life force, its own creative infinity, right?

Fred Moten: yeah, yeah.

Vijay Iyer: I remember, a couple years ago, when it was Monk's hundredth birthday, and there was . . . this guy, Mitch Goldman, who has a show on WKCR? He had me on to talk about Monk, and he had all these bootlegs. The radio station . . . this is the Columbia radio station, WKCR . . . they have access to all these bootlegs that you can't get anywhere else. So, suddenly, I was hearing like, an infinity of Monk, you know, it wasn't just—and it was, like, the band on *Genius of Modern Music*, which I've only ever heard in, like, these 78rpm instantiations, right? They're . . . the cuts are three and a half minutes, people solo for eight bars, and then it's over, right? And instead, it's that band, but playing, just stretching out, you know, playing chorus after chorus, relating, bouncing ideas around, messing up . . . playing on anyway, you know, and like playing over each other, not . . . challenging and testing each other and pushing each other and building something together that has no archival analog, you know? And you know that this was just an ordinary day, and that there's an infinity of days like that, right?, So that actually, what we know from the archive about the music is not . . . is literally not the music, right? It's really not even a trace of a trace, not even a shadow.

Fred Moten: 'Cause the music is the making of the music.

Vijay Iyer: Exactly.

Fred Moten: Right? You know, the sound is beautiful and all, but it's just a clue. It's just a clue, right? And even if we think about the materiality of the sound, the materiality of the sound is just a clue for the materiality of the making of music, you know, which is this social thing, you know,

and like . . . Man . . . 'cause Monk was a cenobitic Monk, not an anchoritic monk, you know? He wasn't one of them, you know, monks who went out into the desert and shit. He wasn't like St. Anthony. He was [laughs] you know, he was a monk who hung out, you know? But he hung out against rule, you know. Minton's was a monastery, you know.

Man, remember that time—were you there when Randy Weston came to the Jazz Study Group?

Vijay Iyer: Um . . . I might not have been there.

Fred Moten: Man, he was there, and he said . . . he said that when he was a kid—young, you know—he went to Monk's house. He had met Monk at a club or something, and he went to Monk's house, and he sat there . . . got there early in the morning, you know, he was going to work on stuff and learn, you know. And Monk just sat there. And didn't say anything. And then . . . you know, there was this guy, and the day went on, the day went on, and finally the sun started to set and it started getting dark, and Randy Weston said, "Well, Mr. Monk, I guess . . . I guess I'd better go." And Monk said, "Okay man, come back tomorrow."

Vijay Iyer: [laughs] That's right. We're not done yet.

Fred Moten: And Randy Weston said, he said, "That's when I realized he was a Sufi master."

Vijay Iyer: Exactly.

Fred Moten: He could teach without talking.

Vijay Iyer: Yeah. That's right.

Fred Moten: And this is . . . but that sociality . . . It's a social pedagogy, you know? What it meant for him to sit there like that, you know? Ah, man, it's . . .

Vijay Iyer: You know, it was something we were talking about the other day, when I sent you that "Requiem X" that Wadada and I made for Malcolm X. And how it . . . every time I work with him, especially, whenever we . . . and this is why I kind of like, want to . . . why he stopped using the word improvisation, just won't go anywhere near it, you know, never again, literally [laughs]. But what I've experienced with him is that it feels like we're writing as we're playing. Like, it really feels like engraving, or . . . more than, I'd mentioned calligraphy, but it actually feels more like engraving, like we're cutting something . . . or, agency becomes . . . agency *is* structure, I guess that's what I mean. Like, that dyad dissolves.

Fred Moten: Yeah. Okay, so you know . . . one time I was . . . I had the amazing good fortune of being in Glasgow with Wadada and John Tilbury, Henry Grimes was there, [Amiri] Baraka was there, Sonia Sanchez was there, I mean, I was just like . . . and the best part . . . it was this series of performances, but the best thing about it was just being in, like, the back room with them, you know? Like, Sonia Sanchez and Baraka were doing, like . . . they were like Redd Foxx and Della Reese all night. They were just messing with each other the whole time. Like, Sonya Sanchez walked in the room, and Baraka's like: "How much older are you gon' get?" [laughs] It was so beautiful just to be there. But I remember, at one point, Wadada was talking and he was talking about how . . . he was basically like, "It hurts to play this music." Because he was doing this solo. And it was a revelatory moment for me because I could hear all that, like I

could retrospectively hear all that in a way that, after he said it, that maybe I didn't quite hear before he said that.

Vijay Iyer: Yeah.

Fred Moten: And when you talk about it in terms of writing, and talk about it in terms of cutting, like . . . man, I just got a chance to see these Jack Whitten, sort of alphabet, Greek alphabet paintings? And they look like scores, but they also look like looms. And I just get . . . and all I could think of was: these are graphic scores, and I want to hear Vijay and Wadada play these scores, right? Those paintings are scores. And even in that double sense of the word “score,” which also means cut.

Vijay Iyer: Right.

Fred Moten: You know? And . . . like, I don't know. I want to start a . . . I want to be a record producer or a record label and put out one record, and it'll be Vijay and Wadada playing Jack Whitten.

Vijay Iyer: We could do it. Let's . . . [laughs]

Fred Moten: Let's go. Let's go.

Vijay Iyer: What are we supposed to do?

Marva Wisdom: This is great, this is wonderful. And awesome. There are folks that are in the chat that are saying, “We don't want this to end! We don't want this to end!” But we also want to honour you in this COVID time and what you need to do, and honour some of the other folks on the call. Oh, my goodness. We can all just sit and listen to you all night, and you can promise to come back, we would love for you to promise to come back.

I know that there was one question, it was more comments, and I know that Rachel is capturing the information in the chat, and we'll get it to you, get the information to you, because there's some really great comments in the chat. I think you've turned . . . spun our head around, 365, for us to really rethink music and its application. I'll never listen to a bird the same way again or a soloist singing—I'm going to be looking for the choir.

This is really, really awesome, and for the two of you to collaborate in the way that you do—really lovely. And Fred, before you came on, Vijay was going to share with us one of his . . . compilation with Madonna, I think, or something to that effect, I don't know. There's probably not time for it now, but . . . Ajay, am I putting you on the spot to say that we'd love to hear this again if these wonderful, fine gentlemen would sat it's okay, at some point, it would be really great.

Thank you both, so very much. Thank you to IICSI and the team and Rachel and Sam and Ann in the background, and thank you to the ArtsEverywhere Festival team, and all of our sponsors, this was really great. Ajay, I'm going to turn to you for one burning question that you might have that you'd love for these two gentlemen to answer, and then we're going to make sure that we let you go by 8:45 so you can do what you need to do.

Ajay Heble: Thank you, Marva. I have many burning questions, but I also very much want to respect people's time and, perhaps I'll just end by saying a huge thanks, Fred and Vijay. I mean,

Vijay I've always said to you, you know, I want you to do more interviews for us. You know, I remember . . .

Vijay Iyer: That's what I was going to say, Fred, is that I actually got to interview Randy Weston in Guelph. One of the highlights of my life. And especially because I asked . . . he mentioned Monk, and he said . . . you know, the first time I heard Monk with Coleman Hawkins, and I thought, "I can play more piano than this guy!" [laughs] Anyway . . .

Marva Wisdom: No, I think this is awesome. Can I just quickly remind everyone, though, that the ArtsEverywhere festival is ongoing and that we have an event coming up, Wednesday June 2nd and one Wednesday June 3rd with Miguel Hilari film screening and then Rosina Kazi and Nicholas Murray with director Jose Garcia for the Q and A for the ArtsEverywhere Festival.

Please stay tuned, go to festival.arts.ca, and certainly the August event for IICSI, make sure that you mark it in your calendar, the IF event, it will be just absolutely mind-blowing again, thank you all so very, very, very much. Rachel, Ajay, is there anything that I am missing? Thank you everybody that commented and were on here, this was a great event.

Fred, I know that you were cooking before—I hope that you got to eat. That's the other thing that he does, folks, that I couldn't fit into the bio—he cooks! And he has turns that it takes to cook in between making music and teaching and poetry. Thank you all so very, very much. Have an amazing night and stay well, stay safe.

Vijay Iyer: So long everybody. Thank you, Fred, thank you Ajay, thank you, Marva.

Fred Moten: Thanks Vijay. Thank you all.