

9-1-2019

## The Uncanon: Radical Forgetting and Free Improvisation

Hannah Reardon-Smith  
*Queensland Conservatorium, Griffith University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.ecu.edu.au/soundscripts>



Part of the [Other Music Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Reardon-Smith, H. (2019). The Uncanon: Radical Forgetting and Free Improvisation. *Sound Scripts*, 6(1). Retrieved from <https://ro.ecu.edu.au/soundscripts/vol6/iss1/13>

This Refereed Article is posted at Research Online.  
<https://ro.ecu.edu.au/soundscripts/vol6/iss1/13>

# The Uncanon: Radical Forgetting and Free Improvisation

by **Hannah Reardon-Smith**

Queensland Conservatorium, Griffith University

**Abstract:** In the first decades of the twenty-first century, the canon narrative within Western Art Music continues to resist the critical deconstructions by feminists and the New Musicology. Its stronghold over the way we talk about musical styles and position our practice is so great that even when we do away with the score and the figure of the composer and improvise freely, we find ourselves still trapped within a logic of canon that pushes certain artists' contributions to the margins. Emphatically free improvisation implies a conscious attempt to forget our musical training and heritage, and subsequently our musical "families": style, performance practice, and instrument. Absolute forgetting is of course impossible, and so we are forced to deal with the uncanny traces of our heritage as they make their ghostly appearances in real time. In exploring a new concept of *Uncanon*, I draw on queer and anti-capitalist texts by Jack Halberstam, Sara Ahmed, Mark Fisher, and Donna Haraway, as well as my own experiences as a classically trained flutist, in order to elaborate a framework by which to understand my own practice and study the work of other artists in the field.

*Resistance lurks in the performance of forgetfulness itself, hiding out in oblivion and waiting for a new erasure to inspire a new beginning.* —Jack Halberstam<sup>1</sup>

In Western art music, the religious concept of the *canon* is invoked to carve a linear narrative through a pluralistic history; a patriarchal and Eurocentric progression of great men and great works, inherited by the future with an imperative towards forward motion. In the first decades of the twenty-first century, this narrative continues to resist the critical deconstructions of the canon by feminists and the New Musicology. The canon narrative has a stronghold over the way we talk about musical styles and position our practice; so much so that even when we do away with the score and the figure of the composer and improvise freely, we find ourselves still trapped within the logic of canon.

In this paper, I explore why the logic of canon persists in the way we talk about improvised music. Drawing on Sara Ahmed and Jack Halberstam, I examine how we might use our always-already externalised position as women and queers to first *forget* what we have been taught as our lineage and inheritance, and *remember anew* the radical truths of a diverse and pluralistic history, inserting a subversive wedge into the dominant narrative. This act of remembering, or of developing new links, might be thought of in terms of Donna Haraway's model of the "oddkin." Subverting and challenging the canon, and elevating traditionally

marginalised voices in this way constitutes both a historico-political discursive thinking practice, and a musical practice; one that creates a different paradigm for music-making—a music-making that is itself a challenge to institutionalised and canonical logics. In so-doing, I explore the beginnings of a queer-feminist ethic for free improvisation.

Artists are necessarily influenced by their predecessors and contemporaries, but the narrative of canon serves to paint a picture of great men begat by great men, reproducing a logic of selective inclusion. The canon has always served to elevate certain voices and figures at the expense of others. The comparative omission from the canon of women, trans and non-binary artists is read as evidence of their lack of merit and artistic innovation. Of course, it is evident that they have been omitted not simply because of the allegedly poor quality of their artistry, as has been shown by such feminist scholars as Marcia Citron, Susan McClary, and Linda Nochlin.<sup>2</sup> Ursula Le Guin writes of the phenomenon of “disappearing grandmothers” to describe how women writers have been left out of the canon. Le Guin thereby maintains the metaphor of family and inheritance while critiquing the “canoneers” for employing the devices of “*denigration, omission, exception, and disappearance*” to the cumulative effect of “the *continuing marginalisation* of women’s writing.”<sup>3</sup>

The history of experimental and improvised musics is often told in terms of a radical break with tradition, validity and authority.<sup>4</sup> But even in this case, accounts tend to be shot through with the use of established social structures and institutional logics. This serves to water down the radical and often political intentions contained within such breaks, and to once again leave important artists and their voices just outside of the picture frame.

Derek Bailey’s *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music*, originally published in 1980, is generally considered a foundational text in improvisation studies. While Bailey did not set out to create a comprehensive survey of the most influential improvisers of his generation, it is notable that not a single woman was included in the first edition (the revised version of 1992 does include a secondary reference to vocalist Christine Jeffrey).<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, there are many interviewed musicians who discuss their influences and their heritage in ways that fit into the narrative of canon: usually name-dropping well-known associates and mentors. Who gets profiled and interviewed in seminal texts such as Bailey’s and Ekkehard Jost’s feeds back on who gets mentioned by musicians as important figures on the scene. Regardless of actual artistic output, this circular logic readily associates certain named individuals with the practice of free improvisation, while others (such as Jeffrey) are attached only at the peripheries—known only by those in their immediate circles and those who specifically seek them out.

This tacit exclusion is a phenomenon identified by Sherrie Tucker in her writings about women in and around jazz communities. “Rather than total inclusion or total exclusion,” she writes, “it may be that improvising women historically border on many jazz communities, including those that have been labelled women-in-jazz.”<sup>6</sup> Tucker states that festivals and programs dedicated to the women in the scene do little to change the overarching culture, and in fact may add weight to the impression that those gendered as Other to the male norm do not fit comfortably in the centre of the jazz frame.

The exclusion of women from the canonical narrative is done in part through what Tucker describes as the masculinisation of musicking. Tucker has spoken about the deliberate

masculinisation of jazz improvisation in response to the idea in Western art music that improvisation is feminine. Improvisation is in this sense seen as other to primacy of the author, the deployment of structure and order, and of careful decision making, which characterises Western art music more generally:

The gender of sound may signify differently across time, but the tendency for sounds associated with masculinity to be more highly valued than those that signify femininity is relatively predictable. “Free jazz,” like other musical practices, may be feminized in periods when it holds less prestige, and masculinized when it holds more prestige.<sup>7</sup>

This masculinisation in practice can and does present in a form that pushes women to the margins of the scene. Anthony Braxton moreover notes the ironic fact that many of the politically and spiritually aware musicians of the 1960s also occupied the roles of “chauvinist and oppressor.”<sup>8</sup> If we are going to talk about freedom and what that means, and what it means to navigate that freedom, then we need to ask how the experience and degree of freedom is experienced by different individuals with different social categories and standings. If free improvisation is to be truly free, it needs to fundamentally question all of the family logics that it has inherited—not just authorship, but also canon, stylistic affinities, prescriptive instrumental combinations, and more. Free improvisation contains within it the possibility of sidestepping the hierarchical system of authorship and the fixed work, as well as stylistic restriction. In doing this, we have the opportunity to break with institutional logics, gender discrimination, and canonical narratives.

### Family Logics

The generational logic of the family is key to the idea of artistic canon. It is a linear narrative of succession—mostly white male to white male—that mimics ancestry and inheritance. As Jack Halberstam identifies, family logic promises “not simply acceptance and belonging but a form of belonging that binds the past to the present and the present to the future by securing ... ‘heterofuturity’ [meaning ongoing reproduction] through the figure of the child.”<sup>9</sup> The canon is a dialectic of historical progression that only achieves development through the rebellion of the solitary genius. Each small break of this kind is necessary to birth something new and different, but which maintains the hierarchical structure through the narrative of progress. This modernist framing of tradition is best expressed in T.S. Eliot’s *Tradition and the Individual Talent* of 1919.<sup>10</sup>

This patrilineal model of mapping progress as father-to-son generations is how we are taught to remember many of our histories, as Halberstam points out:

Generational logic underpins our investments in the dialect of memory and forgetting; we tend to organize the chaotic process of historical change by anchoring it to an idea of generational shifts (from father to son), and we obscure questions about the arbitrariness of memory and the necessity of forgetting by falling back on some notion of the inevitable force of progression and succession.<sup>11</sup>

But the logic of *family* extends further than this. As well as the reproducing generations of geniuses, heteronormative family logics modelled on an inclusivity based on sameness are a widespread phenomenon of institutional subject-formation. Families play an integral role in the shaping listening preferences, as well as determining the education of performers and composers. There is a fundamental relationship between these different types of family logics, by way of their premises of inclusion and exclusion.

In music, we often talk in terms of instrument families, and are bundled into these in educational and performance institutions despite the sometimes stark differences in sound production and repertoire (especially apparent amongst woodwinds).<sup>12</sup> While there are some instruments which teeter on the edge of these demarcations, their ability to cross camps is limited. The brass instrument of the French horn, for instance, becomes a surrogate member of the woodwind family for the purpose of the wind quintet. These families often affect how instruments are grouped. In the world of Western art music this can indeed determine whether you participate in entire categories of music: chamber music competitions are still regularly reserved for various combinations of strings and piano. The Melbourne International Chamber Music Competition, for example, is open only to string quartets and piano trios.<sup>13</sup> Surely what is far more important than these historical categories, particularly in experimental and improvised musics, is developing a rapport with collaborators on a creative and personal level.

Musicians are however regularly grouped into families beyond their instrument category, demarcated both instrumentally and stylistically, and by the means in which we are educated and presented: orchestral instruments, voice, keyboards, classical, jazz, popular musics—boundaries that are not especially porous or easily crossed. Both labelling and pigeonholing by style continue to be an issue.

Family, more literally, regularly has a very intimate connection to musical training and practices. The family in which you were raised in many ways may determine which instrument makes its way into your hands, and indeed whether one does at all.<sup>14</sup> The great musician is introduced to their instrument/s as young as possible, preferably before they start primary school, and a lingering fascination with child prodigies and beliefs about brain malleability leads to real-world limitations, such as the cut-off age for entry into the Paris Conservatoire.<sup>15</sup> A young child's primary instrument is often chosen by their parent or a teacher, on the grounds of certain preconceptions/biases (especially around gender) or, as in my case, practical considerations such as access to a particular instrument.<sup>16</sup>

Furthermore, there is an expectation that musical taste will be shared within families. As Michael Hardt states, “The family is one of the primary social institutions that propagates and enforces a mode of love based on sameness and exclusion.”<sup>17</sup> Where this heteronormative family model is replicated in music education and in how we remember our history and frame our continuation, it makes for a conservative and exclusionary picture.

### **The Queer-Feminist Project of the Uncanon**

The Pakistani-Australian independent academic Sara Ahmed argues that a lived feminism is not simply a set of ethical principles to which we adhere. Rather it is an ongoing act of questioning how we might live better, how we might resist systemic injustices, and how we might support those who are not supported or less supported by the society we live in. Feminists continue to question “how to keep coming up against histories that have become concrete, histories that have become solid as walls.”<sup>18</sup> Essentially, “to live a feminist life is to make everything into something that is questionable. The question of how to live a feminist life is alive as a question as well as being a life question.”<sup>19</sup> This practice of questioning is one that I see as eminently relevant to the practice of free improvisation, and especially to my practice of free improvisation.

I have identified a dominant narrative, centred on heteronormative family logics that have made little room for us, as women or as queers. The canon narrative tends to position us at best on the margins—that is to say, outside of the frame of historical memory. In this way, we are starting from a position of almost-alterity: we are the not-quite-alien, occupying the borders, the edges, able to see in from outside. This position is one in which we as women and as queers have been placed by others. As we find ways to insert ourselves more fully into the narrative and to question its predominance, we tap into our uncanny potential and in doing so upset the balance of power.

Freud proposes the concept of the “*unheimlich*,” meaning the “uncanny” or “unhomely”; a disruption of both the familiar, and that site which most represents familiarity for most heteronormative Western subjects, the family home itself. As Mark Fisher explains: “Freud’s *unheimlich* is about the strange within the familiar, the strangely familiar, the familiar as strange—about the way in which the domestic world does not coincide with itself.”<sup>20</sup> As women, we were always a part of the family; we just did not get to be the main characters in the story. The figure of the woman and the queer is properly *unhomely*, given a place and a role as the child, the sibling, the mother, but at the same time fundamentally excluded from within. We are pushed into subordination. In this way, the domestic does not coincide with itself.

With this in mind, my question is as women, as queers, and as free improvisers—in short, as those who are occupying the margins and blurring the edges—how can we use our position of not-quite-alterity to resist the reproductive, heteronormative family logic of the canon? Can we take our occupation of this uncanny, unhomely position as a starting point from which to rearticulate spaces of free improvisation, thereby rethinking what family and home could look like for our art along the way? Thinking through these questions has the potential for a queer practice, as described vividly by Halberstam:

De-linking the process of generation from the force of historical process is a queer kind of project: queer lives seek to uncouple change from the supposedly organic and immutable forms of family and inheritance; queer lives exploit some potential for a difference in form that lies dormant in queer collectivity not as an essential attribute of sexual otherness but as a possibility embedded in the break from heterosexual life narratives. We may want to forget family and forget lineage and forget tradition in order to start from a new place, not the place where the old engenders the new, where the old makes a place for the new, but where the new begins afresh, unfettered by memory, tradition, and usable pasts.<sup>21</sup>

In order to improvise freely we must practice a radical forgetting of the structures in place that, as stated by Citron, deny our validity, voice, and authority; that we have been told are fixed, are “solid as walls.”<sup>22</sup> We rest in the certainty that—like Christine Jeffrey and so many like her—women, non-binary, and trans folk have always been making music, improvising, and innovating, just outside of the frame of canonical memory.

### **Radical Forgetting, Radical Remembering**

What could a radical queer practice of forgetting in free improvisation look like? “[R]esistance lurks in the performance of forgetfulness itself,” says Halberstam, “hiding out in oblivion and waiting for a new erasure to inspire a new beginning.”<sup>23</sup> This entails a throwing out of feelers and possibilities, while intentionally forgetting or leaving aside those things which might be considered rules or habits; establishing a new norm only to tear it to pieces and replace it anew;

building a complex world of relations and logics without expectations, and with the ability to wreak destructive havoc without rhyme or reason.

There is, however, a dangerous side to forgetting—one that we have a responsibility to grapple with, particularly when we are also, as I am, of European descent in a colonial nation. George Lewis, for example, rejects John Cage’s claim that jazz improvisation was of little significance to the development of post World War II Western art music.<sup>24</sup> In light of how important Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie and others were for Cage’s peers such as Jackson Pollock, it is highly unlikely that Cage himself was not familiar with the near aleatoric forms first pioneered in bebop, and that this therefore influenced Cage also. As Braxton insists, “Both aleatory and indeterminism are words which have been coined ... to bypass the word improvisation and as such the influence of nonwhite sensibility.”<sup>25</sup> Cage’s disavowal is consistent with racialised power relations that see non-white artists omitted and erased from the narrative around the emergence of a free improvisation practice coming out of the American and European avant-garde, in much the same way as women, non-binary, and trans folks. This is despite the central and radical role of many African-American post-bebop musicians in creating a free jazz improvising style—something dubbed “the New Thing” by Amiri Baraka—including artists such as John Coltrane, Thelonious Monk, Miles Davis, Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor, Archie Shepp, and Sun Ra.<sup>26</sup> When we practice radical forgetting as a means to improvise freely, we do not wish to re-enact colonial forgetting. The radical forgetting of the familial canonical narratives can however open us up to reconnect to a plurastic history; allowing us to search more widely for the radical histories that have been erased and omitted. In short, forgetting simultaneously leads to *remembering*, both of the marginalised histories that have always frayed the edges of the frame, as well as of the traces of dominant canon narratives and their tendencies towards exclusion and even violence. It is because of this kind of remembering that when the traces of our past selves—our education and families—inevitably sneak in, we can let these exist in this new, weird world: it is now made into the Other by recentering on our home in the margins itself.

## **Kin Making**

Donna Haraway’s rejection of the human-centred family of Anthropos echoes Halberstam’s rejection of the family. Instead of Anthropos, with all its humanistic fetters on thought and action, Haraway implores us to turn towards kin:

*Kin* is a wild category that all sorts of people do their best to domesticate. Making kin as oddkin rather than, or at least in addition to, godkin and genealogical and biogenetic family troubles important matters, like to whom one is actually responsible.<sup>27</sup>

Kin, and not family, is the primary unit of connection that we must turn to in the realm of free and experimental improvisation. Throughout our educations we are seemingly bound to our assigned families, limiting our imaginations on what music-making can be. Those of us who have worked hard to find other options from within our own families may find that even the process of opening our options up to this degree leaves a hunger for more. Here we might remember that it is not until we take the radical (and dangerous) step of forgetting all that we have been led to believe that we might find ourselves exploring the richness that lies at the edges and dreaming of new freedoms.

Haraway proposes that we “make kin not babies.”<sup>28</sup> Here again we must remember the danger of a colonial logic of populationism: the idea that there are too many humans on the planet has been used as a weapon to justify eugenical practices and restrictions on women’s rights, especially in the Third World. Viewing this statement instead as an *artistic* ethic enables us to move away from the imperative toward the creation of Works and the Artist as solitary creator. By making oddkin, we question the logic of the generative logic in favour of a richer collaborative experience in the present. Haraway observes:

Staying with the trouble requires making oddkin; that is, we require each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations, in hot compost piles. We become-with each other or not at all. That kind of material semiotics is always situated, someplace and not noplacement, entangled and worldly.<sup>29</sup>

Instead of asserting the primacy of the *work* and the *author* with all their overtones of posterity and futurity, with all its deeply ingrained references to forefathers and inheritance, let us instead situate ourselves squarely in the moment, in the fertile space of improvised dialogues of oddkin.<sup>30</sup> In this space, we can deliberately choose our musical kin—based less upon complementary education and training, less upon stylistic identity, less upon our families (instrumental and otherwise), and more upon our willingness to share a sonic space. Here we can forge new connections with oddkin. My own improvisation trio, Rogue Three, is one example. We employ wind instruments not in an orchestral formulation. Instead we combine trombone, recorders, and flutes.<sup>31</sup> Through chance encounters, we discovered the potential of these instruments to explore the blends of their colours and characteristics, as well as their stark differences. The musicians in this trio are ready and listening, wanting to enter into co-creation, becoming-together in the Harawayian formulation. These oddkin formulations and practices are underway in the work of many free improvisers, as I intend to further explore in my ongoing research.

By beginning from a point of radical forgetting, of artistic kin-making and not baby-making, we can use our position on the margins—an uncanny position of almost-otherness that as women and as queers, and even as free improvisers we were always-already inhabiting. This is both a theoretical practice and a musical practice, with which we have the power to address the undead canon, deeply ingrained through our training and returning in traces. We are not running from our past or avoiding our supposed future, but instead are problematising a narrative that has become solid and stagnant, and reconnecting with the pluralistic and radical histories that hold the potential of a richer imagining of artistic possibilities for free improvisation and the way we tell our stories.

## Endnotes

All URLs accessed Jan–March 2019.

<sup>1</sup> Jack (Judith) Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke UP, 2011), p. 69.

<sup>2</sup> Marcia Citron, *Gender and the Musical Canon* (Champaign, IL: Illinois UP, 1993); Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings* (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1991); Linda Nochlin, *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1988).

<sup>3</sup> Ursula Le Guin, *Words Are My Matter* (Northampton, MA: Small Beer, 2016), pp. 88-90.

<sup>4</sup> Derek Bailey, *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo, 1992); Ekkehard Jost, *Free Jazz* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo, 1994); David Toop, *Into the Maelstrom: Music, Improvisation and the Dream of Freedom: Before 1970* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> Bailey, p. 96.



- <sup>6</sup> Sherrie Tucker, “Bordering on Community: Improvising Women Improvising Women-in-Jazz,” in Daniel Fischlin and Ajay Heble, eds, *The Other Side of Nowhere: Jazz, Improvisation, and Communities in Dialogue* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2004), p. 250.
- <sup>7</sup> Tucker, p. 259.
- <sup>8</sup> Eric Porter, *What Is This Thing Called Jazz? African American Musicians as Artists, Critics, and Activists* (Berkeley: California UP, 2002), p. 284.
- <sup>9</sup> Halberstam, pp. 72-73.
- <sup>10</sup> T.S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919), <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69400/tradition-and-the-individual-talent>.
- <sup>11</sup> Halberstam, p. 70.
- <sup>12</sup> Kenneth Kreitner et al, “Instrumentation and Orchestration” (2001) in *Grove Music Online* (Oxford: Oxford UP, ongoing), <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezproxy.ecu.edu.au/grovemusic/view/10>.
- <sup>13</sup> Musica Viva, “About MICMC,” *Musica Viva* (Sydney: Musica Viva, 2018), <https://musicaviva.com.au/comp/about-micmc/>.
- <sup>14</sup> Simy Meng-Yu Chen and Robert Howard, “Musical Instrument Choice and Playing History In Post-Secondary Level Music Students,” *Music Education Research*, 6:2 (2004): 217-230.
- <sup>15</sup> Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique et de Danse de Paris, “Apply and Audition,” <http://www.conservatoiredeparis.fr/en/concours-dentree/>.
- <sup>16</sup> Susan Hallam et al., “Gender Differences in Musical Instrument Choice,” *International Journal of Music Education*, 26:1 (2008): 7-19.
- <sup>17</sup> Michael Hardt, “What is Wrong with the Family?” *Spike Art Quarterly*, 50 (2017): 124.
- <sup>18</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke UP, 2017), p. 1.
- <sup>19</sup> Ahmed, p. 2.
- <sup>20</sup> Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie* (London: Repeater, 2006), p. 2; Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1955), vol. 17, pp. 217–56.
- <sup>21</sup> Halberstam, p. 70.
- <sup>22</sup> Marcia Citron, “Gender, Professionalism and the Musical Canon,” *Journal of Musicology*, 8:1 (1990): 104.
- <sup>23</sup> Halberstam, p. 69.
- <sup>24</sup> George Lewis, “Improvised Music After 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives,” in Fischlin and Heble, pp. 131-162.
- <sup>25</sup> Lewis, p. 139.
- <sup>26</sup> Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), *Black Music* (Brooklyn: Akashic, 2010), pp. 15-24.
- <sup>27</sup> Donna Haraway, *Staying With the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke UP, 2016), p. 2.
- <sup>28</sup> Haraway, p. 102.
- <sup>29</sup> Haraway, p. 3.
- <sup>30</sup> Bruce Benson, *Improvisation of Musical Dialogue* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003), p. 14.
- <sup>31</sup> Rogue Three, *No Meat On Bumblebees*, audio recording (Brisbane: Made Now Music, 2018).