

Editors' Forum

Theorizing the Contemporary

Improvisation

FROM THE SERIES: [Keywords for Ethnography and Design](#)

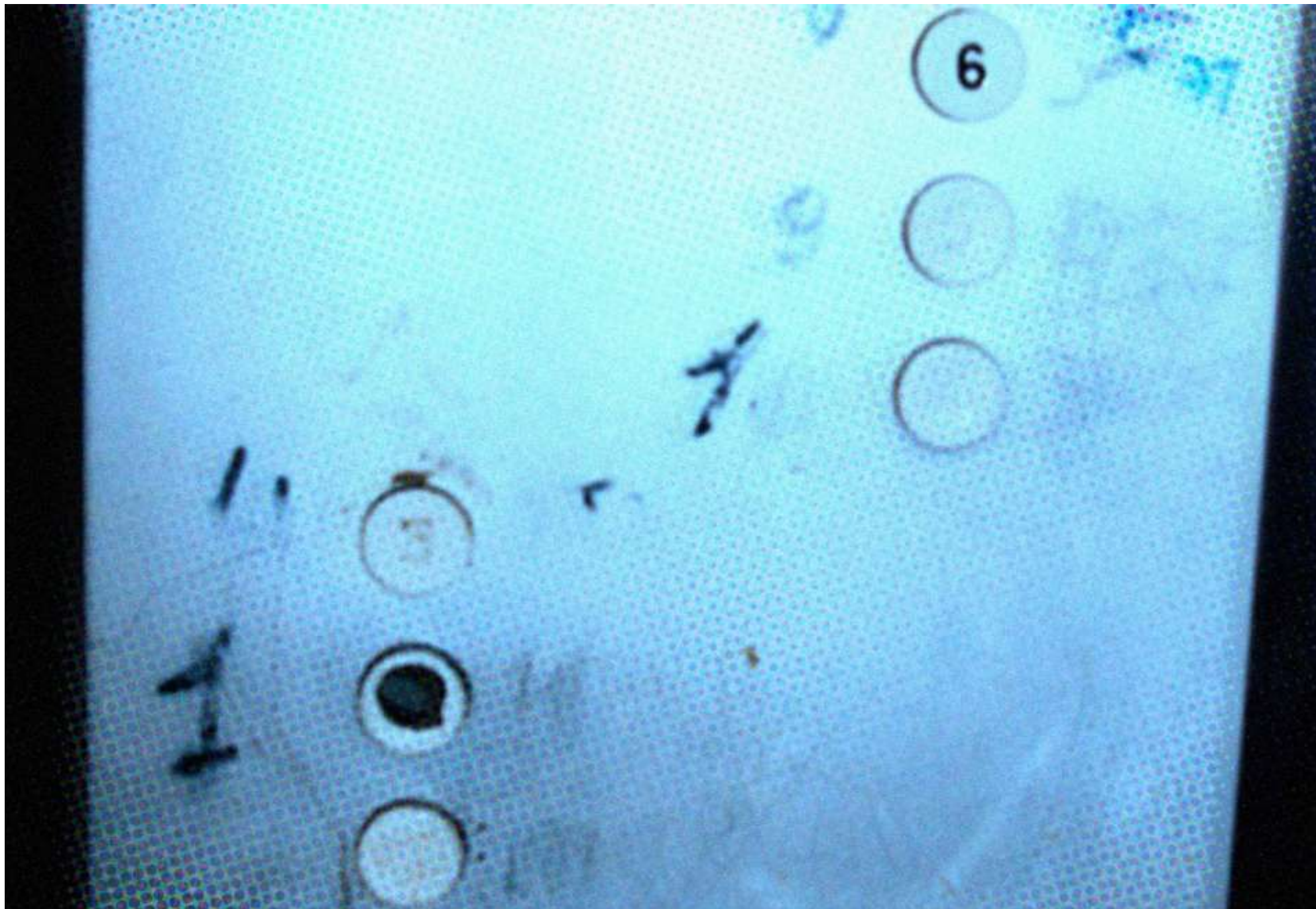


Photo by Anna Klepikova.

By [Joseph Dumit](#), [Kevin O'Connor](#), [Duskin Drum](#), and [Sarah McCullough](#)

March 29, 2018

Publication Information

Cite As: Dumit, Joseph, Kevin O'Connor, Duskin Drum, and Sarah McCullough. 2018. "Improvisation." *Theorizing the Contemporary, Fieldsights*, March 29. <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/improvisation>

Improvising is a deep concept in cultural anthropology. We've heard it joked that sociologists treat people as rule-followers, while anthropologists see people as constantly improvising in ways to make it look like they are following rules. This quip grants a fascinating cohesion to culture, one that requires continual reinforcement and training and is made up of surprising agents (see Hallam and Ingold 2008). Whichever side of this divide we find ourselves on, we might attend to the ways in which social scientists have been trained in practices of attention: to institutions, repetitions, inventions, interruptions, and jokes. Sociologists have many method books but also more playful ones, like Howard Becker's (1998) *Tricks of the Trade*. Anthropologists have usually learned by reading ethnographies and engaging in microexercises since their undergraduate education: go observe a place or situation, take notes, make a report, share, and repeat. For this short concept piece, we propose to think of these exercises as *scores* or *games*—terms we borrow from practices used in theater, dance, and design to train bodymind attention in improvisation by setting up provocative situations. We propose improvisational scores as tools for designing novel ethnography and modes of ethnographic attention.

* * *

Score for a group of ten to twenty people, indoors in a relatively large room

Instructions: Walk around the room. Wander (2 minutes). Notice someone out of the corner of your eye and keep them on your left (2 minutes). Notice someone else and keep them on your right (2 minutes). Wander for a little while longer until you feel like pausing.

* * *

We have used this score during anthropology workshops to introduce the concept of scores with a basic set of instructions that guides a group of people to interact with each other. The instructions can be given all together at the beginning or spread out through the exercise. One thing that is crucial is durational doing: you really do have to allow for the time between instructions; you cannot imagine the exercises or just read them; you have to take the time to do them. We have come to appreciate these scores as exercises that draw attention to something other than themselves. Because the rules are so basic and the time between instructions so long, participants become quite mindful of how they are drawn to move or talk in some ways and not others, of how they make choices about how to follow the rules (or not). All of these are forms of attention to habits of thought, speech, and action, and, in attending to habits, one often experiences new ways of not being habitual (see Little 2014). Therefore, we can think of these as *improvisation games*.

Designers use games to push themselves past usual ways of thinking of objects. Theater folks use games to generate familiarity among a group of people, to stretch their imaginative faculties and sense of timing, and to generate new material. Similarly, choreographers use scores to loosen up and understand the space they are in and to discover new ways of moving together. In each case, scores and games are seen as training tools for improvising and attuning to others.

We are in the process of collecting improvisation scores for ethnography—for training and for use in the field. Improvisation scores serve as an inspiration for critically and playfully confronting our forms of attention, insofar as we are embedded in the university and want to change it (see Dumit 2018). In the classroom we have experimented with adapting improvisation games from theater and dance handbooks. The comedy improv score “say ‘yes’ to whatever is offered to you and continue talking” becomes “pick up the sentence from the last speaker and continue for ninety seconds, then point to the next speaker.” Among graduate students this generates apprehension and laughter, but also more listening and less performative dialogue. The timing again matters, as a form of “training in disorientation” (Albright 2003, 260).

But we are also learning from critical black studies that the very notion of improvisation in anthropology, design, theater, and dance contains assumptions about subjects, choice, and freedom that require a lot more study (Harney and Moten 2013). Improvisation can appear to have a childlike innocence that claims a precultural status before culture constrains and conforms “us.” This status is privileged because there are only certain sorts of persons who can afford to traffic in being primitive and immature—terms that are used to delegitimize other persons (see Weheliye 2014). The notion of being able to choose to improvise is just as historically and politically situated, implying persons who by definition would otherwise just get by. Critical race theorists in anthropology and dance and music studies start from the observation that many people have to improvise in order to survive (Goldman 2010). Here we return to the starting point of this essay: anthropology as the study of the everyday improvisation of people, and the possibilities of using improvisation scores to train our ethnographic practice. Appropriating improvisation as choice overwrites this history, functioning like Ludwig Wittgenstein’s philosophy “as an attempt to repress [the necessary] improvisational motion even as it also would embrace it” (Moten 2003, 101).

Attention to improvisation transforms how we might design and enact our ethnographic projects. We can learn from improvisation in practice—diverse forms of improvisation—as a form of questioning, always asking who gets the stage and how, what is common and not, critical and social, joyful and unsettling (see Fischlin, Heble, and Lipsitz 2013). Who is improvising by being put on the spot in dance, performance, science, and politics? Performance theorist Mayfield Brooks (2016) explains that through this necessary improvisation, one is continually creating new ways of being in the world that challenge structural injustice in creative ways. Scores for ethnography therefore also have to attend to attention for the social and political assumptions within them. In the words of Sylvia Wynter, “humanness is no longer a noun. Being human is a praxis” (Wynter and McKittrick 2015, 23).



References

Albright, Ann Cooper. 2003. “Dwelling in Possibility.” In *Taken by Surprise: A Dance Improvisation Reader*, edited by Ann Cooper Albright and David Gere, 257–66. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press.

Becker, Howard S. 1998. *Tricks of the Trade: How to Think About Your Research While You’re Doing It*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Brooks, Mayfield. 2016. “[IWB = Improvising While Black: writings, INterventions, interruptions, questions.](#)” *Contact Quarterly* 41, no. 1: 33–39.

Dumit, Joe. 2018. "Notes toward Critical Ethnographic Scores: Anthropology and Improvisation Training in a Breached World." In *Between Matter and Method: Encounters in Anthropology and Art*, edited by Gretchen Bakke and Marina Peterson, 51–72. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

Fischlin, Daniel, Ajay Heble, and George Lipsitz. 2013. *The Fierce Urgency of Now: Improvisation, Rights, and the Ethics of Cocreation*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.

Goldman, Danielle. 2010. *I Want to Be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Hallam, Elizabeth, and Tim Ingold, eds. 2008. *Creativity and Cultural Improvisation*. New York: Berg.

Harney, Stefano, and Fred Moten. 2013. [*The Undercommons: Fugitive Study and Black Planning*](#). New York: Minor Compositions.

Little, Nita. 2014. "[Restructuring the Self-Sensing: Attention Training in Contact Improvisation](#)." *Journal of Dance and Somatic Practices* 6, no. 2.

Moten, Fred. 2003. *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Weheliye, Alexander G. 2014. *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.

Wynter, Sylvia, and Katherine McKittrick. 2015. "Unparalleled Catastrophe for our Species? Or, To Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations." In *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, edited by Katherine McKittrick, 9–88. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.

[Back to Series Description](#)

SOCIETY FOR
CULTURAL
ANTHROPOLOGY

