

## Companion Thinking in Improvised Musicking Practice

Jodie Rottle <sup>a</sup> and Hannah Reardon-Smith <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Creative Arts Research Institute, Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia; <sup>b</sup>Indigenous Studies Department, Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia

### ABSTRACT

We understand that our thinking and creating is always in company. By musicking with others, we situate ourselves amongst an entangled web of human, nonhuman, and more-than-human co-creators; to recognise these external and internal influences is to become a companion. Our concept of companion thinking stems from companion texts according to Sara Ahmed (2017. *Living a Feminist Life*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press), which may ‘prompt you to hesitate or to question the direction in which you are going, or they might give you a sense that in going the way you are going, you are not alone’ (16). Companionship implies *with*: In this paper, we discuss how companions are vital to our improvisatory music practices by considering the co-creative relationships in which we operate. We analyse our artistic research from our perspectives as performers and improvisers and consider the processes of making music with beyond-human entities. Instead of the human-focused concept of collaboration, we posit companionship as an approach to thinking-with and sounding-with the more-than-human, other-than-human, and nonhuman. Our former selves, experiences, environments, and nonhuman critters and objects are always-already part of our musicking practices and communities. Performance is thus ecological, political, and personal; it is through this lens that we analyse the entanglements of our varied communities and explore how this concept can stretch beyond a music practice, to consider what it means to engage in creative practice as migrant-settlers on stolen Aboriginal land. This paper includes an investigation of what it means to be a companion and a discussion of a practice-based case study in which we implement—or practice—companion thinking. As friends, collaborators, and companions to one another, we each present our individual concepts of companionship through our own improvisation practices, addressing themes of situatedness, response-ability, surprise, stumbling, curiosity, and unmastery. We then analyse the entanglements of our work in performance. This process of thinking, making, and doing in-company offers the opportunity to consider an intersection of analysis and performance through an improvisatory musical practice.

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**CONTACT** Jodie Rottle [j.rottlet@griffith.edu.au](mailto:j.rottlet@griffith.edu.au), [@jodierottle](https://www.instagram.com/jodierottle)

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## An Introduction

We are two more-than-flutist performer-composers of Arab (via the United States) and European descent living in the nation-state of settler colonial Australia. After many years of studying and practicing European traditions of art music performance, composition, and music analysis, we each found ourselves expanding upon what we were taught to accept as the containers in which this music did and should take place, and the norms and boundaries of acceptable practice. One thing in particular that we found ourselves grappling with was a fundamental concept of European and Anglo-American tradition thought: the (neo)liberal individual. The ways in which the bounds of the individual have been drawn within Eurological<sup>1</sup> art music, as practiced in the last century, separate performer from composer from audience from musical work (and/or score). Authorship as distinct from realisation and interpretation, and even the individuating of each performer from one another, deeply impacts how we practice music and musical analysis. This neoliberal model of music performance has been addressed by thinkers such as Attali (*Noise*, 1985) and Small (*Musicking*, 1998), and while these texts are commonly engaged with intellectually, neoliberal logic pervades the culture of Eurological musical practices.

In this paper, we offer another challenge to the containers and boundaries of neoliberal music making, drawing on queer-feminist thinkings of the complex entanglements of company. We call this *companion thinking*.

Together, we have a history of more than a decade of friendship and shared creative music practices, and in this time, we have identified several meeting points in our research, musicking, and politics (which are always entangled). The ideas presented in this paper emerge from our processes, and we co-present them *as* companion thinkers. They are offered as both provocation and invitation, for readers to think in-company with us. We discuss the concept of companion thinking through the analysis of a shared performer-composer musicking practice, that importantly involves responsive moment-to-moment co-processing in the form of improvisation. As individual researchers, we explore different topics and foci in our investigations as composing-performing-improvising musicians; however, we were curious to find that there was a surprising alignment of our ideas, foundational texts, and underlying understanding of ethics and responsibility. These emerged not via intentional idea sharing, discussion, reading assignments, or even performance collaborations, but on a deeper level of resonance and synchronicity. Together, we have also experienced simultaneous yet significant shifts in our personal lives, as well as realised more active and public explorations of our individual queerness alongside one another. These shared life experiences have deepened a friendship birthed from collaborative sound-making and highlighted how important and special such kin connections can be. Through this connection, we engage our experiences as researchers and improvisers to explore a concept of companion thinking in a music practice.

The term ‘companion thinkers’ (Reardon-Smith 2021) is an extension on Pakistani-Australian scholar Sara Ahmed’s concept of ‘companion texts’ (2017)—referring to those texts we can work with to go deeper into our chosen subjects, whether or not those texts refer specifically to that subject

whose company ... might spark a moment of revelation in the midst of an overwhelming proximity; they might share a feeling or give you resources to make sense of something

that had been beyond your grasp; companion texts can prompt you to hesitate or to question the direction in which you are going, or they might give you a sense that in going the way you are going, you are not alone. (16)

We have experienced similar prompts, encouragements, and moments of revelation by thinking in one another's company. From our position as creative musicians, companion thinking is an approach through which to consider performance and analysis in our musicking practices, one that may be applied or adapted to existing post-qualitative methods of research, artistic research, and autoethnography. As we define companion thinking through the perspective of a creative music practice, we begin by identifying some of our many possible companions. We offer a discussion of the companion texts, research methods, and concepts that helped us to arrive at companion thinking as an approach to music making, which includes Queer Use (Ahmed 2019), stumbling data (Brinkmann 2014), surprise (Rottle 2021), contamination (Tsing 2015), vulnerable listening (McClelland 2017; Singh 2017), interdependence (Solnit 2018), and unmastery (Reardon-Smith 2021; after Singh 2017). Through a case study of our own duo improvisation, we describe how companion thinking is integrated into our musicking practice. We offer insight as to how we think in-company, an analysis of which touches upon the tenets of our identified companion texts. We suggest that this paper is one step of many in the process of building companion thinking as a research method, one that may transfer across artistic disciplines and into spaces that can be both personal and political.

### What is Companion Thinking?

Companion thinking is *thinking in-company*.

Companion thinking is the emergent, active, and ongoing process of opening to the potential possibilities of the relationships that are already at play; a responsibility to acknowledge and work-with (be responsive, response-able to) companions, human, non-human, and more-than-human. As we gather influences within post-human theoretical concepts, speculative realism, and new materialism, among others, we find ourselves tired by the need to differentiate between that which is human and the more-than-human, non-human, other-than-human. Companion thinking is an approach through which we ourselves become companions situated alongside and messily co-constituted with each other, without the necessity to declare, signal, or position our humanness. Companion thinking emerges as an approach to working-with other human and non-human entities, or more simply, companions. As companions within the field of music, we practice this approach through sound making.

Companion thinking is an acknowledgement of the complexity of how embedded any musical process is with external forces. 'Thinking' is a foundational component of musicking, following Vanessa Tomlinson's (2022) integrated sound-based artistic practice of thinking, making, and doing (Creative Arts Research Institute 2020). Companion thinking is a recognition that thinking—before making, creating, doing, or any further action—is always-already done not alone, but rather in relation, in-company.

In the context of musicking and improvisation, there are more openings and opportunities to engage with these companions. Companion thinking is a method of unlearning control over an instrument or domination of your own body. It's a way of unlearning

discipline and pre-formed expectations of sound or sound results. Companion thinking is engaging with what is in the present moment with curiosity. In comes Haraway's curious practice of encounter, 'going visiting' (after Arendt, in Haraway 2016, 126), that is coming into encounters with another person or other human or nonhuman being not assuming you have knowledge of another's actions. It's a momentary visitation with the unknown.

Haraway states:

Visiting is not an easy practice; it demands the ability to find others actively interesting, even or especially others most people already claim to know all too completely, to ask questions that one's interlocutors truly find interesting, to cultivate the wild virtue of curiosity, to retune one's ability to sense and respond ... holding open the possibility that surprises are in store, that something interesting is about to happen, but only if one cultivates the virtue of letting those one visits intra-actively shape what occurs. They are not who/what we expected to visit, and we are not who/what were anticipated either. (2016, 127)

The concept of companion thinking is situated at the intersection of many companions. We acknowledge our positioning and perspectives, and we acknowledge that our thinking is influenced by an incalculable amount of entities. We embrace that which is presented to our perceptibility and acknowledge that which is not. It is a flexible practice, a commitment, a responsibility. As we think in-company, we actively create space where we can experience mystical allure; succumb to the riskiness of surprise; discover the complexities of our imaginations; and explore the many vulnerabilities inherent to relationship building.

### **Who are Companions?**

'Company' consists of a variety of perspectives; different versions of self; and space, place, and environments. 'Companions' is a term that crosses the human, non-human, and other-than-human. It is all at once; no longer do we need to differentiate the bounds of the human individual, labelling subjectivity and objectivity. As companions, we embrace our shared environments, and we make a commitment to *companionship*. This is a flexible process that is always unfolding; to be a companion is to actively contribute to a dynamic between ourselves and other companions.

As musickers, we are accustomed to considering the company of fellow humans: composers (living and not), music teachers, soundmaking performers, sound technicians, recording engineers, producers, and listening audiences. As Small (1998) explains, all of these—and more: venue staff, cleaners, the Uber driver that dropped you off at Southbank—are engaged in the act of musicking. They are our musicking companions. We engage with them via direct dialogue, collaboration, and conversation, and via texts, scores, and knowledge exchange. Humans are teeming with other lifeforms—bacteria and co-constitutive organisms as well as parasites and viruses—who are thinking-with us. Musicking companions also include our soundmaking objects and instruments and technology, the humans and nonhumans that made them, and the histories and narratives with which they are entangled. Every human and object engaged in musicking comes with histories. We realise the past, present, and future versions of our own selves as our companions: we bring our experiences,

hopes, traumas, and optimism into a music practice, and we recognise these versions of ourselves as present companion thinkers. We are ‘holobionts with history’ (Reardon-Smith 2021, 200).

Companions are also the physical spaces we occupy, the environments we contribute to, and the places we are in. Spatial acoustics greatly effect musical performances. So, too, do the histories of these buildings, lands, and the Peoples that have come before and continue still, and the relationships that have taken place here. The invasion and dispossession and genocides that took place in Australia are inscribed into the soil on which we stand. We can choose to think in company with the settler colonial state and its institutions, or to think in company with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s ongoing resistance to colonisation. This is a choice that we make as settler musickers, and choosing not to choose generally means choosing the former.

Our companions include the nonhuman objects, the more-than-human entities or beings or stories that make themselves known to us, and the knowledge of sympoietic (Haraway 2016) entanglements that allow and challenge our continued existence. We also acknowledge those things, entities, and beings that we are not yet knowledgeable or aware of as possible active and passive companion thinkers.

### **A Code of Ethics**

Central to the idea of companion thinking is a curious openness to listening for the voices that may be silenced or otherwise unheard. We can consider this as an ethical foundation of companion thinking. This may be a pathway to understanding and reckoning with our own complicity, and to stay accountable to our living, thinking, and soundmaking on stolen land as settlers, by descent and by migration. This is not an exercise in self-flagellation, but rather an emergent methodology for expansive musicking co-creation that aims to stay response-able to this reality, and to the Peoples and the Land of this place that we inhabit. In choosing to think in-company with anti-colonial struggle, we seek to honour what Anishinaabe theorist Gerald Vizenor calls Indigenous ‘survivance’ (2008), and to engage with Wiradjuri trans non-binary Professor Sandy O’Sullivan’s practice of ‘challenging symbolic annihilation’ (2022): listening vulnerably to the scholarship, artmaking, and thinking of Indigenous peoples, noticing when they are silenced and erased, considering our relations and responsibilities as listening and thinking musickers, and staying attentive to what our musicking does (and doesn’t do) for Indigenous struggles for Country and justice.

In music, companion thinking may take the form of active listening and an acute sensitivity to the volume of our own arrogance. It requires a willingness to understand how our human agency is distributed among an assemblage with the nonhuman, following Jane Bennett’s (2010) concepts within vital materialism. As xwélmexw (Stó:lō/Skwah) artist, curator, and scholar Dylan Robinson explores in his book *Hungry Listening* (2020), Eurological and settler colonial<sup>2</sup> sense orientation creates conditions under which listening is considered an act of consumption, even extraction, in which the listener is not responsible or accountable to the sounded or soundmaking. Drawing upon Indigenous epistemologies, he instead advocates for the act of listening as attending ‘to the relationship between listener and listened-to’ (15). Companion thinking is a

humbling act of vulnerable listening (McClelland 2017), and through this approach we work to amplify and appropriately reference that which might be learned through the process. It is not an *acting upon* objects in order to make sound, but rather sound making in-company, in-relation.

Part of the humility of companion thinking is, for us, remembering to include a thinking of both place and complicity in relation to our musicking practice: situated making-with on stolen land. For settler musickers—particularly for those of us racialised as white, particularly where we have studied in Eurological educational institutions—it is important we recognise and take responsibility for our very real cultural attachments. We are not and never have been ‘neutral’ or ‘objective’. Acknowledging and taking responsibility for our identities in their current formations—individually, culturally, musically, artistically, and academically—is a crucial (if ever evolving) first ingredient to response-able musicking. Moving from the settler-colonial ownership logic of what Quandamooka scholar Distinguished Professor Aileen Moreton-Robinson calls the ‘white possessive’ (2015) to accountability requires becoming *capable of response*: response-able. Cultivating response-ability means being continually willing to self-interrogate, reckon with our own complicity, and to take care of our own discomfort so that we do not expect those we support in solidarity to cater to it. Because of this, there is a need for response-able musickers to approach our selves—our various parts—as companion thinkers, offering ourselves care and compassion even as we insist upon staying with the trouble of our own complicity, and with the discomfort of incommensurability. In doing so, we can learn to unsettle the certainty of our own centrality, and to listen for the voices we have been trained not to hear.

Perhaps companion thinking is an emergent method: it requires acceptance of our own internal and mutual vulnerability and to be open to the possibility (or, potential) of being changed and changing others, human and more-than human. These ethical considerations are ways of calibrating our music practices into the architecture of companion thinking, and we identify the possibility of developing this integration and design into an empirical research method of analysis. We continue.

### **Collaboration with Companions**

As we define who—or what—constitutes a companion and the ethical dimensions of thinking in-company, we consider those terms that have traditionally accompanied collective music making. We arrive at a discussion of the words collaboration, collaborators, and collaborative.

In building the concept of companion thinking, we realise our human-ness as what facilitates collaboration. We suggest that it is perhaps not possible to collaborate with the other-than-human; rather, we can instead think in-company together.

Collaboration is necessary for human survival. Psychiatrist and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder researcher Bessel Van der Kolk (2014) highlights the importance of collaboration as a human function within society: ‘Everything about us—our brains, our minds, and our bodies—is geared toward collaboration in social systems. This is our most powerful survival strategy, the key to our success as a species’ (168). Given this necessity to relate to others in social and cultural systems, we expand on this notion that we may also rely on the non-human entities within our environments to

survive. Collaboration pertains to the networks and systems we build within our own human species: we suggest that culture and society are human-built concepts, and within these systems we can exercise collaborative connections with other humans. Alternatively, companion thinking is an interspecies/multispecies/more-than-human interaction built on the same necessary constructs of networking, interdependence, and relationships, but may not necessarily apply to human-made concepts (such as culture or society). Given our species-specific differences in language, consent, and communication, we question if collaboration is ethically possible with other-than-human companions.

The primary difference between companion thinking and collaboration is how we relate to each other: language. Collaboration is an intentional making, doing, and even thinking with our human companions. It becomes possible through our spoken language, our bodily cues, our knowing and being as humans. We request and offer consent through language, and the ways in which we verbally address the nonhuman compared to our human companions may even prove to be harmful. In her investigation of language surrounding the word *use*, Ahmed (2019) cautions of the exploitative connotations or behaviour that may accompany familiar language, ‘using up is a reminder of how use itself can involve depletion: how to use something, to consume something, can also mean to take the life out of something’ (54). A code of ethics may better inform how we can think in-company and help us to choose respectful and reciprocal ways of communication as we create music together. Companion thinking is an unlearning of the routine or familiar ways of relating to each other, such as spoken language. As companion thinkers within music, music improvisation becomes a medium through which we can begin to communicate with other companions and collaborators. Considering the perspective of Object-Oriented Ontology (Harman 2018), we may never understand the intricacies of the non-human, and we can only approach an answer through our own standpoint as humans. We may not be able to ethically collaborate with the other-than-human, but we can think in-company. While collaboration is a choice we make, companion thinking is an inevitable reality of musicking; it is a method of embracing that which may unfold through our shared curiosity.

## Companion Concepts

Following Ahmed’s (2017) concept of companion texts, we acknowledge the theories, methods, and thoughts embedded in our creative and research practices. The intersections of these sources, thinkers, concepts, and companions with our perspective as creative musicians may be the locus of companion thinking. We question: What has influenced our development of companion thinking in music? What might we learn through music improvisation that we cannot otherwise understand without it, and how can this creative research approach help to inform other areas of research or knowing? To answer these questions, we look to our companion texts. We explain how we arrived at companion thinking through concepts of surprise and stumbling (Brinkmann 2014; Rottle 2021); Queer Use (Ahmed 2019); contamination (Tsing 2015), interdependence (Berry 2021; Solnit 2018; Van der Kolk 2014), and unmastery (Reardon-Smith 2021; after Singh 2017).

### ***Surprise, Stumbling, and Imagination***

Surprise is a recurring theme within our artistic research. As improvisers, we delight in the moments we are surprised by synchronicity, the unknown, change, and curiosity. As composers, we consider how to craft elements of surprise into new musical work. We become surprised by the alignment of our research ideas, similar to how we arrived at co-authoring this article; the visual or other multisensory elements of music making, such as Jodie's interactive work *Your Sound Future* (2018); and the concepts that unfold through companionship, such as Hannah's exploration of flute and physical movement with composer Kezia Yap (*space ii*, Yap and Reardon-Smith 2020–21).

Inherent to its definition, surprise cannot be planned. However, as we create space as companions in musical experimentation, surprise may be embraced as a possibility (Rottle 2018, 2021). It is the emotion we experience when we stumble upon that which is unplanned, and that can manifest as research data. Brinkmann (2014) explains a concept of stumbling data: 'If we allow ourselves to be sensitive to the strangeness of the world, there are numerous things to stumble upon: In conversations, media, books, advertising, consumer objects, architecture, and everyday episodes and situations. Usually, these are not simply given, as 'data', but, at certain times, they may cause us to stumble—and thereby become data' (724). Stumbling is often accompanied with a negative connotation: it is an accidental slip. Through the lens of companion thinking, unexpectedly stumbling or falling may provide rich musical experiences. It may facilitate data collection where we can better understand the ecology of our companions, and the result of this sudden awareness may help shape our work. According to Tanggaard and Brinkmann (2018), 'an experimenting attitude allows for unexpected discoveries. Many scientific discoveries are the result of the phenomenon we call stumbling. This approach sees errors as positive' (94). Stumbling and surprise may help us to stay curious about what we can learn about ourselves and the relationships we build as companions.

Stumbling also provokes the imagination, which may stimulate how we interact and continue to build relationships with companions. Tanggaard and Brinkmann (2018) explain, 'creative imagination is fundamentally relational, arising in the space between subjects and objects' and that 'imagination carries an innovative potential and plays a key role in making new insights available to the human mind' (94). Companion thinking starts within our minds: it is thinking in-company. It is a commitment to hearing both what is present and what may not yet be audible. Imagination becomes an important part of companion thinking as it 'stretches the mind across past, present, and future, also for the researcher' (88). Through our imaginations, we can realise our past, present, and future selves as companions, and we also stay curious about the past, present, and future versions of our companions.

How do we know when we stumble upon data? We may notice we stumble with our companions when we observe our anger; accept the awkwardness or strangeness of a situation; remember specific conversations; or relearn 'the joy of experimentation and of learning by doing or learning by failing' (Tanggaard and Brinkmann 2018, 88, 94). As we think in-company, we may experience excitement as we stumble upon surprise; we commit to analysing, reflecting, staying receptive, and communicating. It is also a recognition that we may be the catalyst that causes our companions to reciprocally stumble



with surprise. In a music practice, improvisation becomes a platform where we communicate, stumble, and create together in-company.

### **Queer Use**

Companion thinking was also closely shaped alongside Sara Ahmed's (2019) concept of Queer Use, wherein lingering on the qualities of use—not just a singular function—may render an object 'all the more lively' (26). As we improvise in a creative music practice, we explore and work-with sounds that may be the result of an object outside of its culturally intended function: 'a use for something can become possible given what has been built; Queer Use as coming after' (200). In this circumstance, queer includes but also extends beyond understandings of sexuality and gender, here defined as that which is unexpected, subverted, or reimagined. Through this perspective, we can practice companion thinking. Together, we create something new; we examine our expanded possibilities through Queer Use, and this begins within our thought processes.

Companion thinking is an invitation to linger, to reflect on our companions and their sounds that may otherwise go missing within a musical improvisation. Ahmed (2019) writes, 'to Queer Use is to make use audible, to listen to use, to bring to the front what ordinarily recedes into the background' (198), and 'to Queer Use can be to linger on the material qualities of that which you are supposed to pass over; it is to recover a potential from materials that have been left behind, all the things you can do with paper if you do not follow the instructions' (208). Lingering with companions may begin in the fog of the unknown. Yet, staying curious and present may offer the possibility of witnessing the emergence of something new. Lingering through Queer Use is to actively participate with that which is out-of-function. This opposes the straight path; a socially accepted proper function; and the user-used authority dynamic that may suggest a one-sided interaction. To companion think in musical improvisation, lingering through Queer Use may provide a pathway of communicating with consent and reciprocity between companions.

The perspective afforded through Queer Use may be combined with surprise and stumbling. When we subvert function, the effect can be surprising: 'Queer Use might describe this potential for an explosion, how small deviations, a loosening of a requirement, the creation of an exit point, opening a door to allow something to escape, can lead to more and more coming out' (Ahmed 2019, 215). Stumbling is an act of taking up space, of positioning, of representation outside of what may be expected. It is imaginative: it is the acceptance of the potential for something new to be realised—often out of our control—that may yet be understood. We may stumble upon a Queer Use, and as we fall, the time we take to regain balance allows us to calibrate as we land in a place different to where we intended. Using our imaginations, we can linger in this act of letting go. As we emerge from unknown territory, we can become companions with what has come out through Queer Use. Perhaps we may come out, too.

### **Contamination**

Contamination is ever-present, both as precondition and ongoing process. In musicking encounters with other soundmakers, audience members, time, place or space, contamination takes place, in the way described by Anna Löwenhaupt Tsing (2015):

We are contaminated by our encounters; they change who we are as we make way for others. As contamination changes world-making projects, mutual worlds—and new directions—may emerge. [Multicellular life was made possible by multiple, mutual contaminations of bacteria (Margulis and Sagan 2000).] Everyone carries a history of contamination; purity is not an option. One value of keeping precarity in mind is that it makes us remember that changing with circumstances is the stuff of survival. (27)

There are no clean lines, no decontaminated laboratory conditions, no clear answers. There is only contamination: the messy, entangled, interdependent, complex, implicated, connected business of living (and dying) and thinking and musicking and falling and trying as a more-than-human earthling. As Alexis Shotwell in *Against Purity* (2016) puts it: ‘however the bounds of the “we” are drawn, we are not, ever, pure. We’re complicit, implicated, tied in to things we abjure’ (7). This is observable in our physical bodies: ‘Our bodily boundaries are penetrated and traversed by viruses, chemicals, microbes. This way of being compromised names the sense in which we are liable to danger, vulnerable, potentially or actually damaged or sickened’ (7). We are born contaminated, with nonhuman cells co-mingling with our own.

In fact, for the human body to be functional and resilient, we require copious amounts of nonhuman inhabitation within what we consider the bounds of our own self: ‘being co-constituted with the world, ontologically inseparable, just seems to be our condition’ (Shotwell 2016, 7). Scott Gilbert’s use of the term ‘holobiont’—first suggested by biologists Lynne Margulis and René Fester—encompasses both an organism and its ‘persistent communities of symbionts’ (2017, M73). Gilbert demonstrates that we as humans are not biologically ‘individuals’ in any of the classical definitions of animal individuality— anatomy, genetics, development, immunity, physiology, and evolution. In each of these various traditional understandings of individuality, we are somewhat monstrous holobionts, teeming with interconnected, symbiotic lives, each of which is not reducible to a single self-contained organism. Everything down to our very DNA is contaminated by our symbionts (as well as our environment and environmental conditions), to a degree of complexity and indeterminacy that makes it impossible to say what ‘our’ essential traits might be. As humans, we are always already more-than-human.

Contaminating encounters pay no heed to traditional distinctions of biological, psychological, ontological, epistemological, sociopolitical, corporeal, visceral, sonic, visual, sensorial, intuitive, speculative, and metaphorical. As musickers, we can think with the careful attentiveness of listening to notice some of these contaminations.

### **Vulnerable Listening**

In opening ourselves towards sounds, made by ourselves or by others, or otherwise occurring in the immediate environment in which we find ourselves, we allow ourselves to be touched, to be transformed. Acknowledging that the choices we make are not wholly of our own volition, but part of a greater ecology of human and more-than-human interactions, of touching and being touched in ways that we are not always in control of, listening may be understood as an act of vulnerability. Listening implicates us—we are noninnocent; we are not bystanders or detached observers, but active co-creators of the music we are hearing. We are forming relationships, drawing connections, contaminating sounds with personal narratives, contaminating personal narratives

with sounds. We are listening to change, recognising some of the changes as they take place (in the soundmaking and soundmakers and in ourselves) in order to change, and therefore to be changed. We are musicking.

Such vulnerable listening to and with companions informs not only our musicking but also our thinking and research practices—in particular, our research ethics as practiced on stolen land. Sara McClelland (2017) examines vulnerability ‘in order to talk about the dangers (and pleasures) of listening, recognizing the responsibility to take care of oneself and others, and perhaps most importantly, taking steps to remain vulnerable even in the face of difficult and painful research’ (2). Vulnerability here is paying attention to the power relationships at play, the structures of oppression and violence in which we are implicated, complicit. It is in listening to our own internal wants and needs, our sense of entitlement, and from where this might arise. It means, as Palyku writer Ambelin Kwaymullina (2020) says, ‘learning to hear the noise of settler-colonialism inside your head’ (55). It means hearing the word no—to ‘not only hear it but look for it’ (56)—keeping in mind that ‘settler-colonialism is a serial violator of Indigenous boundaries’ (56). Sometimes this is ‘listening as taking-leave’ (Kanngieser 2021), hearing not only the word no, but also hearing when something, even someplace, is not *for* us.

Vulnerable listening asks us to pay attention to our own permeability, the ways in which we are both contaminated and contaminating others. As McClelland states, to stay response-able as vulnerable listeners requires care for our vulnerability: ‘This focuses attention on the emotional aspects of data collection that require metabolization, debriefing, and collegial support’ (2017, 2). We call upon our companion thinkers to process emotionally and intellectually, committing to listening with care as a musicking practice that leaks messily outside of intentional artistic soundmaking.

## **Unmastery**

Mastery is always noninnocent. Julietta Singh, in her unthinking of mastery, articulates this:

To be characterized as the master of a language, or a literary tradition, or an instrument, for instance, is widely understood to be laudable. Yet as a pursuit, mastery invariably and relentlessly reaches toward the indiscriminate control over something—whether human or inhuman, animate or inanimate. It aims for the full submission of an object—or something objectified—whether it be external or internal to oneself. In so doing, mastery requires a rupturing of the object being mastered, because to be mastered means to be weakened to a point of fracture. Mastery is in this sense a splitting of the object that is mastered from itself, a way of estranging the mastered object from its previous state of being. (2017, 9–10)

Musical mastery is not a concept confined to Eurological musical traditions. However, the Eurological institutions that seek to train and make use of masterful musickers are particularly invested in neoliberal logics of individualism and separation. The violent splitting of mastery persists in the relationship of musician to instrument and to themselves, and also in the role that musicking plays in representing and performing aspects of a disciplinary social order. The specialisation and commodification of musical praxis moved it from collective activity to spectacle to an industry of mass (re)production and consumption (the final audio editing process of recorded music, ensuring a smooth and comfortable listening experience, is also named ‘mastery’). Musical mastery reflects and

represents modes of mastery that sustain hierarchies of power and social alienation in neoliberal capitalist society: ‘what was an element in the social whole appears as a work or art to be consumed. Our society mimics itself, represents and repeats itself, instead of letting it live’ (Attali 1985, 134).

After Singh, Hannah Reardon-Smith (2021) proposes a musicking practice of *unmastery* as an attempt at undoing some of these institutional lessons. Unmastery is practiced by deconstructing and reconstructing narratives of lineage and inclusion, unlearning our institutional habits and our relationships to masterful instruments and practices, celebrating our mistakes and failures, listening vulnerably to voices we have been trained not to hear, and curiously attending to our environment and contaminations. Unlearning mastery is practiced in-company, as a practice of companion thinking. By declaring ourselves unmasters, we admit to (and admit in) interdependence.

### **Interdependence**

Interdependence is relationship building—both deeply vulnerable and essential for our survival.

Curiously, this term continued to find us as we read for pleasure alongside the creation of this article, and thus became a companion concept. Here, we position interdependence within the heading of un mastery; we identify that to form relationships with our companions—ones without hierarchy or architecture of power—we may first need to experience a process of unlearning. As we read about topics outside of our music practices—psychology, feminism, and creative writing—we continued to stumble upon interdependence. We offer three different perspectives of this concept that may inform companion thinking within a creative music practice.

Within psychology, PTSD-specialist Bessel Van der Kolk (2014) writes that teaching young people in foster care how to be interdependent means ‘teaching them how to have relationships’ (343). Van der Kolk provides a concise definition of the term within his field of research, but perhaps what is curious about this statement is that interdependence is something that must be learned. To consider this statement from a position of un mastery, perhaps it is the discord of isolation, self-sufficiency, and individualism that needs to be unlearned so that interdependence can be realised. Interdependence is simply the act of having relationships; collaboration is necessary to human survival (Van der Kolk 2014). Companion thinking encompasses both of these necessary types of relationships, those with the human and the more-than-human.

In her collection of political essays *Call Them by Their True Names*, American author Rebecca Solnit (2018) imagines our interconnected placement within an ecology of human and non-human entities:

There, of course, is such a thing as society, and you’re inside it. Beyond that. Beneath it and above and around and within it and us, there is such a thing as ecology, the systems within which our society exists, and which it often clashes. Ecological Thinking articulates the interdependence and interconnectedness of all things. (47)

Solnit describes the human societies in which we operate, and then expands this position into a wider ecological network. Our built societies cannot escape the ecological networks in which we operate; human connections exist within a messy web held up by the solid

pillars of natural ecologies. We rely upon, work-with, and often conflict with these ecologies. Yet, we are interdependent. Politically, companion thinking is a way of learning how to build these necessary relationships with the non-human.

Through creative writing, Australian author Vanessa Berry (2021) takes an autobiographical approach to investigating the objects within her surroundings and questions: 'What if I could be a conduit for things like the bird clock or the jacket, as much as they could be conduits for me' (3). Berry applies a post-human perspective through the artistic medium of creative writing. Things, or her companions, are placed into the foreground, which 'challenges the writer of autobiography to determine an approach for balancing self and thing, allowing the thing's expression to present in tandem with their own' (Berry 2021, 3). This creative writing approach is reflective of companion thinking. There is a commitment to listening to what her companions may be presenting; a curiosity about how her presence may affect her companions; and an assumed response-ability for her own placement within an ecology of companions. In this case, creative writing becomes a mode of expressing, articulating, describing the interdependence she has with her companions.

### ***Companion Thinking: An Emergent Method***

Stumbling is unplanned, but through companion thinking we allow ourselves to remain open to the unknown and sit within the murkiness of where we may fall. As companion thinkers, we recognise that we may cause other companions to stumble: our actions, sounds, and responses can be as reciprocally disruptive as the ones that made us stumble in the first place. Just as we experience surprise, we too can surprise our companions. We stay receptive to how we may depend on other companions; we notice our vulnerabilities and approach other vulnerable companions with compassion. Companion thinking is reciprocity, interdependence; we learn how to form relationships with other companions. Music improvisation becomes a platform through which we can realise this interdependence.

We recognise that the intersection of these concepts, when filtered through a perspective of musical improvisation, may be the beginning of companion thinking as an emergent method, one that can be flexible, adapted, and built upon by other improvisers, researchers, and companions as it unfolds anew. We offer the idea of companion thinking in reciprocity: We present it in honour of our collective of influences, and we invite the possibility of further developing this approach in-company.

### ***Case Study: How We Think in Company***

Companion thinking is a practice. It is all-encompassing of the co-creative interaction (often unintentional, but not always) between human and nonhuman entanglements. When we practice within the established confines of a music tradition, either related to instrumental technique, musical notation, or expressive interpretation, we practice within a set of guidelines defining that which is informed, correct, intended. When we become companion thinkers, we submit ourselves to an unknown; we respond to spontaneous and unplanned events. What we do have in these moments is our learned abilities: our past selves, the knowledge we have learned, and the skills we work to unlearn are our

companions. Companion thinking is the process of realising new relationships—in the moment—with what we know, and a commitment to staying receptive to the unknown.

To demonstrate companion thinking, we reflect on a short improvisation<sup>3</sup> that originally served as the conclusion for our presentation at the 2021 Dialogues: Analysis and Performance conference. As we describe this example, we attempt to explain how we think in-company through our creative music practices. Drawing upon the companion concepts described throughout this article, this case study helps to support how companion thinking can become an approach to music analysis.

Our presentation took place remotely in Jodie's apartment in Brisbane, Australia. We set up our gear in her dining room: a table with everyday objects, flutes, and chairs, a zoom recorder, and our phones to take video. It was daytime, and sunlight shone through the east-facing windows as neighbours frequently passed by on the sidewalk. We ceased our chatter and friendly laughter in acknowledgement that we were now shifting from collaboration to thinking in-company. We committed ourselves to companion thinking and listening vulnerably as we expanded our awareness beyond each other and toward our companions: the collection of sound in the tall ceiling height of the dining room; the breeze and sunlight outside the window; the resonant surface of the table. We acknowledged the unknown with curiosity and pressed the record button.

In this case study, companion thinking began before we entered the recording space. It started with the decision to make the recording at Jodie's apartment instead of Hannah's (which are both located within a one-kilometer distance). Jodie's dining room was the more resonant space, with lighting that would best facilitate a video recording for the remote conference presentation. We chose a time of day when her housemate would be at work. Each of these planning steps took into consideration elements that shaped the result of the improvisation before it began. We considered our companions: the recording device, lighting, a housemate. Even the reason to record a remote presentation—Australian travel restrictions due to Covid-19—became a companion in this improvisation.

We both trained as flutists in our formative years of music study, and because of this we actively chose to explore companion thinking through improvisation within a context that stretched outside of what we have come to know as familiar. Jodie elected to improvise with everyday objects, a practice she has developed alongside her flute playing since 2017. Hannah assembled a flute and a bass flute, choosing to explore an expanded register of sound. This decision making was not done alone; rather, it was a contaminated process (Tsing 2015), one that we discussed and reconciled with the former versions of ourselves who identified as classically trained flutists within European art music traditions. We acknowledged and accepted that this was a vulnerable (McClelland 2017) part of our music making: that we trained for so long within a context only to leave its confines in pursuit of a different creative practice, a decision that occurred alongside deep and painful ruptures in our personal lives. Together, we held each other's vulnerabilities through music improvisation. We subverted the functions of everyday objects and found ourselves discovering ways of interacting with the metals, temperature, and parts of the flute, rather than its typical playability. This occurred through the lens of Queer Use (Ahmed 2019), and we delighted in what came out. We stumbled (Brinkmann 2014; Tanggaard and Brinkmann 2018) upon new sounds. As Hannah played high register multiphonics, Jodie sounded a plastic electrical pipe and created similar-pitched

harmonics. We were surprised by these unexpected chords. The high pitch of this event inspired Jodie's dog to howl, and this response to our sound turned our attention further outward as we realised our interdependence (Solnit 2018).

As we continued to improvise and think in-company, we questioned: Who might our other companions be right now, and how can we think with them? Even as we remained unaware of many aspects, they were present and actively playing a part in the sound making: we did not know, for instance, what land on which the gold and silver of our flutes was mined, and the conditions under which this took place, and yet the metals we held in our hands have still somehow made their way to us; these objects have history and materiality beyond that which we can conceive. Our imagination of these possible histories, too, plays a part in our musicking. There are infinite companions.

We made decisions together as collaborators while still considering our companions. The dog chimed in, and we actively listened to his response to our sound making. We did not attempt to control the external sounds of wind, aeroplanes, and pedestrians outside of the recording space. Rather, we embraced these companions and their contribution to the improvisation. Companion thinking occurred both automatically and intentionally. In making the decision to record at Jodie's place, we considered the dynamics of space and logistics. We deliberately embraced all that was presented, engaged with curiosity, and committed to thinking in-company alongside the 'making and doing' (Tomlinson 2022) of musical improvisation.

## Conclusion

Companion thinking as a musicking practice is not about the outcome, but rather about expanding our capacity for awareness of our companion co-creators through the act of soundmaking. Matana Roberts in her piece for John Zorn's *Arcana IV* writes that: 'It didn't really matter how I got to the end result as long as the process was inquisitive, challenging—invigorating' (2009, 259). Companion thinking invites this kind of curiosity and openness into our musicking practices, noticing the pre-existing relationships and those that emerge and develop during soundmaking and analysis.

As we engage with companion texts, concepts, methods, and ideas, we develop our capacity to build relationships. In our creative music practices, we embrace the riskiness of surprise; the subversive and contradictions implicit of Queer Use; the unsettling feeling of stumbling; and the boldness of our own imaginations. Companion thinking begins inward, but it is a commitment and responsibility to turn this heightened focus outward and to think-with. Through honouring our companions, we may discover the potential within ourselves. Thinking in-company may provide clarity as we stumble, fall, or experience surprise; perhaps it can assist us in staying curious and vulnerable in a creative music practice. It is an acceptance that we are always growing, and we have potential to continue to work-with, make-with, learn from, influence, and be in-company.

Thank you for thinking in-company with us.

## Notes

1. George E. Lewis (1996) coined the terms 'Eurological' and 'Afrological' musics, in order to highlight not only distinct traditions of musicking but also the difference in ontological

frameworks and approaches, and how these continue to effect practices of improvisation and musical experimentalisms that seek to deviate from the norms of their traditions. We use the term ‘Eurological’ throughout this paper to refer to thinking and musicking that emerges or derives from European tradition art music.

2. ‘Settler colonialism’—as theorised by Australian settler scholar Patrick Wolfe (1999) and further developed by Native and Indigenous studies scholars, notably Chickasaw scholar Jodi A. Byrd (2011)—points to colonisation as a structure rather than an event, and one which the settler state is continually working to maintain and reproduce.
3. An extract of this improvisation session is available to view at <https://vimeo.com/776470298>.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributors

Dr *Jodie Rottle* (she/her) is a creative flutist, researcher, lecturer, composer, and improviser who works-with the nonhuman to explore new sound concepts. She is a member of the two-time Queensland Music Award-winning Matt Hsu’s *Obscure Orchestra* and often collaborates with artists across circus, spoken word, puppetry, visual art, and physical performance mediums. Committed to the creation and performance of new music, Jodie has commissioned over 45 new works—many by emerging composers—and performed nationally across Australia and the United States. She completed her PhD at the Queensland Conservatorium in 2021 and continues her research as the Resident Adjunct with the Creative Arts Research Institute at Griffith University. In addition to her research and freelance music career, she is a sessional lecturer at the Queensland Conservatorium (Music Theory) and JMC Academy Brisbane (Entertainment Business Management). When she’s not making music, she can most often be found bouldering and hanging out with her dog Stanlee Woofington. More at [www.jodierottle.com](http://www.jodierottle.com)

*Hannah Reardon-Smith* (they/them) is a settler flutist, electronic musician, improviser, radio producer, community organiser, writer, researcher, and thinker living on the unceded land of the Jagera, Yuggera Ugarapul, and Turrbal Peoples. Their work and thinking are rooted in queer and feminist collaborative and contaminative co-creation with other ‘holobionts with history’—soundmakers and artmakers, physical and social environments, ecologies, histories, and narratives, exploring the emergent possibilities of making-kin and finding agency within community (soundmaking as kinmaking: *musickin*). Hannah completed their doctoral candidature at the Queensland Conservatorium, Griffith University in 2021 and are now post-doctoral research associate at Macquarie University, supporting Wiradjuri trans-nonbinary Professor Sandy O’Sullivan’s ARC Future Fellowship project, *Saving Lives: Mapping the influence of Indigenous LGBTIQ+ creative artists*. They are an active experimental musicker in the Brisbane scene, playing with Matt Hsu’s *Obscure Orchestra*, It’s Science And Feelings, The Flowers of Evil, Rogue Three, and as a soloist under the moniker *cyberBanshee*. They are also producer of the podcast *Saltwater Library*, with University of Queensland DECRA scholar Dr Rebecca Olive, and co-producer of community radio 4ZZZ’s regular programme *Radio Reversal*. More of Hannah’s soundmaking and work can be found on their website: [hannahreardonsmith.com](http://hannahreardonsmith.com)

## ORCID

*Jodie Rottle*  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7385-4857>

*Hannah Reardon-Smith*  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4983-3807>



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