In spring 2020, I finished my dissertation, and decided to read for pleasure for a while. I had time in my hands, because there were no jobs available. My defense was in April, just as the first wave of COVID-19 was cresting.¹ I had factored in the terrible academic job market well before COVID, but that spring even nonprofits, a sector where I'd built up a robust résumé before returning to graduate school, were calling off existing searches and deferring new ones.² My home department, where by informal tradition those completing the PhD counted on at least a year of teaching work while they transitioned, wrote to say not to expect to teach in the fall: their contractual obligation was completed. Comfort, in short supply elsewhere, became a priority in reading. Weary of the academy and my dissertation topic, I needed a break from nineteenth-century America.

My dissertation topic had grown out of a hunch, an intuitive guess, with no real evidence at first, arising out of what I knew about Emily Dickinson’s musical life and a passing encounter with improvisation theory. Wanting to attend a conference in Paris, I proposed what seemed an outlandish idea, that Dickinson, known among her family and friends as a dynamic extemporaneous piano player, also improvised in her writing practice. Fortunately, as I dug deeper into the music and writing of Dickinson’s time, I found improvisation everywhere. Many scholars were generous with their knowledge, and forgiving of my initial mistakes, and over time I grew conversant in previously unfamiliar subjects, including nineteenth-century U.S. musical performance cultures, extemporaneous oratory, historical ethnomusicology, and a subfield of Romanticist criticism focused on literary improvisation. The latter two fields provided useful
methods for writing how a young woman’s ephemeral, semi-private musical performance practices informed her semi-private, now-canonical writings. Ethnomusicology describes how music illuminates the cultures and social networks that produce it, which was important for a writer who shared her work among friends, and whose improvised piano playing we know about entirely through writings by others. Romanticist writing on improvisation demonstrated the interconnection between musical and literary improvisation, and showed that poets important to Dickinson improvised in writing, and wrote about improvisation. It was a live topic during her lifetime, but an ephemeral experience, visible in the archive mostly through passing references by others.³

Stated very briefly, improvisation as we now understand it arises out of the intersection of opera, oral poetry, and print culture in eighteenth-century Italy. Some of the earliest opera composers, such as Pietro Metastasio, began their careers as improvisatori, roving extemporaneous street-poets, who performed long, metrically complex poetic pastiches of Classical and modern themes, often suggested by their audiences. The figure of the improvvisatore spread throughout Europe and then the U.S., especially after Germaine de Stael’s immensely popular and influential 1807 novel Corinne, ou L’Italie. Corinne influenced poetic representations of improvisation in Byron’s Don Juan, Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Aurora Leigh, and Laetitia Elizabeth Landon’s The Improvisatrice, among other works, and the character Corinne, loosely based on the Classical lyric poet Corinna, served as a trope to praise or damn women writers. The terms used to praise and critique improvisers has remained remarkably consistent over the centuries: uncannily powerful and emotionally resonant, but textually unreliable and formally unconstrained. These critiques will sound familiar to anyone familiar with Dickinson’s reception history.
I had come across and set aside much fiction, poetry, criticism, and theory relevant to the topic, but with no home in my single-author dissertation. We all end up with a to-read pile, but with no teaching job in the offing, I faced no pressure to write more about my dissertation subject. In fact, after five years of constantly writing to deadlines, no one needed anything from me. This small pleasure was inextricable from being cut loose institutionally.

2. Among the books set aside were George Sand’s 1841 Consuelo and its 1843 sequel, La Comtesse de Rudolstadt. These were published after Sand’s early, scandalous successes from the 1830s. They are a narratively messy, sprawling pair, but their plot mechanics will not offend a reader of Dickens, Stowe, Thackeray, Stendahl, Alexandre Dumas, or Victor Hugo. Consuelo is an opera singer in eighteenth-century Venice, and an impoverished Spanish “zingara,” a semi-pejorative term for Roma people, more or less equivalent to “gypsy.” This makes her an object of fascination though an unlikely opera star in fashionable Venice, where she doesn’t quite fit in with the other students of the elderly, highly-esteem composer and singing-teacher Nicola Porpora. This is a real historical figure, and throughout the novel, Sand arranges for Consuelo to meet many actual eighteenth-century Europeans, including Metastasio. Consuelo’s vocal improvisations have a powerful, uncanny quality that cuts across social divisions, charming and attracting nobility and peasants equally, though strangely, the novels include few scenes showing Consuelo singing. Sand wrote the novels while romantically involved with Fredric Chopin, who played in public infrequently and reluctantly. Perhaps Chopin’s reticence is the model for Sand’s hiding of Consuelo’s characteristic light under so much narrative bushel.
Consuelo is rootless, stateless: neither Spanish nor Italian, she roams from Italy to Bohemia to the Austro-Hungarian and Prussian empires. These wanderings are sparked by her need to flee Venice, where her lover, Anzoleto, a self-absorbed gondolier and would-be singer, and Count Zustiniani, the owner of the opera house where she performs, fight over the right to financially and sexually exploit her. With the help of Porpora, Consuelo finds refuge in a remote Bohemian castle, tutoring a frivolous young noblewoman who aspires to sing. Here, Sand stops to inform her readers that this is the Gothic section of the novel, complete with family secrets. These include the mysterious, ghostlike brother of her pupil, suspicious servants, and a network of hidden tunnels and grottoes. Consuelo falls in love with the brother, Albert, heir to the Prussian title Count von Rudolstadt. Albert may or may not also be the reincarnation of an ancient ancestor on his mother’s side, Ziska Trismegistus, another real-life historical figure who fought against Prussian conquest and oppression. Albert’s violin, another family inheritance, makes music with a hypnotic power akin to the effect of Consuelo’s singing. He has befriended Zdenko, a kind of holy-fool poet, and the only person who knows that Albert’s frequent disappearances relate to the tunnels and grottoes, built during the time of Ziska’s last stand against the Prussians.

Consuelo eventually flees the Rudolstadt’s castle, too. Anzoleto happens to walk by and, seeing her, upsets her carefully-constructed place within the family, seeking to force her to return to Venice. While in transit, Consuelo befriends Josef Haydn and… well, the narrative is too complicated to summarize without derailing this essay. In the equally busy sequel, Consuelo reconnects with Porpora, singing for royalty, nobility, historical figures like Voltaire, servants, and peasants in and around Dresden and Vienna. Along the way, Albert dies, comes back to life, and is found to be at the center of an anti-imperialist secret society. In the end, Consuelo and
Albert adopt, and embody for their followers, a rootless Republicanism, impoverished and internationalist, zingari-ism as a social and political ethos.

The twists and turns are improbable, but as Sharon Cameron pointed out recently in *J19*, we don’t read even a master-plotter like Tolstoy primarily for the narrative.⁴ If novels illuminate the values, aspirations, and anxieties of the time and place where they were written, and help us to see our own cultural anxieties more clearly, then *Consuelo* has something to say not only for French readers but Americans, too. Consuelo’s vocal improvisations create a democratic space, within which listeners across political affiliation and social class, from emperors to peasants, hear the same essential, lasting, and true expression. Chopin’s piano improvisations were said to have been similarly esteemed across class and social station, and the notion that improvised music could contribute to social change was essential to the revolutionary-Romantic France Sand and Chopin knew.⁵ Drawing on her six month-long stay in Venice during 1834, her knowledge of de Stäel’s and Byron’s writings, her first-hand experience of extemporaneous performance by Chopin, as well as Franz Liszt and Pauline Viardot, the singer on whom Consuelo was modeled, Sand imagined, and then created, not only the fictional Consuelo, but also a writerly persona and mode of improvisation-inflected writing with comparable ambitions to remake society.

Consuelo and Albert increasingly commit to Republican, anti-imperial social reform, and as Kari Lokke has argued, “in *Consuelo* republicanism takes on a distinctly socialist and proletarian cast.”⁶ Sand’s Republicanism was also, always, feminist, so another strange, complicating quality of both novels is that they devote so much space to Albert von Rudolstadt, Porpora, Haydn, and the other men in Consuelo’s life. This may be explicable by considering that not only was Sand’s Republicanism feminist, but her feminism was Republican. Sand sought above all else to exercise all the rights of a citizen, as since childhood she had seen men,
including her father, an officer in Napoleon’s army, do. The identity George Sand, the top hat, pants, and dress coat were a signal of her insistence on free movement around Europe, doing as she pleased. Sand’s attention on the men around Consuelo highlights the singer’s growing awareness of the rights accorded as a matter of course to those men, but not to her, and her increasing self-determination to participate in the rights accorded to Anzoleto, Porpora, Albert, Haydn and the rest. Part of Sand’s radical project in writing the 1841 Consuelo, then, was its depiction of an eighteenth-century woman who anticipates Sand’s own insistence on the right to go where she pleases, work and fight among men to destabilize the familiar power structures that rely on passive consent, and, albeit offstage in Consuelo’s case, fuck whom she pleases.

3.

Sand was not kidding about this. In 1822, age 18, she married Casimir Dudevant, a friend-of-friends who was a military officer. Almost immediately, she regretted the decision. They had two children, Maurice and Solange, and lived at Nohant, the family estate in the Berry region that Sand had inherited from her grandmother. The pen name arose from an 1831 novel credited to J. Sand, *Rose et Blanche*, written collaboratively with Jules Sandeau. By the time the novel was published, the woman born Amantine Lucile Aurore Dupin was already infamous in Paris for dressing in a suit-jacket and pants, with a top hat and cane, and for openly engaging in extramarital sexual relationships with Sandeau and others. In the early writings as George Sand, she does not break character, and other writers, including men such as Alfred de Musset, Victor Hugo, and Honore de Balzac, not only accepted her as a fellow writer, but referred to her using the male pronoun. News of her Paris exploits reached Berry, but the populace there remained largely loyal to Sand across her lifetime, even as she divorced Dudevant and successfully sued to
retain ownership of Nohant and custody of their children. During the reactionary decades between Charles X’s ascent to power in 1824 and the 1848 Revolution, male critics frequently accused Sand of being anti-marriage, a charge she denied, and anti-husband, one she embraced. In Lettres d’un Voyageur, she responded to a critic, “Yes, Sir, the downfall of husbands would indeed have been the object of my ambition had I felt I had the power to become a reformer.”

Property and other social rights accorded to women during the 1789 Revolution, including the right to divorce, had been whittled away in the ensuing decades.

Sand’s writing made use of an astonishingly wide range of forms and genres: she wrote plays; music criticism; epistolary, personal, literary, and political essays; novels; cartoons; children’s stories; and thousands of letters. Her innovations extended beyond what she created to how she created it, assuming a male persona and the privilege that accompanied maleness, and treating matter-of-factly her right to employ forms and genres considered the province of men. Sand’s masculine narrative voice is richly unstable, full of enticing slippages, as when she writes, in Lettres d’un Voyageur, of Sand’s longing for the absent friend/lover de Musset. She worked fast and published a lot, in part because others financially depended on her. This speed contributed to her own reputation, among critics both sympathetic and not, as a literary improviser. Still, even after achieving financial stability, Sand kept writing, seemingly for the fun of it.

4.

Consuelo is not in print, and it should be. The text has not been translated into English since the nineteenth century. The first English translation, by Francis G. Shaw, appeared serially in 1845 in The Harbinger, a Transcendentalist periodical published by the Brook Farm phalanx,
with the first four pages of Volume 1, Issue 1 devoted to the novel’s first two chapters. The Boston firm William Ticknor & Company then published the translation in book form in 1846. Shaw also translated the sequel, rendering the title as *The Countess of Rudolstadt*. Strangely, the sequel has been retranslated in a twenty-first century scholarly edition. Gretchen van Slyke’s 2008 translation, with the title rendered as *The Countess von Rudolstadt*, includes an informative introduction and useful contextual notes. A twenty-first century scholarly edition of *Consuelo* in English would offer the opportunity to reintegrate the novel into nineteenth-century American literature. Sand was popular in America, and an acknowledged influence for American writers including Margaret Fuller, Walt Whitman, Henry James, and, yes, Emily Dickinson. Yet these novels, and Sand’s writings generally, are little-discussed in contemporary Americanist literary criticism.

It is unclear which of Sand’s writings Dickinson read. If Sand was a threat to social norms surrounding gender, profession, and marriage in France, then how much more destabilizing her example must have seemed in small-town Massachusetts. On the other hand, it is difficult to imagine Dickinson *not* reading Sand. The musically-engaged Dickinson would have been aware of *Consuelo*, issued by a Boston publisher during her teens. Sand was important to Elizabeth Barrett Browning and George Eliot, who were important to Dickinson. To her nieces, Frances and Louise Norcross, probably in 1861, of women forced to constrain their inner selves as children, Dickinson wrote, “Mrs. Browning fainted, we need not read Aurora Leigh to know, when she lived with her English aunt, and George Sand ‘must make no noise in her grandmother’s bedroom.’ Poor children! Women, now, queens, now!”

Then there is the manuscript of “Alone and in a circumstance,” with a pasted-in collage of a three-cent postage stamp depicting a train engine in motion, about 90 degrees
counterclockwise from the top of the sheet, with two snips of paper sticking out from the left edge, one reading “George Sand,” the other “Mauprat.” This is not evidence that Dickinson read the 1837 novel. As Mike Kelly points out, the clippings seem to come from an essay in the May 1870 issue of *Harper’s Magazine*. Yet it does indicate that Sand was a literally iconic writer for Dickinson, much as her bedroom-wall portraits of Eliot and Browning signal an emotional affiliation and affective identification. Much attention has been paid to the possibility that the collage represents the poem’s spider, traipsing across the speaker’s “reticence,” but who is the reticent speaker? The character Edmée, in *Mauprat*, is held captive and forced to accept a proposal of marriage, while in *The Comtesse de Rudolstadt*, Consuelo is imprisoned for refusing the sexual advances of Frederick the Great. The poem’s references to legal seizure of property may refer to the irony that Consuelo’s captivity is both illegal – she has broken no law – and legal, because Frederick’s power exceeds the law. The image of the train in motion toward the edge of the page, with “George Sand” and “Mauprat” looking something like smoke rising from an engine under full steam, resonates with the desire for escape.

Walt Whitman acknowledged to Horace Traubel how important *Consuelo* had been to him, saying that his “‘heart turns to Sand: I regard her as the brightest woman ever born.’ Better than Hugo as a novel writer? ‘Oh! greatly! Why, read *Consuelo*: see if you don't think so yourself: it will open your eyes’. ” In 1938, Esther Shephard argued that Walt Whitman had based his entire ethos and aesthetic, including the unusual typography of the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*, on his reading of the two Consuelo novels. Shephard focused on the visionary patriot-poet Zdenko and the mystically gifted aristocrat-violinist Albert, more than on Consuelo herself. Her argument depends on Whitman’s use of French terms that also appear in Sand’s original French, and on a close reading of certain phrases and stylistic quirks of the French original and
first American editions. Shephard’s basic premise is credible, that Whitman’s reading of *Consuelo* informed his new approach to, and ambitions for, his poetic project, leading to the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*.

It is in character for Whitman to borrow words, phrases, ideas, and even Sand’s distinctive use of ellipses. But Romantic-era writing has no shortage of visionary and even revolutionary-minded poetic personae for Whitman to emulate. Zdenko is problematic as a model for Whitman’s poetic persona. He is a recluse, and sometimes violent, particularly when he thinks Albert is at risk. Yet Sand’s, and particularly *Consuelo*’s, stamp can be seen in the 1855 *Leaves*, as Betsy Erkkila insightfully points out, as in the description of the “pure contralto”’s song as a “profound and rapturous” experience, and in Whitman’s roving, freedom-seeking, inclusive “I.”17 Whitman’s reading of *Consuelo* may also explain his transition from the 1845 Eurosceptic of “Art Singing and Heart Singing” to the opera-lover of the 1850s.18 The sweeping, operatic, and socially-engaged *Leaves* may have been provoked by the narrative ambitiousness of the novels. Whitman’s long, digressive lines are crafted to carry the formal and tonal qualities of extemporaneous vocal elaborations on operatic arias. *Leaves*, like *Consuelo* and *The Countess of Rudolstadt*, attempts to articulate a new set of social principles and structures that, if enacted, would remake society and make conflict based on geographic, class-based, and – Whitman’s addition – racial distinctions irrelevant.

Margaret Fuller actually met Sand, though she wrote little about the encounter, at least among the writings that survive; but Fuller’s style, subject matter, method of writing, and even choice of medium shows how much she took from Sand. Both were better educated than most women of their time and place, and initially known as conversationalists. Neither was above writing for mainstream newspapers: Sand’s wrote for *Le Figaro* and other periodicals, and even,
during the 1848 revolution, edited revolutionary periodicals. During Fuller’s time as a roving
European correspondent for the New York Tribune, she described meeting Sand and hearing
Chopin, and reviewed Consuelo twice, first the French-language text and then the English
translation. Like Sand, Fuller wrote increasingly wrote in a hurry, growing more politically
engaged as she filed stories from the 1848 Roman Revolution.

Henry James wrote frequently of Sand, describing with admiration her devotion to her
craft, her attention to “the citadel of style,” and her commitment to representing the full range of
emotional engagements. The centrality of these qualities in his own novels speaks most
elocutously to her importance for James. Sand has a particular, characteristic narrative move that
can be seen, refracted through their distinctive styles, in James and many of the other writers
who admired her. She will suddenly shift from an extended, seemingly internal monologous
meditation on the subject at hand, to a direct, even confrontational address to the reader, or to an
imagined rhetorical opponent. This seemingly extemporaneous shift in thought, arriving at a
charged moment of expression, may be what James refers to in an 1899 essay, when he says that
she “found her gift of improvisation , found her tropic wealth, by leaping — a surprised
conquistador of ‘style’ — straight upon the coral strand.” He compares her writing to the
seemingly intuitive performance of an opera singer, “she started with the whole thing as a Patti
or a Mario starts with a voice which is a method, which is music, and that it was simply the train
in which she travelled.” He conflates Sand with Consuelo, and with the central character of
another novel, actress Lucrezia Floriani, asserting that Sand was distinctive and compelling not
only “the force of her gift for rich improvisation, beautiful as this was,” but also “the force of her
ability to act herself out, given the astounding quantities concerned in this self. That energy too,
we feel, was in a manner an improvisation.” Leland Person, Jr. suggests that James’ repeated
references to Sand as an *improvisatrice* relate to their shared concern with gender identity, which is “subject not only to perpetual deconstruction but also to improvisation.”23 James’ enthusiasm was retrospective, as is mine. This is different than that of Dickinson, Whitman, or Fuller, who read and responded to Sand’s writings of the 1840s and 1850s as they appeared, or soon after. Still, it says something that American writers as diffuse in ambitions as Fuller, Whitman, James, and Dickinson were so ardently committed to Sand, and to the project as a writer and a “reformer” that she laid out in her work and her life.

5.

Sand has helped me return fresh to a nineteenth-century American literature that feels more capacious with her in it, providing vibrant new perspective on familiar American writers, and on American writing. Like listening to great musical improvisers – Sonny Rollins or Gabriela Montero, say – reading Sand can leave the uncanny impression that she is discovering alongside us what she wants to say. When as a young woman Sand’s grandmother died, and she inherited money and real estate in Paris and Berry, there were surely easier ways than writing to supplement that wealth. Later in life, when her children were adults and her finances more stable, Sand continued to write. The obvious conclusion is that she wrote for fun, or for the challenge. Dickinson, of course, did, too. Reading these writers has prompted thinking about what it means to have both a reading and a writing practice that derive from and contribute to pleasure.

Academic writing outside the tenure track is difficult. The tenure system is structured to support and incentivize scholarly writing, but other professions – including university teaching off the tenure track – are not. Outside of those supports and incentives, you quickly feel how much uncompensated, time-consuming labor is involved, and might reasonably ask, “Why
continue?” There is also a freedom that accrues to those who live and work off the tenure track. Like all radical freedoms, it can be frightening. You are free to write whatever you want, or nothing at all. Walking away, withholding one’s uncompensated labor, from an industry with no space for you, is always a reasonable option. You can, at least, choose where, how, and for whom you provide free-of-charge labor.

Writing is fun, especially when you are able to choose what you write. Pursuing the PhD helped to bring my hunch into reality. The generosity of the people I encountered while doing so sits uncomfortably alongside the ultimately self-sabotaging lack of generosity in the institutions supporting the work. I still don’t understand this but I’ve come to realize that, in my self-created workspace outside the tenure track, it is not my puzzle to solve. The long, deeply discursive and institutionally-embedded experience of writing the dissertation, followed by many mostly solitary COVID-months since, have led me to three other important, and comforting, conclusions: first, trusting hunches can lead to good scholarship; second, academic writing can be pleasurable; and finally, I need not rely on the validation or rejection of institutions to do this work. Neither do you.

1 “CDC Museum COVID-19 Timeline.” David J. Sencer CDC Museum, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (https://www.cdc.gov/museum/timeline/covid19.html). A nationwide emergency was declared on March 13. On April 10th, the U.S. reported 23,036 deaths, surpassing Italy “as the global leader for reported deaths due to COVID-19.” The vaccine-production initiative Operation Warp Speed was launched on April 30.

2 If anyone needs reminding of the demise of tenure, a glance at the charts, showing the ups and downs of hiring in modern languages starting in the mid-1970s, in any recent iteration of the Report on the MLA Job Information List should do the job (https://www.mla.org/Resources/Career/Job-List/Reports-on-the-MLA-Job-List).

3 The best, most comprehensive introduction to the subject is Angela Esterhammer, Romanticism and Improvisation 1750-1850 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009).


5 For a brief but excellent introduction to the culture of European improvised music at the time, and its intersection with Romantic writing, see the “Prelude” to Dana Gooley, Fantasies of Improvisation: Free Playing in Nineteenth Century Music (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 1-24.

For biographical information, I rely primarily on Joseph Barry’s *Infamous Woman: A Life of George Sand* (New York: Doubleday, 1977). Despite its age, this biography is carefully researched and accessible to a non-expert.

See Letter XII of *Lettres d’Un Voyageur* (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 294, in which Sand responds to a critic who accuses her of hostility to both marriage generally and husbands specifically.


Henry James, “George Sand [1897],” *Notes on Novelists, with Some Other Notes* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1914), 169.

Henry James, “George Sand [1899],” *Notes on Novelists, with Some Other Notes* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1914), 197-198

Henry James, “George Sand [1914],” *Notes on Novelists, with Some Other Notes* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1914), 224.