Derrida, Coleman, and Improvisation

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Jacques Derrida: What do you think of the relationship between the precise event that constitutes the concert and pre-written music of improvised music? Do you think that written music prevents the event from taking place?

Ornette Coleman: No. I don't know if it's true for language, but in jazz you can take a very old piece and do another version of it. What's exciting is the memory that you bring to the present. What you're talking about, the form that metamorphoses into other forms, I think it's something healthy, but very rare.

Jacques Derrida: Perhaps you will agree with me on the fact that the very concept of improvisation verges upon reading, since what we often understand by improvisation is the creation of something new, yet something which doesn't exclude the pre-written framework that makes it possible.

Ornette Coleman: That's true. (Murphy, 2004, p. 322)

ON JUNE 23, 1997, Jacques Derrida interviewed composer and saxophonist Ornette Coleman regarding improvisation. The interview segment above was an examination about the gesture of improvisation as it occurs between the language mediums of music and the written/spoken word. In this excerpt, Derrida's comments aligned with Coleman's conceptions of improvisation and preexisting structures. Coleman, in his response, acknowledged improvisation as occurring for the jazz musician in engagement with pre-existing musical composition, situating improvisation as the metamorphosis that occurs through the dialogic relationship a musician has with the pre-existing musical composition. Furthermore, improvisation is simultaneously the aural reaction and discourse yielded through engaging a pre-existing piece of music.

The essential point of Coleman's response is an acknowledgement of structure. Structure for Coleman is situated as flexible, unstable, and filled with possibilities. Additionally, Coleman's specific language on improvisation is rooted in a concept he referred to as harmolodics. In his *DownBeat* magazine article, "Prime Time for Harmolodics" (1983), Coleman defines harmolodics as:

…the use of physical and mental of one's own logic made into an expression of sound to bring about the musical sensation of unison executed by a single person or with a group. Harmony, melody, speed, rhythm, time, and phrases all have equal position in the results that come from the placing and spacing of ideas. This is the motive and action of harmolodics. (Coleman, p. 54, 1983)

I interpreted Coleman's conceptualization of improvisation from two perspectives. First, from the interview conducted by Derrida, I saw Coleman's discussion of improvisation as a consideration of individual or collective investigation into the restlessness of the relationships with memory in the present as opposed to demarcations with the past and present. Second, in addressing harmolodics, which is Coleman's specific language regarding improvisation, I saw him as describing an embodied conceptual space, whereby the individual or collective must navigate a fluctuating series of deliberations amongst self and world in order to transform their understandings of material and emotional contexts into sonic media. The broader connection I made from reading Coleman's statements was that the metamorphosis, experienced in improvising, resulted from the individual or collective discursive engagements with mental or physical artifacts in present contexts. While Coleman discusses improvisation as related to interacting with the past along with transforming ontological understandings to sonic representations, Derrida can be observed echoing some similar sentiments. Despite their disagreements on some of the finer points, Derrida and Coleman both believe that improvisation is grounded in reaction to preexisting structures, as can be seen in "Negotiations" (Derrida, 2002b), in which Derrida is interviewed and part of the discussion hinges on hierarchies in relation to structures.

Derrida's sense of improvisation can be understood as a key aspect residing in the nature of how a hierarchy is considered. In the "Negotiations" interview, Derrida distinguishes between how hierarchies exist in two overarching ways: given and unstable. The "given" hierarchy is rigid, oppressive, and allows no room for reconsideration; an unstable hierarchy has degrees of play that provide spaces of possibility for the reconsideration of approaches and applications (Derrida, 2002b, p. 21). Therefore, just as Coleman acknowledges form when explaining how a jazz musician engages older pieces of musical literature and in the process discovers another way of presentation, Derrida considers form through the ways in which hierarchies are perceived and implied. Although he discusses how hierarchies can be oppressive under the guise of rigidity, Derrida makes clear that sheer negation of hierarchies is equally problematic, a possibility Derrida equates with anarchy (Derrida, 2002b, p. 22). Yet implementing hierarchies is unstable from his perspective. For Derrida, it is through the consideration of how to conceptualize hierarchies as unstable that serve as points of possibility through which negotiations can proceed. And it is through such acts of negotiation that Derrida, like Coleman, considers the inherent relevancy of connections with the past and are acts of improvisation.

These segments of interviews are intended to present one of many ways both Derrida's and Coleman's definitions of improvisation converge. A distinct characteristic uniting Derrida and Coleman's notions of improvisation is their engagement with forms, related to hierarchies through philosophy and song, which stand as foundations to create and understand meanings of the present.

In the following discussion, I explore the concepts of responsibility, hierarchy, hope, and improvisation. My analysis of these concepts will lead to an explanation of what I call improvisational responsibility. Defined, improvisational responsibility considers what it means

to engage and stay engaged with aporias, the points of impasse, contradiction, conflict, and non-resolvability emanating from oppressive systems through which we are governed. From this perspective, I see improvisational responsibility is present in a wide variety of Jacques Derrida's scholarship. However, for this discussion, I focus on Jacques Derrida's speech "For Mumia Abu-Jamal" (Derrida, 2002a, pp. 125–129) and Mumia Abu-Jamal's book of essays *Live from Death Row* (1994), using this examination to document some of the ways in which what I call improvisational responsibility presents possibilities for staying engaged and hopeful when countering what appear to be aporias.

Derrida and Responsibility

For the present, to me, democracy is the place of negotiation or compromise between the field of forces as it exists or presents itself currently (insufficient democracy, European democracy, democracy American-style or French-style, for example) and this "democracy to come." The negotiation must always readjust itself each day in relation to differing places. The responsibility one must take is always unique. (Derrida, 2002c, p. 180)

Derrida conceptualizes responsibility as unachievable or an aporia (Derrida, 1992/2008), an understanding in which acknowledging impasse and divide is a first ethical step. For, when Derrida acknowledges the impossibility of a person or community to understand the responsibility they have to the 'Other,' he is identifying an insurmountable divide that is characterized by responsibility, a tension which never stops shifting nor morphing into varying meanings. Therefore, according to Derrida, responsibility never ceases for humanity nor is it achieved because how one engages tangential meanings of "responsibility" differs between contexts making it impossible to settle upon a singular (shared) meaning. When read altogether, responsibility can be understood as the non-linear tension of progress that sustains the contextual instability of meanings in discourse. Therefore, when Derrida mentions the impossibility of understanding the responsibility one has to the 'Other,' responsibility is simultaneously both an aporia and a conceptual space in individual and community psyches where they convene with prior ideas (similar to Coleman's "forms") to consider the possibility of how to negotiate varieties of existence.

For Derrida, improvisation is the foundation of his notion of responsibility. Improvisation in this context considers the agency that an individual or community is able to realize in reaction to and within hierarchies, both unstable and rigid. Responsibility is one tension inhabiting improvisation, but it is important to recognize the presence of the tension of hope. In the following section I present the other central component of improvisational responsibility, hope. Here philosopher Cornel West's critique of Emersonian hope is helpful in framing the hopeful tensions that I seek to weave into Derrida's approach to responsibility.

Cornel West and Hope

In *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (1989), Cornel West engages the meticulous task of examining the work and thought of Charles Peirce, William

James, John Dewey, and Ralph Waldo Emerson, among others. Pragmatism, a philosophical approach situated in the North America, in part considers the measurability of experiential experience and how, from the rationalization of these experiences, reason was constructed. Furthermore, in earlier conceptualizations of pragmatism, it was *experience* that served as the point to make meaning. Here, West's identification and critique of Emerson's notion of "hope" provides the root of my discussion.

In West's strand of pragmatism, Prophetic Pragmatism, he identifies hope in association with tragedy, critiquing Emerson's notion of hope grounded in optimism. West's Prophetic Pragmatism with attention to hope serves to confront "candidly individual and collective experiences of evil in individuals and institutions—with little expectation of ridding the world of all evil" (West, 1997, p. 406). Furthermore, hope in West's Prophetic Pragmatism embodies polyrhythmic relations,[1] characterized as fruitful desires for improvement prevailing in opposition to treacherous circumstances offering no measurable outcomes.

> To talk about human hope is to engage in an audacious attempt to galvanize and energize, to inspire and to invigorate world-weary people. Because that is what we are. We are world-weary; we are tired. For some of us there are misanthropic skeletons hanging in our closet. And by misanthropic I mean the notion that we have to give up on the capacity of human beings to do *anything* right. The capacity of human communities to solve any problem. (West, 1993, p. 6)[2]

Here West presents hope as infused with tragedy to account for the challenging conditions of humanity. While dreams rest upon improvement of oppressive situations, he demands that communities (indicated by his use of "we") face the tragedies of situations that help maintain the "misanthropic skeletons." The "we," traditionally for West, is a personal conceptualization of deciphering historical and present meanings of hope for Black communities in America. However, unpacking the cipher of "we" does not stop with the Black community for West. Rather, the act of engaging the "we," for him and those who engage us, seeks to loosen the rigid hierarchal constraints in order to better understand how oppressive moments have generated misanthropies within and amongst communities. Misanthropy in its formal definition denotes a dislike for humanity. However, misanthropy in West's discussion describes the state of hopelessness toward humanity that people embody. He characterizes misanthropy as a tension that is sustained over time, that does not lessen. By naming the tension as "misanthropic skeletons," West acknowledges misanthropy as a continuum sustained through embodiments that humanity carry, subdue, and impose upon each other.

For West, like Derrida and Coleman, engaging the past is essential. It is a perspective West engages collectively, as both an observation of others and of himself: "We are world-weary; we are tired"—of the past. But beyond this, hope for West involves awareness of past and present tragedies, acknowledging the realization that the future will also reveal additional tragedies built on prior continuums of catastrophe that include our current conditions. It is a notion of hope that considers what it means to stay engaged in the fight in spite of the continual awareness of the depths of tragedy.

This hopeful energy resembles that of the 1965 Selma protesters who marched faithfully into the violent space of Selma, Alabama only to be confronted by policemen's nightsticks and instigated canine attacks. Protestors engaged in these acts of resistance with hopes of improving

the voting conditions for Blacks in the United States while bearing witness to our fates being riddled with bodily harm and death.

This is an example of hope, in West's framing, realized in the protesters' recognition of their fates as riddled with police brutality. Selma protesters enacted this resistance gesture with an awareness that disparities around voting, race, and class would not be immediately amended, nor was there a future vision guaranteeing improvement. For the individuals engaged in the protests, hope was situated within an understanding of tragedy, emphasizing the necessity to stay engaged in the struggle despite the bodily and psychological trauma they faced.

West's consideration of hope is powerful precisely because it embodies an acknowledgement of tragedy, the sense of a non-guarantee of improvement, in tandem with responsibility to engage. In contrast, Emerson's conceptualization of hope suggests guaranteed improvement, symbolic of an endpoint. This sense of an endpoint is problematic for West because it represents a point of disengagement with a given issue, context, or possibility. Instead, hope as exemplified by the Selma protesters and described by West, situates the problem as never being solved and therefore underscores the understanding that one must always be engaged.

Hope, Engagement, and Improvisation

West's discussion of hope, like Derrida's about responsibility, faces aporia. Hope and responsibility for them are aporias, insolvable situations, whereby the work of engaging them is never complete. Rather hope and responsibility acknowledge the instability of contexts that people embody, externally imply, and react to. In other words, contexts are pre-existent and people do not develop improvisations of contexts within a vacuum. This plays out in Coleman's discussion in the opening excerpt, in which jazz musicians' improvisations occur through such metamorphoses when the musicians engage pre-existing compositions and song forms, parallel to the ways in which West and Derrida consider constructs of hope and responsibility.

Now I overlay the concept of improvisation over West's notion of hope and Derrida's notion of responsibility. For West, improvisation grounded in hope is the study of negotiation and discovery between self and community in the will to "keep on pushin'" (a la Curtis Mayfield, 1964), while simultaneously acknowledging the persistence of tragedy. For Derrida, improvisation is situated in responsibility whereby individuals and community must realize the impossibility of implying a singular ethic or ideal due to the constant contextual shift. Furthermore, improvisation situated in responsibility is the attempt to create meaning with what is available in order to aid in tending with the contexts that arise. Pairing West's notion of hope and Derrida's notion of responsibility, what I conceptualize as "improvisational responsibility," helps me to consider how they function together as reminders of the necessity to become and stay engaged with problematic issues in light of tragic, unpredictable contexts; an awareness, however, that poses no guarantee of improvement regardless of individual and communal intents. This does not negate the need to pose challenges, but instead reconsiders them in light of a sense of hope more clearly defined.

Improvisational responsibility can be a strong tool to stay engaged with, and interrupt, aporias. Improvisational responsibility is situated at points of impasse—for West, aporias exist in separating tragedy from hope and, for Derrida, aporias articulate the inability to understand how responsibility functions for individuals within and outside conceived communities. Thus,

improvisational responsibility emphasizes the necessity to stay *engaged* with aporias in spite of the insurmountable boundaries presented. Improvisational responsibility also characterizes the *tension* created between hope and responsibility in ways that aid in sustaining engagement with aporias. In the following section I utilize the lens of improvisational responsibility to address two passages from Mumia Abu-Jamal's book of essays, *Live From Death Row* (1994), in order to more deeply demonstrate how this construct can be theoretically applied.

Mumia Abu-Jamal and Improvisational Responsibility

> Don't expect the media networks to tell you, for they can't, because of the incestuousness between the media, the government, and big business, which they both serve. I can. Even if I must do so from the valley of the shadow of death, I will. (Abu-Jamal, 1994, p. xx-xxi)

> The earth is but one great ball. The borders, the barriers, the cages, the cells, the prisons of our lives, all originate in the false imagination of the minds of men. (Abu-Jamal, 1994, p. 63)

Mumia Abu-Jamal—activist, journalist, and author of numerous articles and books, most notably *Live From Death Row* (1994)—was given a death sentence (later changed to life in prison) through a 1982 conviction charging him in the death of Philadelphia police officer Daniel Faulkner. However, Abu-Jamal's case and subsequent imprisonment has proven controversial due to the unfairness of his trials, flawed evidence, and undependable witnesses.

The above quotations are but two of many possible choices from Abu-Jamal's shockingly prescient collection of essays, *Live From Death Row* (1994), that could be used as evidence for the ways in which improvisational responsibility functions within Abu-Jamal's writing and thinking. For myself, a Black Queer man living in the United States (the country with the world's highest imprisoned population) in conjunction with living in Louisiana (the state with the highest imprisoned population in the nation), Abu-Jamal's words resonate with a harmonic brilliance, articulating how the United States penal system sustains and continually promotes its violence and aggression within society.

Collectively, these two excerpts address the expansiveness of prison to a point that Abu-Jamal identifies "the media networks" and "the earth" as two imprisoned spaces. In conceptualizing these spaces as imprisoned, he destabilizes the notion of prison as a solidified and singularly-situated place. While in prison, Abu-Jamal also identifies how the community, deemed as not imprisoned, lives within the psychological and physical confines of prison, the intimate relationships among media, government, and corporations.

For Abu-Jamal, a prime proponent of naturalized boundaries is produced through the tight relationship government and corporations share along with media's servitude to them. Additionally, he identifies media as a servant of the government and corporatized interests, understandings that also highlight the how the psychosis of prison has been naturalized. By considering the earth as "one great ball," Abu-Jamal is taking a step back to imagine the earth without manmade boundaries. However, it is the boundaries implemented through humanity's colonization that serve to simultaneously limit and control access to family, community, public services, *etc*. As but one example, from the conclusion to his (1994) essay, "A Toxic Shock," he

challenges the false naturalizations of the varieties of boundaries that exist in the world (pp. 50–52). For Abu-Jamal, while prison is simultaneously a physical place and psychological space, it is the psychological space of prison that gains momentum because it is infused with the illusion that various boundaries are not socioculturally constructed but instead naturally exist.

Conceptualizing Abu-Jamal Improvisational Responsible Actions

When Abu-Jamal writes, "Even if I must do so from the valley of the shadow of death, I will," he is enunciating the kind of awareness that improvisational responsibility requires. Derrida's discussion of both rigid and unstable hierarchies aids in processing Abu-Jamal's statement: The rigid hierarchy counters growth and proposals of differing ideals whereas an unstable hierarchy allows some growth and considers alternatives. However, what makes Abu-Jamal's statement powerful is his attempt to find and create instability *within* a rigid hierarchy.

An example of rigid hierarchy is the entanglement of government and large corporations that control the media's informational output—Abu-Jamal collectively refers to the rigid hierarchy of government, the corporation, and the prison as "the shadow of death." In this construction prison is not only the place in which he is bound but is also the misconstrued information, further aided by the relationship between government and large corporations that the media projects to the public. Furthermore, when the community (those not literally bound to the physical places denoted as prisons, whom he considers not to be imprisoned) is bombarded with this false information and places their faith in that information, the minds of once-free community members are transformed into a prison. It is from this perspective that Abu-Jamal situates the prison as simultaneously physical and psychological structures, in which he locates himself in "the shadow of death." Based on my interpretation of Derrida, Coleman, and West, he is an improviser in this predicament. Improvisational responsibility, then, is Abu-Jamal's commitment to staying engaged in negotiating, in *reading*, the contextual meanings of responsibility's tangents in rigid hierarchies while attempting to give the public honest and in-depth representations of oppressive regimes in light of tragedy.

Additionally, Abu-Jamal's improvisational responsibility can be seen as his personal negotiations between mental and physical imprisonment. His body is bound to and within a place, which could have incited him to conform to mental imprisonment, the choice to not create public discourse critiquing the Unites States penal system. Yet, Abu-Jamal finds agency within himself to continually critique in light of ramifications that have been instituted to quell his United States penal system critiques. Improvisational responsibility is therefore also apparent in Abu-Jamal exercising his ability to create and discover agency even when the foundation is permeated with misanthropic tensions (for more on agency in dire situations, see Ortner, 2006). In "the shadow of death" Abu-Jamal deals with a rigid hierarchy and acknowledges the tragic fates. However, he realizes his responsibility to face toward the tragedy in order to present truthful accounts.

Derrida and Improvisational Responsibility

Circling back to Derrida, his speech "For Mumia Abu-Jamal" (Derrida, 2002a), delivered at the Parliament of National Writers who gathered on August 1, 1995 at UNESCO (United

Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization), is another example of improvisational responsibility. Here I consider how improvisational responsibility functions in accordance to Derrida's appeal to the Pennsylvania penal system in favor of sparing Mumia Abu-Jamal's life.

Before continuing with analysis of this speech, I wish to first return to the segment of Derrida's interview with Coleman as a touchstone about a convergence that, I think, constitutes improvisation between Derrida and Coleman. In the penultimate statement, Derrida says,

> Perhaps you will agree with me on the fact that the very concept of improvisation verges upon reading, since what we often understand by improvisation is the creation of something new, yet something which doesn't exclude the pre-written framework that makes it possible. (Murphy, 2004, p. 322)

Coleman agrees with Derrida's acknowledgement that newness is possible through engagements with what Derrida calls a "pre-written framework," a construct that, as described above, can be interpreted as a hierarchy which can become rigid or unstable to the individual and or community.

For Coleman, "the pre-written framework[s]" are the previously constructed musical compositions and compositional forms that can become unstable hierarchies, as seen in his talk of the metamorphosis that occurs when a jazz musician engages with such musical pre-written frameworks to produce alternatives.

However, in his address, "For Mumia Abu-Jamal," Derrida is reacting to rigid compositional forms embodied through the prison. Thus, as noted above about Abu-Jamal's understandings of imprisonment, for Derrida, a prison is also both a physical place the body is bound, along with how psychosis is formulated to imprison one's mind to align with rigid hierarchies. From this shared perspective, survival is foundational to many forms of improvisation, a move that provides possibilities to create "play" in the structure of rigid hierarchies.

Play is the movement and mobility of flexibility. Furthermore, play also refers to one's discovery of conceptual spaces, both mental and physical, within rigid places, as seen with the prison, to create alternative meanings countering those prescribed by a governing or dominant system. Additionally, my use of play denotes another's relationship with an artifact—a preexisting song form, piece of literature, theoretical concept, etc.—in which the engagement yields alternate, non-dominant pathways for the individual to envision the subject matter presented by, through, or in the artifact. Collectively, Coleman and Derrida suggest that this construction of play is a sustaining discourse that aids in creating variations within hierarchies.

Derrida, like Coleman, considered improvisation as both a personal and communal engagement to loosen rigid hierarchies, as he does in "For Mumia Abu-Jamal" when he says:

> We must not let ourselves be discouraged, of course, never, even if we know from experience—alas!—that there is little we can expect from one who signed the order of execution by lethal injection, Governor Tom Ridge, or for the voters with whom he has concluded a deal (for he said that he wanted thus to "fulfill a campaign promise"), from this political police brutality; we cannot expect much attention and compassion, much understanding either, for the testimonies, the arguments, the protests in the name of justice and humanity that we may address to them. (Derrida, 2002a, p. 126)

Here Derrida underscores how Abu-Jamal's predicament is a public commitment through the use of "we," a use that also documents Derrida's connectedness to Abu-Jamal's difficult fate and removes any sense that responsibility for that fate should be delegated. Additionally, Derrida's use of "we" also creates a communal commitment, which I argue is a form of "play" in the rigid hierarchal spaces between individuals, serving to remind himself and Abu-Jamal's supporters of the aporietic reverberation's vivid presence (for more on reverberation see Gershon, 2013). These reverberations function as consciousness, in constant motion, exposing modes of impasse for those advocating for Abu-Jamal. In the language posed in this article, Derrida's improvisation is characterized as the resistant energies opposing inertic desires allowing Abu-Jamal's tragic circumstances to wander into complacent, forgotten territory. In other words, Derrida's improvisational ethic is personalized with responsibility to the "Other."

In the first line of the statement Derrida argues, "We must not let ourselves be discouraged, of course, never, even if we know from experience." Like West's description of hope, Derrida's statement considers the meaning of hopeful engagement with challenges in spite of an awareness that improvement is never promised. This is Derrida's response to mental structures he and Abu-Jamal's supporters are up against. Abu-Jamal's example of mental prison structures would be the skewed information filtered through the intimate relationship of government, large corporations, and media. The mental prison structure is the community acceptance of the notion that the information presented is complete and unbiased. Moreover, the mental prison is represented through the governmental corporative media conglomerate's abilities to bombard and thus create acceptance in communal psyches of the graphed images honest in representation. Such imprisonment results in degrees of complacency routed through beliefs, having persuaded the community that "all has been done" and negating a need to engage with acts imposed by the United States penal system, or having generated hopelessness (as opposed to the hope envisioned in West's discussions), which deemed it unnecessary to engage with pending and mounting problems because no achievement is guaranteed. In these cases, the mental prison is the mind.

The physical prison structure, such as the one in which Abu-Jamal is being held, is architectural. However, the physical prison structure exists as a rigid hierarchy comprised of interconnected networks reinforced by people. Pennsylvania Governor Tom Ridge is the main individual Derrida denotes as adding rigidity to the prison structure.

Derrida observes Ridge's indebtedness as a primary agent in creating a rigid hierarchy further entrapping Abu-Jamal. Ridge's indebtedness functions as a series of fulfillments to campaign promises responding to desires to see Abu-Jamal's life extinguished through lethal injection. Reverberations of atrocity are further detailed by Derrida's acknowledgement of the larger system Ridge represents, one supporting "political police brutality," a more mobilized appendage of the prison (Derrida, 2002a, p. 126). After articulating the rigid structure, Derrida extends his analysis and explains the harmonic tonality uniting Ridge and his supporters as the lack of compassion for life. He states, "there is little we can expect from one who signed the order of execution by lethal injection, Governor Ridge, or from the voters with he has concluded a deal (for he said that he wanted to 'fulfill a campaign promise')" (Derrida, 2002a, p. 126).

Thus, what Derrida identifies is the dominance of what I frame here as Ridge's harmonies and staggering amount of space they dominate, this dominance being the main factor that creates and sustain prison structures. Such oppressive and overly structured harmonies are in distinct and direct contrast with the kinds of harmonies of compassion that Derrida and Abu-

Jamal advocate that occupy only a minimal space. The dominance of prison structure that Derrida identified aligns with West's assertion of the "candidly individual and collective experiences of evil and institutions" (West, 1997, p. 406). For both Derrida and West alignment of thought is observed in the inherent oppressive ideologies that construct and sustain prison. While West considers the history of oppressive regimes that some institutions exemplify, Derrida specifically identifies Governor Ridge as the individual along with the communities, whom Ridge is indebted to, as representative of the oppressive ideological institution.

Derrida concludes the passage saying, "We cannot expect much attention and compassion, much understanding either, for the testimonies, the arguments, the protests in the name of justice and humanity that we may address to them" (Derrida, 2002a, p. 126). Here Derrida articulates the tragic dimensions that lie ahead for advocates of his and Abu-Jamal's causes. Derrida identifies the tragic dimensions of non-compassion of Gov. Tom Ridge and his supporters hold for Abu-Jamal's life. However, Derrida posits the essentiality that he, alongside Abu-Jamal's supporters, not be callused by their hyper awareness of rigid hierarchies maintained by the state to keep Abu-Jamal imprisoned.

It is improvisational responsibility, I saw, that allowed for the realization/presence of hope in the closing statement. It is West's idea of hope in tragedy which permeates this closing statement. While Derrida, in the entire statement, articulates the tangential, unstable existence of responsibility the community has to Abu-Jamal, the final point situates Derrida observing the misanthropies Gov. Tom Ridge and his supporters represent. Derrida articulates the tragic contexts the advocates and he himself must negotiate in the process of supporting Abu-Jamal. Together, Derrida's opening ("We must not let ourselves be discouraged") and his closing ("We cannot expect much attention and compassion, much understanding") presents the meaning of engagement, such as engagement in the struggles against rigid hierarchies as an Abu-Jamal supporter. He creates a space asserting the essentiality of improvisational responsibility: while he and other advocates share hope of Abu-Jamal being freed from prison, he acknowledges that the context reveals continual terror and oppression for Abu-Jamal. Abu-Jamal, Derrida, and Abu-Jamal's supporters all seem to show that improvisational responsibility is the space created and discovered, simultaneously individually and communally, within spaces wrought with misanthropic ideals.

Conclusion

Derrida and Coleman's interview served as a springboard to argue that improvisation extends into other mediums and aspects of life. Both luminaries emphasize how newness is understood in relation to engagements with the past. It was through my consideration of their content and contexts combined with the candor and depth of their wide-ranging conversation that led me to my conceptualization of "improvisational responsibility."

Specifically, I derived improvisational responsibility from Derrida's notion of responsibility and West's notion of hope. Improvisational responsibility brings Derrida's responsibility and West's hope in close proximity as reminders to become and stay engaged in challenges while acknowledging tragedy and non-guarantee of improvement regardless of intent.

Abu-Jamal's (1994) *Live From Death Row* exemplifies the awareness that improvisational responsibility requires. In this discussion, Abu-Jamal was situated as someone attempting to create instability within rigid hierarchies. I interpreted the rigid hierarchy as the

mental and physical prison. While the physical prison is the place Abu-Jamal is bound to, the mental prison is the communal bombardment of false information manipulated and filtered through the collective government, large corporation, and media.

Improvisational responsibility is not intended to alleviate controversy surrounding the individuals discussed, ground improvisation in the jazz genre, emphasize the superiority of thought of an individual, nor argue the innocence or guilt of another. Rather, the framing of improvisational responsibility functions as an attempt to characterize, describe, and learn from the responsive gestures, accessed by the individuals discussed, in order to turn toward the aporia and stay engaged.

In conceptualizing improvisational responsibility, I attempted to consider the flexibility required in reacting to aporias. Simultaneously, I realize an aporia is neither reduced nor surpassed. Rather an aporia is improvisational in how it constantly reformulates itself to erect points of impasse. Therefore, it becomes essential to approach an aporia with an improvisational mindset, not so much for the purpose of mastery or overcoming, but to stay in the constant conceptual dance of deliberation. As Coleman and Derrida situated newness in their discussion, newness was the response and reconceptualization when reengaging artifacts or past events. Improvisational responsibility is a set of ethics. Thus, with the addition of West's discussions of the tragic dimensions of hope as related to Blackness, improvisational responsibility is the necessity to stay engaged with an aporia while acknowledging the impossibility or guarantee of ever experiencing the desired outcome.

Perhaps a question to follow is, "What possibilities are yielded when oppressive conditions are addressed from a mindset rooted in improvisational responsibility?" One way to consider improvisational responsibility is as a way to counter erasures. Oppressors have attempted erasures—that is, they have attempted to expunge community memories through infrastructural change. An example is the decimation of communal spaces via the construction of interstates through Black neighborhoods throughout the 1960s and 1970s, or more recently with renewed desecration of indigenous sacred lands, as witnessed with the oil pipeline construction at Standing Rock. Protesters' efforts, in both situations, countered the encroachments of infrastructure. A part of such resistance can be understood as non-adherence to erasures of their discourse from communal, national, and international memory. In the face of the aporia embodied by the corporate and governmental conglomerates, the protesters elevated resistant discourses by situating their physical bodies, utilizing multiple media formats, producing of print resources that transmitted the events within their community to the broader community, nationally and internationally, which challenged attempted erasures.

Through witnessing the decimations of community spaces, along with the resistance from marginalized communities, a lens of improvisational responsibility acknowledges the protesters' impossible task of resisting overpowering of governmental/corporative collectives due to lack of access to financial and political resources. Thus, in observation of the protesters, improvisational responsibility can be seen as the tragic realization that they may not see immediate or any results in their lifetime yielded from their efforts. However, for the engaged protester, the aporia articulated by oppressors is not a reason to stop resisting. Rather, the aporia is the unsettled space of responsibility, always shifting, to which the protester commits when attempting to remain engaged and vulnerable when attending to oppressive conditions. The tension of improvisation is the series of constantly growing, tragic deliberations that the protester must negotiate and attend to, between self and community, which cannot be ignored. It is improvisation, engaged through

the constant communal requirement of re-discovering the energy to continue on, which the protesters have had to find through self and community in order to stay engaged with tragedy.

Notes

[1] Polyrhythmic refers to the occurrence simultaneous rhythms. However, in this iteration, polyrhythm functions as metaphor in order to consider multitudes of issues, further issues within initial issues, and both the challenge and the responsibility to confront these successive layers of issues simultaneously.

[2] I discuss this statement from Cornel West differently in a paper response titled "The Blues' Ontology of Improvisation," which I delivered at the 2015 Philosophy of Education Society conference. This paper was paper was published in the 2016 Philosophy of Education Yearbook.

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