

Weight Shifting; An Ethnography of Contact Improvisation

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ABSTRACT

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Haley Baird

This thesis reflects on ethnographic research of the improvised dance form, contact improvisation. This research addresses the ways in which dancers of contact improvisation navigate the burgeoning conversation around consent in the context of their practice. In the past several years, consent has become an increasingly pressing concern in the form, and has resulted in the fashioning of guidelines, workshops, and demonstrations meant to address the practice of consent. Based on participant observation and interviews across the San Francisco Bay Area of California (US), Montreal, Quebec (CAN), and various online platforms, this ethnographic study explores some salient questions which dancers seek to address in the context of their dance practice. Contact improvisation historically reflects a strong attachment to ideals of egalitarianism and non-codification. It has frequently been addressed as a practice in which dancers experiment with a certain ‘blurring’ between bodies, states of disorientation, and an improvisational ethos of unpredictability. Thus, it is a particularly challenging and potentially creative venue for thinking about the politics of consent. This thesis does not attempt to give an exhaustive reading of the situation, nor to prescribe a way forward. Rather, this research focuses on several key tensions between contact improvisation and consent. Among them, this work addresses how the relationship of contact improvisation to constraints and to “flow” might need to be rethought in the context of making the practice more consensual.

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Figure 1. Nancy Stark Smith and Alan Ptashek, photo by Erich Franz 1979 (in Novack 1990: 120)

Introduction

Prologue

This thesis is concerned, broadly, with the ways in which the notion of “consent” is articulated and addressed amongst “contact improvisers.” Contact improvisation is an improvised dance form. I place the word “consent” between quotations, not to bracket the seriousness with which one should approach the notion, nor to signal a host of suspicions one should fasten to the term, but rather to ask that we continue to approach it as phenomena about which one might remain curious, as if its meaning were not already firmly fixed in place. As if those quotation marks indicated a certain trembling or quivering.

I wonder if we might begin to return to the Latin origin of the word consent as *con-sentire; feel together, feeling together*. Perhaps few other notions are as laden with the trappings of liberal discourse as consent. In many ways, the juridico-political notion of consent almost-always imagines or refers to the volitional, particulated, rights-bearing individual who is, for all intents and purposes, ostensibly discrete, unburdened by social constraints or external forces. So how did the initial sense of consent as *feeling-together*, turn into the sense in which we most often employ it today as a thing which we give to or withhold from others? If consent traffics a series of refrains which refer to liberal personhood; these refrains are those which aim to keep separate things separate. Consent’s repertoire of conditions typically posits a sovereign and singular agency, consent in a process of adjudication tells us where one body ends and another begins.

Consent has constituted, and continues to constitute, an absolutely essential intervention into a spectrum of relational configurations which too-frequently proceed in egregiously coercive, extractive, and violent ways. The work of this intervention is far from finished. However, it is essential to ask questions *of* consent. The work of doing so should not diminish our investments in what has been, in the case of sexual consent, an essential intervention into sexual politics. I ask that we nevertheless remain committed to its critical theorization, as a phenomenon which with which we engage in complex, and often contradictory ways in our everyday lives.

There are certainly different questions to be asked in this regard, different questions to ask of consent. I concern myself with a very specific instantiation of the phenomenon in what follows. It is, of course, by no means comprehensive and is everywhere marked by complexities which exceed what is written, or did not make it onto the page. Other questions we might ask of consent would necessarily enrich (and hopefully destabilize), in fundamental ways, what has been written here.

For example, consent's *historical* conditions of possibility (the constitutive role of forms of erasure, domination, and violence upon which the subject of consent has oftentimes been predicated) which continue to structure the contemporary, have been robustly theorized by Black, Indigenous, decolonial, feminist and Queer scholars.¹ As Cordis and Ihmoud say of Saidiya Hartman's work which reminds us that "(de)constructing consent is necessary if we are to create spaces of erotic power and healing love, which cannot occur within a colonial cisnormative paradigm that merely situates consent as the prevention of potential (and inevitable) violence" (Cordis and Ihmoud 2018, Hartman 1997).

An Ethnography of Rooms

I spent the summer of 2019 in the San Francisco Bay Area of California attending contact improvisation jams, classes, and workshops and learning what I could of the form.² I conducted formal and informal interviews with dancers of various degrees of familiarity with the form, from long-time practitioners to so-called "newcomers" who had only attended their first jam days prior. I stayed primarily in Berkeley, California although I often traveled to the neighboring cities of Oakland and San Francisco for (contact) jams or classes.

¹ See Hartman (1997, 2019); Simpson (2014, 2016); Deer (2015); Cordis and Ihmoud (2018). Jennifer Doyle notes consent's importance to an ongoing struggle against forms of violence. She says, "It is used in the recovery of colonial histories of systemic rape, forced pregnancy/sterility, and punitive gender policing. It is a way of naming gendered forms of violence as integral to genocidal practice. It is also used by feminist scholars working within communities of color, advocating for gender equity and sexual empowerment as an integral part of anti-racist politics. Within queer scholarship, the term appears in a conversation about what it means to maintain a sense of agency as sexual subjects while also acknowledging that our bodies are not miniature states (or, at least, that this is not what our bodies *ought* to be); that being (not just being sexual, but *being*) is a form of undoing, unmaking boundaries and borders" (Doyle 2015: 126). See also Puar (2007). Doyle also discusses the critiques of anti-rape movements for their varied allegiances to the carceral apparatus. See Spade (2011); Richie (2000).

² A jam is a loosely-structured gathering in which dancers come together for a free-practice of the form, I will explain jams more in depth in what follows.

Upon my return to Montreal for the Fall semester of 2019, I continued to practice the form, attend workshops, and occasionally interview other dancers. In April of 2020, I attended the *Consent Culture in Contact Improvisation Symposium* on Zoom. The symposium had been slated to occur over a weeklong period at Earthdance, an arts organization based in Massachusetts (USA) but transitioned to an online format in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This symposium brought together dancers from various parts of the world (many of whom would not have been able to attend the symposium in-person). Two other Montreal-based dancers who had been at the conference contacted me afterwards to start a reading-group which would explore the growing body of literatures on the subject of consent in contact improvisation and to consider them in specific relation to the community of dancers here in Montreal. For several weeks, we met once a week on Zoom to discuss a range of readings on the subject.

By practicing a ‘participant observation’ of the form of contact improvisation, I attempted to understand what type of bodily comportment is necessitated by the form. Attempting to learn the form, my research entailed an embodied methodology in which I explored the technical practices of the form through the *medium* of my body (see Pink 2009; Davida 2012; Elliott and Culhane 2017). As a dancer of contact improvisation, I struggled with (and continue to struggle with, at the time of this writing) the impositions installed by the biopolitical reorganization of life in response to the pandemic which have made dancing contact improvisation with others extremely difficult, if not impossible.³ As I write this, it is unclear when and in which way people will be able to dance contact improvisation again.

These different aspects of my research constantly forced me to reconsider what I think of as my “field site.” While the notion of the ethnographic “field” is still central to anthropological modes of knowledge production, the very idea of a field site—understood as a discrete place in space and time, partitioned off from the ethnographer’s everyday life and practice—has been widely troubled. “Multi-sited” (Marcus 1995), “para-sited” (Faubion and Marcus 2009), or

³ In the wake of the global biopolitical reorganization of life wrought in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, one might be tempted to partition ‘virtual’ modes of convening which have become ubiquitous, off from our previously ‘embodied’ ways of living. While this is an understandable distinction, I want to refrain from positioning our current situation as a ‘non-embodied’ one, despite the obvious monopoly of the virtual. Rather, I want to think of the contemporary circumstances as *differently* embodied, rather than non-embodied. Doing so forces us to account to the ways in which our embodied lives are everywhere made over by biopolitical (re)arrangements and digital technologies, and helps us take distance from what might be a vexing tendency to slip into Cartesian splits between the mind and the body.

virtual (Boellstorff 2008) approaches have widened our understanding of what constitutes an ethnographic field site, without discarding the methodological importance of an ethnographic way of “being-there” (Borneman and Abdellah, eds. 2009).

In some sense, the structure of my research might be akin to a sort of “multi-sited” ethnography, but my investigations focused less on discrete geographical locations, and more on the form which constituted my continued engagement with each location. I do not want to make an abstraction of the cultural context in which these dance-forms are embedded, as these forms are part of “global assemblages” which embed local as much as transnational elements (Ong and Collier 2004). However, perhaps more traditionally, if there was a “culture” which I was studying, it would be that of contact improvisation as a transnational community of practice.

The slippage between the specific contexts of my research and certain generalizations I have hazarded to make, is not unproblematic. It is undoubtedly replicative of tendencies which have garnered much critique both in anthropological praxis, as well as in the so-called “global contact improvisation community.” Contact improvisation has been closely linked to the forces of globalization and tourism.⁴ Many of the dancers I spoke with had traveled to the contexts in which I met them from other places for the purpose of attending festivals or workshops. I conducted interviews with dancers from the United States and Canada, Mexico, Switzerland, Sweden, France, Russia, and India.

The fictional maneuver by which we frequently conceive of “the field” as a discrete spatio-temporal site both “there” and “before,” was constantly destabilized by my ongoing practice of this form (see Clifford and Marcus: 1986). There never seemed to be an outside to my inquiry. I never arrived at a clean break, from which I looked back at my fieldwork as something which was finished. As long as I continued to practice the form, and engage in virtual conversations, I considered my fieldwork ongoing. This posed several challenges, most pressing

⁴ The idea of contact improvisation as “cultural exchange” or communication is a quite common theme amongst dancers and scholars of the form. The international context of the practice has been celebrated as a tool for “cross-cultural” discourse and exchange (see Rösch 2018). However, many also address the problematic aspects of the forms international practice, referring oftentimes to the (neo)colonial relations implied in contemporary tourism and globalized dance practice. Keith Hennessy, for example, points to a quite common remark, that I have heard and read on numerous occasions that “CI is practiced by folks on all continents except Antarctica” (Hennessy 2016: 190). He problematizes such a claim because, as he notes, contact improvisation is overwhelmingly practiced by “the European diaspora and/or a privileged middle class” (*ibid*). We might also problematize the (neo)colonial rhetoric which undergirds this statement of intercontinental expanse, which is often expressed as a kind of mark of pride.

of which was a certain incapacity I experienced in trying to “frame” my investigation, to achieve some semblance of analytical distance.⁵ I oftentimes felt as though I had lost the figure by letting it get swallowed up in the ground.

Over the months (and now years) which have come to host this research, I have realized gradually that a different type of delimitation was framing my work. My research has been, nevertheless, framed throughout by a kind of rectangularization; I did a sort of ethnography of rooms. Throughout my research, and throughout the writing process, distinct sites of investment have been framing my engagement with the form of contact improvisation. From the Zoom “rooms” which were the structuring platform for the second half of my fieldwork, and which constituted the background *dispositive* for my life in the writing period of this thesis, to the studios in California, and Montreal which sit in uneasy, and sometimes frictious tension to the so-called “outside” world. That one could attempt to make such a distinction between the “inside” and “outside” is constitutive of this very tension.

A turn of phrase I heard throughout my research regarded an injunction to “leave your social selves at the door.” To leave things, whether they be one’s worries, ways of relating socially, or simply one’s shoes “at the door.” The dancers I studied with were engaged in asking and problematizing the question of *who* can leave *what* at the door. One woman I spoke with told me that she felt that many people “find this space like a kind of refuge” but that for others “this place has never felt safe, it’s a constant work to be here.” In this regard, an ethnography of rooms involves attending to the ways in which rooms might be made over as liminal social contexts which house distinct affects and sensibilities or modes of relating, but which nevertheless extend beyond the walls which were meant to contain them.⁶ It involves, following my interlocutors, asking what rooms fail to contain, what is brought into them and cannot be left there. Perhaps it also attends to what is brought into a room and lingers, hanging around, thick in the air. To

⁵ While I do not consider this an “autoethnography” in the strict sense, I do believe this thesis has autoethnographic elements. Autoethnography, it has been noted, does much to “strip away the veneer of self-protection that comes with academia” making the researcher “accountable and vulnerable” (Denzin 2003: 137). See also Møhring Reestorff (2019).

⁶ Similar to anthropologist Victor Turner’s analysis of ritual, in which every day social codes are temporarily suspended or altered (Turner 1969), the “dance event” is an important concept frequently engaged with by anthropologists studying dance. See Cowan (1990); Kringelbach and Skinner (2012). The dance event indicates an event in which quotidian social codes are temporarily suspended or altered.

assume that we can “leave it at the door,” might well preclude our capacity to have nuanced discussions about the ways in which we cannot and do not leave behind our “social selves.”

An ethnography of rooms is also an attempt to address the context in which this thesis was written. That is, that of the pandemic. I am interested in reflecting on a general turn towards ‘rectangularization’ which our lives have overwhelmingly taken in this moment. On one hand, our lives are now structured by the collapse of what were (if only as a kind of performative condition) distinct social spaces into the overwhelmingly digitalized space of the so-called domestic sphere. Notably, “work” has ceased to be a location to which one commutes (from the Latin *commutare*, *com*— ‘altogether’ and *mutare*— ‘to change’) and has rather become a kind of continual state of analogic “on-ness,” we are always on. We are, like our digital devices, always (and increasingly expected to be) ‘on’.

In the moments in which we seek respite, a kind of recharge (perhaps from so-called ‘Zoom fatigue’) we *compulsively* turn, again, to our devices. We deliver ourselves as we deliver our data, producing surplus value for digital forms of capitalism. We understand ourselves *as* data, we feel ourselves (and enact attempts to feel *otherwise*) through these logics. We are everywhere *looking for distinction*, to be made distinct, to commute somewhere or to something else; “Feel Good” movie-categories on Netflix, “Beast Mode” workout playlists, #lifestyle. We turn to our own digitalization, we turn ourselves in *as* digital subjects, as an attempt to relate, but in doing so we produce surplus value for those who have every investment in our continued state of social alienation.⁷

On the other hand, our lives are currently marked (and marked, of course, in radically different ways considering that ‘our life’ is by no means a kind of coherent entity) by biopolitical injunctions structured by ongoing attempts to keep things separate (social distancing, contact tracing, bubbles). We see the proliferation of a kind of phobic relationship to leakage. Leakage, that is, not just as the transmission of viral particles, but as the ongoing project of actualizing and enforcing self-containment. Fashioned in part by the various psychological disciplines, the ‘self’ which fails to be discreetly bounded is overwhelmingly a pathological one.⁸

⁷ A constellation of works has influenced my thinking here (Berardi 2009; Bombay and Collu 2020; Collu 2020; Han 2017; Zubov 2018).

⁸ As Teresa Brennan argues in her book *the Transmission of Affect*, modern theories of subjectivity from the psychological disciplines maintain that “the healthy person is a self-contained person,” having successfully “established ‘boundaries’ in early childhood, having successfully negotiated the relationship

Of course, we also see an ongoing refusal to be contained on the part of many who favor individual liberties at the expense of something like social constraint. These are not the only two options in a binary set, but we see the absolute valuation of unchecked expansivity in instances in which one refuses to wear a mask, for example. This pandemic moment may have otherwise borne novel ways of reconceptualizing care in instances of precarity in which our atmospheric entanglement, operating in an extra-personal register cannot be denied.

I am invested in asking, in this sense, which bodies fail to be contained, to contain. What is it that they fail to contain? Which bodies, conversely are celebrated in their refusal to be contained?⁹ What are our attachments to being or feeling contained? Likewise, how do our varying attachments to containment structure our relationship to “liberation,” loosely conceived; the investments we might have in liminal spaces which promise (which is not to say they deliver) a kind of remove from social or symbolic systems? In what follows I am very interested in thinking through and problematizing the relationship between containment and improvisation. These tensions constitute a central preoccupation which runs, unresolved, throughout this thesis.

Contact Improvisation

Contact improvisation is a form of improvised dance, often referred to as a postmodern form, which in theory has no central definition, repertoire or formal body of technique¹⁰ (Novack 1990). Defining the form has always been a “challenging yet compelling activity” (Koteen and Stark Smith 2008: xii). Contact improvisation, also referred to simply as “contact,” “contact improv” or often as “CI,” has been framed as a practice wherein “impulses, weight, and momentum are communicated through a point of physical contact that continually rolls across and around the bodies of the dancers...fluid and eccentrically weighted, the dancing bodies

to the mother,” that is, the (m)other (Brennan 2004: 24). See also Nikolas Rose’s *Inventing our Selves: Psychology, Power, and Personhood* (1998). See also Erin Manning’s chapter, “Towards a Leaky Sense of Self” in *Always More Than One* (2012).

⁹ I am thinking here of Alia Al-Saji’s reading of Shannon Sullivan’s work which describes the ‘habits of white privilege’ as “ontologically expansive” where certain bodies expect to *feel at home* wherever they go (Sullivan 2001 in Al-Saji 2014, emphasis mine). Conversely, bodies which are not ‘contained’ within the logics of embodied comportment dictated by whiteness are confronted with extraordinarily violent consequences.

¹⁰ Keith Hennessy notes that although dancers in contact improvisation “do not repeat precise and fixed gestures or phrases of movement” there is nevertheless a “very standard and recognizable set of movements and danced relationships” and “implicit or invisibilized standards” nevertheless influence the dancing (Hennessy 2016: 139).

swing, bounce, roll and fly through and with a common center” (Siddall in Koteen and Stark Smith 2008: xiii). This “point of physical contact” is usually called the “rolling point of contact” and is a point of continued connection which, if ‘followed’ will generate movement.¹¹

Born out of prototypical engagements with forms of democratic utopianism in the 1960’s and 1970’s in the United States, the form is most frequently understood to have begun in the early 1970s through the work of dancer and choreographer Steve Paxton. In 1972, Paxton, as a part of the Grand Union collective, was invited to a residency at Oberlin College in Ohio (Pallant: 2006).¹² Paxton had been interested in exploring “pedestrian” movements (the quotidian physicality of the body such as standing and walking) in contrast to choreographic dance phrasing, in an attempt to “break down the distinction” between the two (Pallant 2006: 11). He was interested in exploring the extremes of orientation and disorientation by prompting a group of eleven men (Paxton’s initial exploration included only men) “to fling themselves at one another, colliding, sliding, and falling into a cushioned mat” (*ibid*: 11).

These initial studies resulted in the improvisational piece, *Magnesium*, which is now hailed by many as the “seminal work” of contact improvisation (Novack 1990; Williams 2019; Pallant 2006). *Magnesium*, originally the structure for an improvised solo Paxton had planned for himself, was taught to the men at Oberlin College. Several months later, Paxton invited a mixed-gender group of students and dancers to explore the propositions he had begun to explore in Ohio (such as pedestrian movement investigations and collisions) to the John Weber Gallery in New York City for a week-long rehearsal period, followed by a week-long performance (Pallant 2006).

¹¹ This, “point of contact” is, as Ann Cooper Albright notes, “sometimes referred to in Contact parlance as the ‘third mind’” (Albright 2013: 270). She continues, “allowing their dancing to be led by this ‘third mind,’ the two partners endeavor to follow its spatial and rhythmic journey throughout the studio space. At first it may seem clear which partner is leading and which one is following, but eventually those roles evolve into such a fluid and subtle exchange that the categories of leader and follower lose their oppositional moorings” (*ibid*: 270). Albright links this phenomena of the “third mind” to Merleau Ponty’s conceptualization of intersubjectivity (*ibid*).

¹² Grand Union was a “collective of dance theater improvisers that included Barbara Dilley (then Lloyd), Trisha Brown, Yvonne Rainer, Douglas Dunn, David Gordon, and Nancy Peck (then Green)” (Pallant 2006: 11). Much of the Grand Union collective emerged from the ongoing work of The Judson Dance theater, a theater very connected to the emergence of the “postmodern” avant garde (marking a departure from modern dance) (Banes 1978). As Sally Banes notes, many of the Grand Union dancers had been engaged in each other’s work through the Judson Church (*ibid*).

This group of students included Nancy Stark Smith, Danny Lepkoff, Nita Little, Curt Siddall, and David Woodberry who would be central figures in the development of the form over subsequent years (Yohalem 2018). Nancy Stark Smith would come to be a particularly influential figure in the form, founding and later serving as the co-editor of the highly-influential journal, *Contact Quarterly* which continues to be a vibrant resource for all things contact improvisation-related.

Here, at the John Weber Gallery, the form was referred to as “contact improvisation” for the first time (*ibid*). Some authors, including dancer and scholar Keith Hennessy, regard the performance at the John Weber gallery as a more accurate founding event, rather than *Magnesium* (see Hennessy 2016; Koteen and Stark Smith 2008).¹³ While Paxton has been called the “founding father” as well as the “inventor” of contact improvisation, he has been hesitant to claim ownership or authorship as such (see Hennessy 2016). Likewise, many have pushed for a reappraisal of Paxton’s role as the sole originator of the form.¹⁴ Nevertheless, a sort of “charismatic authority” has been attributed to him which is overwhelming present in the literature on contact improvisation (Novack 1990).

Many of the early practitioners of the form felt that it “literally embodied the social ideologies of the early ‘70s which rejected traditional gender roles and social hierarchies” (Novack 1990: 11). There were no clearly delineated steps, nor explicitly gendered roles or positions. Paxton was interested in attempting to model less authoritarian social structures which could be “based on suggestion, invitation, improvisation, and collaboration” (Hennessy 2008). He did so in contrast to what he perceived as a “dictatorship” characteristic of the choreographic process at the time which alienated dancers from their own movement (Paxton in Novack 1990: 54). He said, addressing the position of the dancer, “your motive, your movement sources were determined, controlled by them [choreographers], and you struggled to be what they were” (Paxton in Novack 1990: 54). The initial work of contact improvisation is often read as part of a

¹³ Keith Hennessy’s various writings, and his doctoral thesis have been very influential in my thinking. Hennessy describes his thesis as engaging with “a critical race and queer-feminist inquiry...which spirals around the question of CI’s ambivalent political potential: clashing some participants claims of dancing as liberation with the hetero-white-normative and neoliberal contexts that sustain the dancing” (Hennessy 2016:2).

¹⁴ Hennessy notes that he wants “to take Paxton’s word that he merely provided the spark for CI, and gave it a generic name, rather than continuing a creation myth that locates CI’s birth in a single performance choreographed by Paxton” (Hennessy 2016: 205-206).

“generalized turn towards greater equality and communality in the dance world in the wake of the sixties counter-culture” (Yohalem 2018: 45).

However, especially in recent years, many voices have emerged which question the “founding” ethos of contact improvisation and ask whether it is currently, or ever was truly “egalitarian” (see Hennessy 2016, 2018; Mitra 2019; Suseno 2019).¹⁵ They note the ways in which power continues to play out in the form and question the predominantly white, middle-class, and heteronormative make-up of its practitioners (see Hennessy 2016, 2018; Stark Smith et. al 2018).

Paxton, speaking in broader reference to the improvisational work of Grand Union, has called this early work he was engaged in in the early 1970s “anarchistic democratic” (Paxton in Yohalem 2018: 45). Paxton noted that Grand Union, which he described as an “anarchistic democratic theatre collective,” was engaged in an “*attempt* to be emancipated without confining or restricting others” (*ibid*). This was, according to Paxton, not an easy task considering as he did that we are, each of us “conditioned to voluntary slavery” (*ibid*).¹⁶ Early practitioners considered the “experience of touching and sharing weight with a partner of either sex and any size as a way of constructing a new experience of the self interacting with another person” (Novack 1990: 11). The form emerged as a “historically specific theory of group interaction and communication translated into a tactile, physical medium” (Yohalem 2018: 46).

Cynthia Novack in her ethnography of contact improvisation, *Sharing the Dance*, introduces contact improvisation in the following way:

Contact improvisation is most frequently performed as a duet, in silence, with dancer’s supporting each other’s weight while in motion. Unlike wrestlers, who exert their strength to control a partner, contact improvisers use momentum to move

¹⁵ Hennessy notes that he seeks “to understand and to explain how the social contexts of contact improvisation (CI) remain predominantly white and heterosexual despite the radical potential of the dancing and the utopian intentions of many CI dancers” (Hennessy 2018).

¹⁶ This “voluntary slavery,” Paxton argued, was enabled through a general lack of awareness about the body and its embodied way of being in the world (See Turner 2010). He asked, “[w]hat had the culture physically suppressed or selected out - certain gestures, modes of posture and behavior (i.e., body language) which constitute proper social activities and communications, as well as the accompanying mental attitudes we acquire or aspire to for proper presentation of our 'selves' - which we might reclaim?” (Paxton in Turner 2010: 124).

in concert with a partner's weight, rolling, suspending, lurching together (Novack 1990: 8).

An improviser in Novack's ethnography described it as "a cross between jitterbugging, wrestling, and making love" (Novack 1990: 8). Additionally, it has been described as a "duet dance form based on the dialogue of weight, balance, reflex and impulse between two moving bodies that are in physical contact" (Koteen and Stark Smith 2008: xi).



Figure 1: Nancy Stark Smith and Alan Ptashek photo by Erich Franz 1979 (in Novack 1990: 120)

In contrast to the concerns of traditional modern dance, which tend to emphasize an aesthetically stimulating exteriority based on expressive vocabularies, the focus of contact improvisation has been on the physical dialogues between two bodies, and the internal sensations which underlie them. However, many have argued that this intention shifted in the 1980s as the practice grew and became increasingly incorporated into larger networks of practice and

performative economies (see Novack 1990; Schaffman 2001; Mitra 2018).¹⁷ Hennessy notes that contact improvisation has “had significant impact on the training, embodied aesthetics, and choreographic process of postmodern and contemporary dance, especially but not exclusively in North American and Europe” (Hennessy 2016: 93).

Contact improvisation is practiced in a range of settings with varying degrees of formality and institutionalization. These settings range from practice-based research dance labs to pedagogic settings in universities to loosely-structured, informal gatherings called “jams.” The form (and various derivative embodied propositions which the form popularized) have also been employed to teach partnering and improvisation more broadly in other theater and dance contexts. It has elsewhere been used as a therapeutic practice.¹⁸ In this thesis, I focus predominantly on the form’s capacity as a social dance. In that regard, my research took place primarily at contact improvisation “jams.” These jams are loosely structured gatherings in which dancers come together for a free-practice of the form. The term ‘jam’ harkens to other forms of informal practice such as tango’s milongas or musical ‘jam sessions.’ Jams can occur over the time-span of a few hours or a few days in (oftentimes residential) multi-day festivals.

As a social dance, it is at once a form and a social milieu, or as Novack regards it, a “culture” or as Dena Davida has called it, “a community of experience” (Novack 1990, Davida 1999: 101). However, as Novack has noted, “contact improvisation has constituted a social experiment, an attempt to place dance in a liminal social context which fitted neither the category of theater dance nor the category of social dance” (Novack 1990: 16).

Contact improvisation is composed of a set of technical practices which include (but are not limited to) the cultivation of states of proprioceptive disorientation and subtle somatic

¹⁷ Carrie Lambert-Beatty has argued of the earlier Judson Dance works (the Judson Dance Theater being the ground for the creation of Grand Union) that the “interest in co-presence and immediacy in 1960s discourse was a case of... registering in negative the encroachments of communications technology and cultures of spectatorship” (Lambert-Beatty 2008: 25-26).

¹⁸ Novack notes that while the ‘therapeutic effects’ of the form have arguably been apparent to its practitioners since its inception, the form has been more explicitly used as a therapeutic tool since the mid 1980s (Novack 1990: 170). Novack notes the utilization of the form in transactional psychological therapy in England in the 1970s, where contact improvisation was more closely linked to release technique (*ibid*). Contact Improvisation has been researched as both method and object across and within a diversity of academic disciplines from anthropology (Novack 1990; Davida 1999) to dance and performance studies (Hennessy 2016; Goldman 2010; Dey and Sarco-Thomas 2014; Mitra 2018). As Brynn Marie Williams (2019) notes, the form has been mobilized within a variety of more practical sectors, namely the therapeutic (Houston 2009; Marchant et al. 2010; Barrero 2019) and educational (Williams 2019; Berselli & Lulkin 2017; T’ai 2017; Rösch 2018).

attunement between bodies which oftentimes seem to blur an easy demarcation of the sensorial boundaries between these bodies. As Johanna Heil remarks, dancers in contact improvisation “negotiate their own bodily boundaries and give them the opportunity to blur; the bodies no longer have to end at the boundary of the skin” (Heil 2019: 486). Thus, she says, dancers in contact improvisation “emerge as subjects that are radically different from the observing liberal humanist subject” (*ibid*: 489).¹⁹ This dimension of contact improvisation, its capacity to ostensibly inspire a kind of “blurring” of the distinction of self and other, is frequently celebrated in much of the literature and discourse on the form. It is in this sense that these practices constitute the materiality of the problem with which I concern myself, and to which I will return below: consent.

Training in Disorientation

An essential aspect of the practice of contact improvisation concerns one’s ability to cultivate embodied states of disorientation and “readiness.” Neither of these phenomena can properly be thought without the other. As my interlocutor Emily described to me, it is not enough “to *just* be disoriented, you have to be *ready*.”²⁰ Indeed, as I will argue when I return to this claim of Emily’s in later chapters, one might ready themselves *for* instances of disorientation, both in and outside of the form itself by experimenting with states of disorientation. As Emily described the practice, it is about ‘getting good at being disoriented.’ In this sense, it might teach us how to respond when confronted by instances of disorientation which visit our lives.

In Danielle Goldman’s *I Want to Be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom*, Goldman considers contact improvisation as an “embodied practice of self-readiness” (Goldman 2010:25). “At its core” she says, “contact improvisation is a practice of making oneself ready for

¹⁹ Humanist, in this context could refer to “notions of subjectivity” as a “self-contained, self-governed, self-sufficient, pre-given stable entity” (in Garrett Brown 2011: 65).

²⁰ Steve Paxton was influenced by aikido, the Japanese martial art form (see Novack 1990). Much of his experimentation with “rolling, falling and partnering skills” emerged from his experience with aikido (Novack 1990: 59). While Novack cites the influences of meditation practices and martial arts practices coming from Asia throughout her ethnography, Paxton, in reviewing her work has noted that she did not give sufficient weight to the contribution from these other practices (Paxton 1993; see also Hennessy 2016).

a range of shifting constraints” (*ibid*:97). Constraints accompany improvisational practice (broadly speaking) and contact improvisation specifically as crucial dimensions of improvisational practice. In this thesis, it is critical to understand constraints as essential to the practice of improvisation, in order to think through questions of consent in the context of these improvisational practices. I will revisit the notion of constraint more in depth in what follows.

As Emily explained to me, “over and over again, contact improvisation teaches me to hang out in a space of disequilibrium, how to be in a space of unknown where you are disoriented but deeply responsive.” It is part of what she called an attempt “to constantly get bored and then figure out how to get curious again, how to get bored and get curious, get bored and get curious.” The challenge, as another dancer noted, is not “to wait until you are confronted by discomfort, but instead, to look for areas of discomfort in every moment.” As contact improvisation pioneer, Nancy Stark Smith has remarked, “alertness is developed *in order to* work in an energetic state of physical disorientation” (Stark Smith in Kozel 2017: 282 emphasis mine).²¹

The exercises which were developed early in the form aimed to quite literally curate “vestibular disorientation through diagonal rolls, spirals and falls” (Bibler 2020). Ann Cooper Albright calls contact improvisation a “*training in disorientation*” and she cites physical practices of “falling, being upside down, moving through fear and with a great deal of momentum, and being out of control” (Albright 2003: 260). These techniques, which are now canonized in much of the pedagogic and choreographic work of contemporary postmodern dance, “use disorientation to ‘free’ the dancer of the limitations of prior social and aesthetic training” (Bibler 2020). As Albright notes, this training in disorientation “leads us out of our habitual responses by opening up alternative experiences” (Albright 2003: 260). In this sense, a sort of premium is placed on not knowing where one is going in advance of the movement itself.

In Albright’s epilogue to the oft-cited reader in dance improvisation, *Taken by Surprise*, she discusses the practice of (contact) improvisation as one which might teach us how to, as she says, “dwell in possibility” (Albright 2003) She lauds dance improvisation as a practice capable of upsetting the reproduction of habituated embodied reactions (*ibid*). She says, improvisation

²¹ We might align what Stark Smith calls ‘alertness’ with the concept of ‘readiness,’ though it is important not to collapse what might be salient distinctions between the two.

can teach us to “resist our first response” guiding us “into another kind of responsibility, literally giving us the *ability to respond differently*” (Albright 2003: 258).

As Nancy Stark Smith, has noted of a phenomenon she calls “the gap,” “where you are when you don’t know where you are is one of the most precious spots offered by improvisation. It is a place from which more directions are possible than anywhere else” (Stark Smith in Albright 2003: 258). This “gap,” has likewise been considered a “moment of possibility... an existential state, a suspension of reference points in which new experiences become possible” (Albright 2003:258). Stark Smith remarks:

Every time I want a cigarette and don’t have one I’m creating a gap. Moments that once were easily and automatically filled have become uneasily and consciously unfilled. By leaving them unfilled, I’m not only breaking a ‘momentum of being,’ a pattern of behavior, but I’m bringing attention and charge to a moment that would have passed without remark (Stark Smith in Albright 2003: 258).

This language of improvisation, in and around the periphery of ‘the gap’ rehearses several central elements of the form including its emphasis on spontaneity, disorientation and refrains of the attainment or striving-for forms of “freedom.” These refrains traffic much of the literature and practice of contact improvisation but they are also characteristic of larger ideological trends in the history of modern and postmodern dance.

Bojana Cvejić, speaking of dance improvisation and contact improvisation specifically, argues that the “unknown,” “unexpected,” “surprise” or “discovery” are “the terms of a doxa, a common-sense jargon of practitioners within which improvisation is negotiated” (Cvejić 2015: 128). As Daniel Belgrad has argued, contact improvisation is in a sense archetypical of the American liberal tradition of a “culture of spontaneity” (Belgrad 1998).²² Cvejić attributes a relative paucity of scholarship, “theoretical analysis, systematization, historicization, etc.” on improvisational dance, in part to a “pronounced fear of the impoverished language ‘versions’ of

²² Belgrad argues that a host of cultural phenomena in the American post-war avant-garde were typified by a kind of “culture of spontaneity” (Belgrad 1998). From Gestalt therapy to Jungian psychology, beat poetry to abstract expressionism, a series of artistic, philosophical, literary, and therapeutic traditions were characterized by the tenor of spontaneity (*ibid*).

bodily experience” amongst improvisers (Cvejić 2015: 132).²³ As Paxton as said, “improvisation is a word for something that can’t keep a name” (Paxton 1987: 126).²⁴

Improvisation is often frequently, although problematically, aligned with spontaneity, childlike innocence or play, or a lack of control (see Dumit et al. 2018; Gold and Lewis 2015). It is often linked to a departure from the work of cultural mediation or reproduction. Whether offered up as a momentary blip in the ongoing reproduction of cultural forms in and at the level of the body, or given the status as a sort of “precultural” phenomena, improvisation is often associated with the loosening of a kind of rigor of comportment subjects usually tend to keep up.

Robert Turner, summarizing Paxton’s understanding of the physiological theory of the body in contact improvisation writes that, “the body and its reflexes could be free, spontaneous, uninhibited, unfettered, if it were allowed to act without consciousness’s interference, its cultural blocks, gaps, impositions, and habits” (Turner 2010: 130). As Turner notes, Paxton’s theories tended to make a rather loose opposition between “reflex” or the “bodily” and “culture,” “consciousness” or “habit” (*ibid*).

These associations are consistent with a larger trend in American postmodern dance which values the aesthetic and experiential sense of being moved by something external to the self, and thus positioning the dancer in a kind of bracketed relation to the self and its socio-historical situation. Refrains such as “dance as if the movement was *happening to you*” or, for example, Yvonne Rainer’s desire to refrain from imbuing dance with her own intentionality reflect a particular orientation to the body and the ways in which it signifies or is made to signify. The attempts to become unfettered by social or technical training which are much characteristic of postmodern forms, including contact improvisation, have often placed a

²³ She notes the absence of critical scholarship on dance improvisation, lamenting that much of the literature on the subject is constituted by “discourses based on the reflection of first-hand experiences” which tend to “prioritize an experiential (as opposed to theoretical) approach to improvisation” (Cvejić 2015: 129). She notes Novack’s ethnography as an exemplary case which employs “an analysis on the basis of personal experience” (*ibid*). While I am sympathetic to Cvejić’s intervention, considering she does so in the context of arguing against the language of ‘the ineffable’ often set-up by these experiential accounts of improvisation which tend to posit the mind as something separate from the body, I think her distinction between the “theoretical” and the “experiential” risk replicating the very distinction she sets out to critique.

²⁴ This so-called jargon, and the attendant refrains of the inadequacy of language to apprehend movement, Cvejić argues, places the experience of the moving body close to the “Romantic transcendent notion of the ineffable” (Cvejić 2015: 132). She refers to improviser João Fiadeiro’s assertion that the goal of improvisation is to “let go of wanting to produce meaning” (Fiadeiro 2007: 104).

premium on the assumption that to leave behind one's history or social identity is not only possible, but reparative or even healing.²⁵

Zena Bibler, writing of the work of improviser mayfield brooks, asks a series of compelling questions, interrogating the refrains which have long peppered American post-modern dance (Bibler 2020).²⁶ She asks, "for whom is the present moment a place of freedom? Who feels free when they leave their history behind? What are the stakes of this intentional amnesia?" (*ibid*). As Miguel Gutierrez, writing in the context of the politics of race in contemporary dance notes, whiteness has become a sort of "lack of allegiances" one accesses, or attempts to access in assuming they can simply "leave behind" their socio-historical circumstances (Gutierrez 2018).²⁷

Danielle Goldman, in her book *I Want to Be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom*, troubles the idiomatic purchase of the notion of "freedom" in improvised dance (Goldman 2010). She notes that "freedom" is often associated with improvisation with little regard for the social-historical contexts in which such a concept is necessarily embedded (*ibid*). In her work, she attempts to reconfigure improvisation not as a "desired endpoint devoid of constraint" but rather as constituted by an ongoing relationship to constraint (*ibid*).

Phenomenological readings of contact improvisation, while ample, have been critiqued for maintaining the "supposed neutrality and ahistoricity of the phenomenological body" (Yohalem 2018: 47).²⁸ In other words, for their failure to attend to the body as a site of complex intersecting social identities, and histories rather than a universal concept or site of

²⁵ I want to thank Angélique Willkie, and the rest of the Dramaturgical Ecologies research group for an ongoing exploration of these themes, and particular interventions along these lines. This research group concerns itself with resisting the supposed 'neutrality' of the body in contemporary dance, aiming instead to articulate the notion of a dancer's individual, embodied dramaturgy.

²⁶ brooks' work, *Improvising While Black* (IWB), explores disorientation not as a forgetting of one's social situation and history but rather as a practice of "searching for the senses" in the wake of the desensitization wrought by anti-Blackness (see brooks 2016). IWB is brook's allusion to their experience having been racially profiled while driving in San Francisco, in a situation some call "driving while black," a play on "driving while intoxicated" which points to the ways in which Blackness is criminalized and the performance of everyday actions like driving are considered cause for suspicion and, too often lead to instances of harassment, brutality or murder at the hands of the police. (see brooks: 2016).

²⁷ See also Arun Saldanha's *Psychedelic White: Goa Trance and the Viscosity of Race* (2007) and Amanda J. Lucia's *White Utopias: The Religious Exoticism of Transformational Festivals* (2020)

²⁸ Yohalem, while agreeing "that the implied universality of the body in contact improvisation absolutely resulted from white racial privilege" argues against "collapsing that understanding into the one that emerges in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's philosophy" (Yohalem 2018: 47). See also Albright 2011.

intersubjective experience. If disorientation is canonized in the pedagogic and choreographic work of contemporary postmodern dance, which “use disorientation to ‘free’ the dancer of the limitations of prior social and aesthetic training” we must ask which bodies can afford to leave behind their past experiences and what the varying stakes might be for doing so, or attempting to do so (Bibler 2020).²⁹

In a similar regard, my interlocutors described to me a phenomenon called the “just physics” approach to contact improvisation. This approach concerns itself with the “raw facts” of the physical body, as an unquestioned set of ‘universalized’ sensations or tendencies. As Novack remarks of the early days of the form, “participants took the focus on physical aspects as a neutral value, a part of natural law rather than an aesthetic (cultural) overlay” (Novack 1990: 68).³⁰ In the context of what follows in this thesis, people often critiqued the “just physics” approach for celebrating the form as a practice in which people can be “just bodies.”³¹

Many scholars and practitioners of contact improvisation point to a veritable discrepancy between the social ideals of non-hierarchy, which were theoretically inscribed in the early days of the practice amongst a relatively homogenous group of dancers, and the diversity of social positionalities represented in contemporary ‘communities of practice.’ To say that contact improvisation today is diverse would certainly be erroneous, but it is nevertheless more diverse today than it was in the early years in the 1970s where the vast-majority of dancers were, as Novack notes, “young, college-educated, white, middle-class Americans” (1990: 10). In this sense, the form was reflective of the social contexts from which it emerged as well as a prototyping venue for the practice of social ideals which were proper to these contexts.

As Novack notes, contact improvisation was, to use Geertz’ conceptualization, both a “model of” and a “model for” reality (Novack 1988: 105; Geertz 1973). Novack notes, “[t]he experience of the movement style and improvisational process itself were thought to teach people how to live (to trust, to be spontaneous and ‘free,’ to ‘center’ oneself, and to ‘go with the

²⁹ See also Miguel Gutierrez’ “Does Abstraction Belong to White People” in which he asks, “how did whiteness become...a lack of allegiances?” (Gutierrez 2018) He asks, in the context of contemporary dance, “who has the right not to explain themselves? The people who don’t have to. The ones whose subjectivities have been naturalized” (*ibid*).

³⁰ See also Schaffman (2001) on the production of the “natural” in contact improvisation.

³¹ Hennessy refers to Paxton’s call to “focus on the physics but not the chemistry (where chemistry is code for affect, energy, sexuality, relationship)” and notes that this has “proven to be CI’s most slippery directive” (Hennessy 2016: 318).

flow’), just as the mobile, communal living situations of the young, middle-class participants provided the setting and values which nourished this form” (Novack 1988: 105)

This discrepancy between the social contexts from which the form emerged, and those in which the form is currently practiced have more recently been considered as warranting a necessary revisiting or reimagining of the initial propositions of, for example, non-hierarchy or an assumed egalitarianism (Kim 2020; Hennessy 2016). Many dancers I spoke with argued that the form “never expanded” to account for or reflect the increasing diversity of its participants. As the form gradually expanded to include a more diverse range of people, the form’s initial ethos of “non-hierarchy” failed to account for the hierarchies which dancers brought to their practice as products of their socio-historical positionalities.³²

Consent in Contact Improvisation

Contact improvisation’s central preoccupation with intimate (although arguably non-sexual) touch or *contact*, and its strong attachment to spontaneity, may make this dance form particularly vulnerable to various forms of transgression or what my interlocutors often referred to as boundary violations. Particularly in the past several years, and especially so in the wake of the #MeToo movement, a growing attention has been paid to the intersectional politics of consent in the form and this attention has been accompanied by a host of writings, lectures, interventions, workshops, performances and demonstrations, guidelines and varying-public accountability processes.³³

Consent has become progressively more focal in the discourse and practice of contact improvisation since the inception of the form in the early 1970s. Like any other social milieu, intersectional patterns of violence are present. As one of my interviewees remarked; “unless we are really doing the work to think about how power plays out in the form, it’s business as usual but now we roll around and touch each other.” Sexual and gendered harassment, assault, abuse and violence are present and perhaps particularly so considering contact improvisation’s nature

³² Novack gives some mention to the hierarchies which began to develop in the late 1970s and 1980s as the form was popularized and thus practiced by increasingly more people (Novack 1990). However, her analysis solely addresses the hierarchies which developed between practitioners of differing skill or experience levels (*ibid*).

³³ See Bachrach et al. (2018); Beaulieux (2019); Gottlieb (2018); Harrist (2019); Hennessy (2018); Rea (2017, 2018, 2019).

as a touch-based form. However, consent in this context is not limited to notions of transgressive (sexual) touch but is instead understood in a more expanded and intersectional way which aims to take into consideration power dynamics across racialized, gendered, and differently abled bodies.

In its contemporary articulations, consent has become the rubric through which we understand increasingly more relationships both within and beyond the purview of the state. Understandably so, considering consent is a vital intervention into various relational configurations which too-frequently proceed in egregiously coercive, extractive and violent ways. From the consent forms used during ethnographic research, to those we sign when we go to the therapist, or the “terms and conditions” boxes we distractedly check when we download an app, consent is a concept with which we are deeply familiar. While our lives may be intimately entwined with the logics of consent, we rarely attend to the ways in which these very same lives are made over as the products of these logics. Consent might arguably constitute the basic precondition of our participation to social and political life, that *social contract* from which proceeds the assumption that one consents to be governed, for example.³⁴ These logics often presuppose particular formulations of agency, desire and self-transparency or self-responsibilization which we would do well to examine more critically, especially for a more rigorous sexual ethics. This does not mean, in any way, that it hasn’t been an acutely necessary intervention into contemporary sexual politics, the work of which is far from finished.

³⁴ See Macpherson (1962); Pateman (2018). Macpherson’s analysis of liberal-democratic theory argues that the central underpinning of such theory is not simply a reliance on an essential “individualism,” but more specifically on an individual’s “possessive quality” (Macpherson 1962). This “possessive quality” of individualism “is found in its conception of the individual as essentially the proprietor of his own person or capacities, owing nothing to society for them” (*ibid*: 3). Thus, the individual is *properly* “an owner of himself,” and is “free inasmuch as he is proprietor of his person and capacities” (*ibid*). Accordingly, “society becomes a lot of free equal individuals related to each other as proprietors of their own capacities and of what they have acquired through their exercise” and thus “consists of relations of exchange between proprietors” (*ibid*). Political society, then “becomes a calculated device for the protection of this property and for the maintenance of an orderly relation of exchange” (*ibid*). Pateman’s intervention consists in theorizing that the “social contract” (and social contract theory)—as the cornerstone of liberal-democracy—is constituted by an invisibilized, although prior, assumption of the “sexual contract,” an originary contract establishing the political right of men over women *as* property (Pateman 2018). This conversation has been widely taken up in the context of slavery, the slave contract, and its afterlives (see Hartman 1997; Han 2015). Black critical theorists which mark Blackness as a constitutive exclusion involved in the construction of so-called ‘civil society,’ are essential to this conversation (see Moten 2013; Sexton 2011; Wilderson 2020).

In contact improvisation, instances of transgression show up in ways that are and are not particular to the form of the improvisation itself. In other words, instances of abuse of power, or non-consensual touch for example, might happen in the hallways of contact improvisation jams in much the same ways that these forms of violence happen elsewhere in hallways around the world. This is not to dismiss the ways in which these phenomena occur differently across different cultural and infrastructural settings. However, instances of transgression happen in ways which are specific to *the form itself*. In this thesis, I will pay particular attention to instances of transgression which occur during the dance itself.

Dancers cite instances of transgression both inside and outside of the context of dances. Inside a dance, it might look like being touched “with a sexual intent” or with an obvious “lack of communication,” perhaps in a way that is directive, aggressive, manipulative or eroticized. Oftentimes, dancers complain of being “manhandled” “directed” or “muscled” into lifts, or of their partners “trying to get a lift without an invitation.”³⁵ In general, contact improvisers try not to use what is called “directive” touch. Directive touch tends to use the palm of the hand or the fingers to influence a partner, “directing” them where to go or how to move.

Instead, one might try to use “constructive” touch which offers touch as a sort of invitation, more frequently employing surfaces of the body other than the prehensile, ‘grabby’ hands. This “invitation” is less like an invitation which is either accepted or declined, but is rather perhaps more akin to a suggestion which offers up a series of possibilities for movement. While it may be difficult to describe what the “invitation” looks like, most dancers I spoke with had little trouble pointing to instances in which the principle of inviting rather than directing was clearly not being observed. Transgressions might appear as the continuation of touch outside of

³⁵ In contact improvisation, one typically tries to avoid “muscling,” using their strength to execute movement. Rather, they try to organize themselves in a way in which they harness or follow momentum and gravity in order to move. In theory, lifts should happen in more organic ways because of the force of momentum, gravity or skeletal organization, for example. Putting another dancer into a lift can be extremely dangerous, because one does not give them the opportunity to organize themselves, to make sure they can use their “landing gear” (hands, feet, arms and legs) in exiting a lift or falling from one. In addition to being dangerous, dancers also described being put into lifts as “boring,” “repetitive,” and “frustrating.” Dancers with smaller frames (particularly women) oftentimes expressed frustration at being constantly lifted by those with larger frames (typically men). Contact improvisation, particularly in its earlier years, was frequently linked to gender equality and feminism for (among other reasons) the ways in which women were able to lift men, a phenomenon that was relatively absent from other dance traditions.

the context of a dance within which such touch may have been acceptable but outside of which is undesired.

However, it is important to acknowledge that “grabby” dances or dances with strong sensual undertones, for example, undoubtedly happen and are oftentimes welcome, provided they happen in a consensual way. Indeed, “heuristic constraints” are often employed in pedagogic settings such as classes or workshops where dancers experiment with states in which one dancer is passive, another active or one dancer “leads”, another “follows” (see Kimmel et. al 2018). However, some teachers of the form told me that they no longer teach exercises which, for example, involve states of passivity to beginners or without very careful consideration for how the exercise is done. Teachers expressed an increased desire to curate educational spaces which prioritize consensual relating, emphasizing that exercises need to be framed with care and attention.

Perhaps particularly so considering the form has resisted codification, and has no central, formal body of technique, there is a range of perspectives which address what is and is not to be considered properly contact improvisation and what the place of sexuality or sensuality is in the practice. Some dancers I spoke with considered sensuality something that may arise in the context of a dance, and may be used to generate movement, without being explicitly expressed. One woman told me that it “just isn’t honest to try to act like CI is some ‘pure space’ aside from all that.” “But,” she said, “people still need to own it, and be responsible.” Teachers often warn about getting involved in what Steve Paxton called “the gland game,” focusing “on sexual encounter or psychological interaction rather than on touch and weight as the impetus for generating movement” which can be “physically dangerous...as well as stifling to the development of the dance” (Novack 1990: 165). Hennessy notes that many dancers “think that there is a taboo about revealing the eroticism of CI, despite how evident it is to a first time viewer” (2016: 281).

Other dancers more adamantly insisted that “sexual energy” is simply not welcome in contact improvisation. Many jam guidelines include lines which state that “sexually explicit” behavior “will not be tolerated.” Hennessy notes that “inappropriate touch, gaze, and dating tactics” constitute part of the “everyday sexism at jams” (2016: 194). Much of the conversation around consent addressed these “dating tactics,” and where they sit on a continuum of coercive structures. These conversations, however, opened the way for more expanded readings of the

place of sexuality, in general in contact improvisation.³⁶

Contact improvisation, is a form which consists of complex bodily encounters in which dancers are tasked with constantly “negotiating personal and sociocultural boundaries of what it means to touch and be touched” (Heil 2019: 486). Given that contact improvisation involves a desire to dance “without knowing where you’re going,” it is a particularly complex context in which to think about consent, which (if mistakenly) is often understood to be about delineating where it is possible or not possible to go, operating most typically in the future-tense.³⁷

As one of my interlocutors, Michael, shared with me, “the issue with consent in CI is that sometimes you want to get in situations where you don’t know what’s going to happen, that’s the appeal of it. Sometimes things change so fast that verbal communication is galloping after and you need something faster, some immediate physical response and openness to perceiving the other’s immediate physical response.”

Additionally, because the form is not canonized, and because there is no central body of technique, it is vulnerable to a series of potentially quite problematic asymmetries which might often go unaccounted for because the form is, in theory “non-hierarchical”. The idea that these asymmetries exist, in a supposedly-free, non-hierarchical form, is resisted by some. As one woman I interviewed told me, “there’s a whole narrative, like it is dangerous to be putting constraints on anything because we need to have freedom in dancing.”

For example, a similar story was told to me several different times over the course of my fieldwork both by people who directly experienced this situation or one similar to it, or by people who referred to this situation as a kind of typified theme. The situation usually involves a “newcomer” to contact improvisation; someone who has never been to a jam, or has perhaps been to only a few. Kathleen Rea, one of the most audible voices addressing consent in contact improvisation has referred to this situation as “the newcomer experience” (see Rea 2018).

³⁶ Our in/capacities to draw strict lines between the “sexual” and the “non-sexual” should not, in any way diminish our desire to engage in a rigorous politics of anti-violence.

³⁷ Hennessy writes, “[m]any CI dancers revel in the seeming loss of bodily boundaries in a CI dance. By focusing on the point of contact between oneself and another dancer, and by following impulses and momentum rather than any future-oriented plans, dancers will express a loss of quotidian ideas of self and personality. The experience is both a ‘loss of self’ and a sense that the two bodies or two dancers are ‘one’” (Hennessy 2016: 168).

This newcomer walks into a room of people who are engaged in what many of my interlocutors referred to as a touch-based form; they are rolling around on the floor, carrying one another on their shoulders, gliding across each other's bodies, laying in each other's laps, embracing. Everything may seem to have a fluidity to it; people lift each other up in seemingly effortless ways and spin them around, everything seems part of a "flow." There are no set "moves," or "roles." During a jam there is rarely instruction, though there may be an optional class beforehand which usually costs extra; maybe about ten dollars. There is not much talking amongst the dancers, maybe there is some chatter on the periphery of the dancefloor.

As people described this experience to me, this newcomer might not be able to distinguish between what is properly contact improvisation and what is not. The boundary between what is and isn't contact improvisation is already blurry; contact improvisers have long been attached to resisting any kind of codification of the form. This 'blurriness' nevertheless constitutes what might be, at least for a newcomer, a felt-sense of the practice, which makes asking questions *of* this blurriness quite important. The distinction between what is properly contact improvisation and what is "something else" can be a difficult distinction to make for many newcomers to the form, especially when most of the touch that happens in a contact improvisation jam might already seem strange or uncomfortable given how rarely many of us are involved in intimate touch outside of the context of sexual or familial relationships.

One of my interlocutors, a young woman from Argentina, noted that when she first learned contact improvisation, "it was more about dancing with the things that you don't like, not about how to stop the dance, it was more about figuring out how to make a dance *about* what you didn't like." She noted that "it adds a whole other layer to things because you may feel unsafe, or uncomfortable, but it's also because you're learning things." It may be uncomfortable to touch or be touched *without* a sexual intention. She continued, "so you learn to discern why you're uncomfortable, it teaches you so much."

Kathleen Rea notes several things which might happen as part of the "newcomer experience" (*ibid*: 2018). She says, "newcomers often enter a jam not knowing what the form involves," if "they or their partner stretch the bounds of the form, they are not even aware this is occurring because they have yet to understand the form completely" (*ibid*). They might "not yet be able to end a dance," or might "not yet understand the CI principle of not taking meaning

from a dance into everyday life” (*ibid*). Dancers may, she says, “enter into an altered state of consciousness” or “associate touch with sex” (*ibid*).³⁸

All of these possible permutations point to some of the ways in which the opacity which inheres in the form might make it a particularly vulnerable venue, or one in which people may be reticent to acknowledge as one woman explained, “how power plays out in the form.” While Rea speaks about the newcomer experience here, many of these asymmetries extend beyond the “newcomer” period and are noted wherever asymmetries in power exist.

The ‘newcomer experience’ might more frequently be cited in order to address the vulnerabilities which are particular to one’s never having practiced the form before in terms of that person’s vulnerability to possibly be ‘taken advantage of.’ However, many of the dancers I spoke to over the course of my research recalled for me what had been, for them “a vulnerable time” when they first began practicing. This ‘vulnerable time’ is related to the ‘newcomer experience,’ but implies some of the particular contingencies of vulnerability in a slightly broader field.

One dancer, Eric, when telling me about his experiences with consent in the form told me “you’re engaging in all this touch and sensuality and the only other place you usually have that is in sex and sexuality.” Eric explained to me that part of the practice of contact improvisation involves adding “layers” to the way one gives and receives touch, and the ways in which we have been variously socialized to think about intimate touch. Eric explained having situated the touch which happens in contact improvisation within a broader spectrum of intimate touch which doesn’t necessarily correlate to, or index the touch we often think of as sexual. Eric explained this process of gradual layering to me as one of “de-patterning,” part of a “bigger undoing.”

³⁸ Rea notes that newcomers may enter into an “altered state of consciousness,” in the practice for any combination of the following reasons: dancers may experience “oxytocin and endorphin ‘high’ ...due to a combination of the level of touch and exercise-exertion,” have “strong emotions or memories” arise, experience an overwhelm because of a “high level of vestibular input,” or not yet be “able to organize experience” and “might not yet have a psychological ‘box’ or ‘container’ or ‘organizing system’ in their psyche to place experience in, and this can be disorienting” (Rea: 2018).

A Cartography of Tensions

As I initially formulated this project, I was interested in a kind of productive tension which might exist between the practice of contact improvisation and the practice of consent. I had been interested in trying to explore how a corpus of literatures which deconstruct the body or the self as a cohesively bounded entity might interface with the practice of consent, which concerns itself, and for essential reasons, with drawing, maintaining, and respecting boundaries.

I originally saw contact improvisation as signaling a series of practices which advocated a reliance upon a repertoire of conditions of disorientation and blurred boundaries and consent as often implying a particularly liberal-humanist notion of personhood which tends to understand the “self” as discreetly bounded, sovereign entity with attendant notions of desire and agency. I wondered how these two things would ‘bump up’ against each other.

This opposition is, admittedly (and thankfully), a quite crass oversimplification of my thoughts. My intention in pursuing this research had been, primarily, to lend complexity to the matter, rather than to pledge my fidelity to the conceptual enforcement of the perceived dissonance. The more time I spent ‘in the field,’ the more I realized that the *technical practices* of contact improvisation might actually lend rigor to the *practice* of consent.³⁹ Likewise, the practice of consent might lend rigor to the practice of contact improvisation in ways which are in keeping with the improvisational ethos of the form, rather than exterior or contrary to it.

In attempting to ask what type of *effects* the discourse of consent has on contact improvisation, it is important to note that contact improvisation is not, and never has been, some sort of “pure” space of practice anterior to the intervention of the discourse of consent (or to an ethnographic analysis). Not only did my interlocutors insist that while “consent” may be a

³⁹ Indeed, some have argued that contact improvisation constitutes a particularly useful venue in which to analyze the nuances involved in negotiations of non-verbal consent. See Williams 2019; Kimmel et al. 2018; T'ai 2017. Kimmel et al. write that “dancers produce a stream of momentary micro-intentions that say ‘yes, and’, or ‘no, but’ to short-lived micro-affordances, which allows both individuals to skillfully continue, elaborate, tweak, or redirect the collective movement dynamics” (Kimmel et al. 2018). Gina T'ai has written that “consent is a huge part of practicing Contact Improvisation. To practice CI is to practice consent...” and has used contact improvisation as a tool to teach consent to university students (T'ai 2017). Teaching a consent-focused contact improvisation class to university students, T'ai remarked that it was not so very different than the normal contact improvisation class she might teach, in which “there are always exercises to help increase body awareness, to practice creating and breaking boundaries, to practice saying yes and no, both verbally and nonverbally, and to practice getting out of potentially dangerous situations safely” (*ibid*).

relatively new term, conversations which have addressed boundaries, sexuality, and abuses of power, for example, undoubtedly preceded its arrival. Contact improvisation, for its part (even in particular, local instantiations) is by no means a kind of cohesive unit of cultural analysis, thus it is not my intention to *represent* the dancers I studied with.

In the initial phases of this research I was concerned with trying to understand how consent (as a sort of idiom) and the practice of contact improvisation might pose a series of potentially provocative interventions vis-à-vis one another. I wondered how the notion of consent might traffic in or potentially destabilize a series of refrains referring to liberal personhood. How might the notion of consent rely upon, imagine, or trouble the notions of sovereign and singular agency which are constitutive of liberal, secular modernity and late (carceral) capitalism? How can we think about consent without falling back on a vexing tendency to regard bodies which fail to be discretely bounded as *pathological*?

In this work, I have struggled to reconcile my position amongst literatures which have sought to deconstruct the notion of the body or the subject as a discretely bounded singularity with my position as a woman who feels constantly tasked with operationalizing and articulating my own boundaries in the world. I am all too familiar with having those boundaries crossed, if I manage to do the work of “setting” them in the first place, which as the participants in my ethnography have constantly reminded me, is not an easy thing to do.

Feedback Loops

If I had originally thought of consent as an intervention into the form of contact improvisation which somehow staged a kind of incommensurability, it was of course indicative of my own ignorance both of contact improvisation and consent. I had imagined, before conducting my fieldwork, that an attempt to integrate one into the other might entail the diminishment of one or the other’s *telos*. One or the other phenomena would have to lose its grip on itself.

This was perhaps my initial inquiry (if not rhetorically hyperbolized here). How do practitioners navigate consent in the context of contact improvisation? What I discovered was that, rather than one or the other phenomena needing to lose its grip on itself or to come undone, the meeting of these two phenomena inspired a destabilization in both things vis-à-vis one

another. A destabilization in the categorical understanding of two distinct things, provoked by *their contact*. This destabilization makes both phenomena precarious by way of a generative tension.

This precarity was a generative point of contact, which enabled patterns of movement which would not otherwise have been possible. It required that both things give something, and receive something from the other. This point of precarious tension is not unlike contact improvisation's *rolling point of contact*. At times, as dancers follow the rolling point of contact, one or the other dancer is more precarious, more off-balance, in a more compromised position. At times, one dancer might be supported, or held. Sometimes both dancers, each of them off-balance, find their stability in one another. Sometimes the point of contact is lost completely.

I came to conceive of each phenomenon as stronger, by virtue of the interventions the other posed to it. Contact improvisation may have lost touch with its improvisational ethos, having become too formulaic, or too attached to the seamless *flow* of movement, what Nancy Stark Smith has called "the harmony business" (in Goldman 2005:107). As Emily told me, "something attentionally has become lax over the years, the form is supposed to constantly adjust and teach you to constantly adjust and people aren't doing that enough." The original propositions of contact improvisation never responded adequately to the changing context of the form's practice. Many have stressed that while the form may have 'radical political potential' it nevertheless sits in a rather ambivalent relationship to that potential (see Hennessy 2016; Turner 2010).

Contact improvisation, operating under the name of "improvisation," often fails to keep up its end of the bargain. It has perhaps lost touch with the importance of constraint, failing to recognize *consent as a constraint*, and one which is thus capable of producing emergent movement forms and patterns (and not just bodily movement forms and patterns, but also 'forms' and 'patterns' which everywhere dictate our ways of thinking and relating). The practices of subtle somatic attunement which contact improvisation cultivates are also useful for cultivating a practice of consent.

The dancers in this ethnography often lamented the conflation of 'consent' within the form as some sort of restriction of expressive freedom. They noted a growing contingency of dancers who considered consent (or rather, more appropriately, what is asked of dancers *in the name of consent*) as some sort of diminishing of their capacity to truly improvise. Indeed, as the

dancers in this ethnography reminded me, those who react most fiercely to having their individual liberties restricted or diminished are often those with the most privilege.

Before undertaking this research, I too positioned improvisational “freedom” and consent-as-constraint in uneasy relation to one another. Through undertaking this research however, it became clear to me that if a constraint is a central feature of contact improvisation then consent as constraint is in some sense proper to the form itself. Not only, the subtle practices of attunement, recognizing tension, resistance, or a change in the other person’s body are incredibly useful skills for the practice of consent which might go beyond one’s capacity to clearly state their boundaries.

However, I am interested in how a diversity of political and ethical concerns are organized under the rubric of consent, as opposed to anything (or many-things) else. While consent is essential, and I do not mean to diminish that in any way, it may also, as the point of departure for a multiplicity of concerns, eclipse more necessarily-complex ways of understanding power, violence and autonomy which may indeed speak to the complexity with which we live out our everyday lives. Over the course of my fieldwork I have become increasingly more inclined to believe that contact improvisation might help cultivate a version of consent (or a multiplicity of ethical stakes which are, at times, at odds with one another) which is not merely synonymous with the consent of liberalism.

Consent, for its part, oftentimes fails to speak to us where we are at, as beings who did not consent to be implied in the world in the ways in which we are, and who, despite our fantasies to the contrary, are not equipped with perfect self-knowledge. Consent might, arguably, fail to make legible forms of violence (but also forms of care) in as much as it *only* imagines or appeals to notions of the discreetly bounded individual. Contact improvisation, offering a kind of prototypical venue for the real-time negotiation of consent might work to broker more space for our experiences of disorientation and more ‘ecological,’ or what Ann Cooper Albright calls “intersubjective” ways of attuning to the physical experiences of those around us (Albright 2011).

Contact improvisation and consent address one another in a kind of durational provocation where one or the other stalls out, where the logics of the reproduction of meaning start to fail the phenomena they were meant to serve. They make one another stutter and stumble. I do not intend to resolve the tensions about which I speak (the moments or instances in which

these two things sit in frictionous or uneasy relation to one another), rather, I am convinced that it is precisely these tensions that are the most essential to follow without foreclosure. The form of contact improvisation asks us to think about consent differently, and consent, intervening in the form of contact improvisation, asks us to rethink the form itself. Neither exists in a kind of ‘prior’ state as cohesive bodies of theory or practice, they cannot be solicited as such. To stage them as such is useful merely as an exercise in giving temporary structure to my thinking about what happens at the ‘intersection’ of two things which can never, in fact, be separated in clear-cut ways.

Chapter One

Happenings

I sat on a grassy hill with Rebecca and Daniela, we shared lunch after having spent the morning dancing together in Berkeley. Rebecca told me that there had been several instances in dances where she “felt the nature of the touch change.” She said, “I just realized, oh, *this* is different, there is an energy that is recognizable.” She said that she could tell when the touch was no longer, as she said, “platonic,” but was something else. Daniela responded, “sometimes the touch changes, and there is this like ‘hungry touch,’ where I feel like somebody wants something from me.” “That really creeps me out,” she said, “they’re sliming on you.” Daniela continued, “I might be really attracted to someone, sexual energy comes up, but you have to hold it, there’s a way to own it where you don’t subject the other person to it and force them to deal with it in some way.” “It feels,” she said, as if that person were acting “like ‘you’re my only source of this thing,’ as if they were feeding off of her. She continued, “we can talk about the dance, what it feels like, not just have it leak all over.”

Dancers often described the people with whom they danced as having “yucky vibes,” or “creepy energy.” Terms like “vibes,” “energy,” “slime,” and “leaking” indicate what might be a sensation we don’t quite have a name for. It may be difficult for language to capture and make sense of these kinds of feelings.

Writing about consent in the context of contact improvisation has asked me to attend to the ways in which *things happen*, and in so happening, deliver (or fail to deliver) the sense of having happened at all. When speaking of dances which entailed “yucky vibes” I often heard sentences like: “I mean, *nothing really happened*, but it just felt gross.” One woman told me, “after dancing with someone like that, you just feel gross, like their energy just rubs off on you.” *Something* sticks around, sticks to you.

In the past, I have shared dances and afterwards felt something was left sticking to me, but it was something I couldn’t quite name. A lingering sense of the encounter, which perhaps made me feel energized or alternatively left me feeling depleted. This context has pushed me to think through a body of literatures which revolve around the notion of “affect.” Affect theory

starts from the idea that our body has the capacity to affect and be affected. To be affected is to register an alteration, our body undergoes a change in state.

Many affect theorists begin with Baruch Spinoza's formulation that we have the capacity to affect and be affected and what we are affected by has the capacity to diminish or augment our capacity to act, our range of motion in the world (see Gregg and Seigworth 2010; Spinoza in Bertelsen and Murphie 2010). In this sense, and in the context of contact improvisation, it became important for me to understand how certain dances could carry and deliver a sense of an "affective intensity" (Massumi 2002) which could leave dancers feeling a certain way or catch them up in a feeling which could augment or diminish their capacity to act. These intensities can travel along intersectional axes which require us to understand how particular affects can be expressed, transmitted, or received according to our racialized and gendered positionalities, and thus our positioning within a dance.

Thinking about how affects might travel across gendered positionalities, I found the work of Teresa Brennan extremely inspiring (Brennan 2004). Without going into the details of Brennan's engagement with psychoanalysis, endocrinology, and affect theory, I would like to point towards a particularly salient dimension of her work. I am interested in what Brennan calls the "transmission of affect" (Brennan 2004). The transmission of affect calls our attention to the ways in which the atmosphere or the environment "literally gets into the individual" (*ibid*: 1). As she writes, affects are forces that travel across bodies and can enhance or depress our embodied experience of the world, like a slimy dance that leaves you feeling diminished, exhausted, or confused (Brennan 2004: 3). When somebody's sexual energy "slimes on you," you carry it around, it depletes you. When somebody is "feeding off of you" it depletes you.⁴⁰ Brennan says, "affects have an energetic dimension" (*ibid*: 6). They can "enhance or deplete," they enhance when they are "projected outwards, when one is relieved of them; in popular parlance," she says, "this is called 'dumping'" (*ibid*). Affects deplete, "when one carries the affective burden of another" (*ibid*).

Thinking about these types of energetic transfers between bodies destabilizes our imaginaries about the self-contained, bounded body (see Massumi 2002; Gregg and Seigworth

⁴⁰ Brennan recalls Montaigne's "well-known observation that an old rich man would find his energy enhanced while the younger man... in his company would find his energy depleted" (Brennan 2004: 16). This "old man is invited 'to feast his senses on my [Montaigne's] flourishing state of health'" (Montaigne in Brennan 2004: 16).

2010). Brennan notes that the transmission of affect was “once common knowledge” but the “concept faded from the history of scientific explanation as the individual, especially the biologically determined individual, came to the fore” (*ibid*: 2).⁴¹ She notes, the “self-contained Western identity has to be a construction...this construction depends on projecting outside of ourselves unwanted affects...in a process commonly known as ‘othering’” (*ibid*: 12). Thus, “the construction of self-containment also depends on another person...accepting those unwanted affects for us” (*ibid*).⁴²

Containment, for Brennan, is thus constructed rather than given. She notes that our capacity to *discern* the transmission of affects has progressively declined, and that such reticence to think beyond the self-contained individual marks a particularly liberal, secular, modern way of thinking.⁴³ That our practices of discernment may have waned, does not mean that we have become less porous. As many scholars argue to the contrary, our contemporary politics, and public cultures increasingly work *affectively* (Berlant 2010; Massumi 2002; White 2017). Additionally, scholars of affective atmospheres have robustly theorized how atmospheres themselves can express or contain racialized (or racializing) or gendered (or gendering) forces (see Anderson 2009; McCormack 2018; Mawani 2020; Stewart 2011).⁴⁴ Affect, for William Mazzarella, “implies a way of apprehending social life that does not start with the bounded, intentional subject while at the same time foregrounding embodiment and sensuous life” (Mazzarella 2009: 291).

⁴¹ She notes, the assumption of the “emotionally contained subject is a residual bastion of Eurocentrism in critical thinking” (*ibid*: 2).

⁴² This other person, she notes, is “usually the mother, or later in life, a woman, or a pliable man, or a subjugated race” (Brennan 2004: 12). For Fanon, this might be similar to the othering involved in racialization, which “...involves a projective mechanism (or intentionality) by which what is undesirable in the self is projected onto the other; the result is a negative mirroring whereby the other is constituted as that which this self is not, or does not take itself to be” (Al-Saji 2014: 136; see also Fanon 2017).

⁴³ However, a host of postmodern scholars have raised suspicions about the supposed-secularity of modernity. These secular-troubling claims range from, for example, Michael Taussig who points towards the “intrinsically mysterious, mystifying, convoluting, plain scary, mythical, and arcane cultural properties and power of violence” of the rational-legal state apparatus (Taussig 1992: 16) to the tradition of science and technology studies which has troubled the “enchanted” nature of technoscience (see Haraway 1988). Secular notions of agency, and their correspondent understandings of the body have also been culturally and historically situated (see Asad 2003; Hirschkind 2011; Taylor 2007; Connolly 1999; Mahmood 2001).

⁴⁴The concept of the “atmosphere” has long enchanted thinkers. Marx inquisitively declared in 1856, “the atmosphere in which we live, weighs upon everyone with a 20,000 lb. force, do you feel it?” (Marx in Berman 1983: 19).

In conceiving of ourselves as distinct, we may preclude or foreclose on our capacities to think about forms of violence, but also forms of care, which necessarily extend beyond an easy conception of the self as cohesively bounded. One of my interlocutors explained to me that when she teaches contact improvisation, she says “everything you do impacts everyone in the room, and the space itself.” She said, in this regard, that she was interested in “understanding impact,” understanding how what we do impacts and affects the spaces we inhabit.

Affect theorists have attended to the ways in which affects impact and traverse our everyday life, while mostly escaping our properly conscious awareness. They have an atmospheric status. The “something” that feels some kind of way in a dance, is not reducible to the emotions, to body-language, or to something we can easily name (Massumi 1995). Something doesn’t stay inside one’s body, something spills or leaks out, gets into the air, rubs off on you, sticks to you like slime. This sense of something, what Lauren Berlant would call “something that feels like something,” points to a need to theorize everyday life affectively (Berlant 2010).

However, besides pointing to a need to *theorize* affectively, it signals a felt-sense of the incursion of the personal, a sense of being violated. Much of the politics adopted to address these incursions are concerned with the vocabulary of “boundaries,” while our experiences of being violated might belie commonsense understandings of these boundaries. In pursuing this research, I was interested in trying to explore how literatures which problematize the properly bounded body, might speak to the politics of consent in contact improvisation.⁴⁵ Or, accordingly, might fail to do so. What might a politics of the atmospheric give to a rethinking of consent beyond liberal notions of self-responsibilization?⁴⁶ At the same time, might attempts to strive for more consensual spaces of relating, which emphasize the need for “healthy boundaries,” point to the limitations of some of these theorizations of affect?

How can writing address that which oftentimes fails to warrant the status of having happened?⁴⁷ “Something that feels like something” is at stake in the comment “nothing *really* happened” (Berlant: 2010). The point here is to trace the outline of what Kathleen Stewart by way of Nigel Thrift has called a “geography of what happens,” without slipping into an

⁴⁵ See also Abrahamsson and Simpson (2011).

⁴⁶ See Anderson (2009); McCormack (2018); Mawani (2020).

⁴⁷ The stakes of such an inquiry, in the context of patriarchal juridico-cultural projects which ceaselessly aim to delegitimize claims of sexual violence, should not be underestimated.

adjudicatory process by which we attempt to discern whether things happened or *really* happened (2007).⁴⁸ Tracing what Stewart calls a “speculative topography of the everyday sensibilities now consequential to living through things,” formally elevates the “nothing *really* happened” to the status of a “something that feels like something” (Stewart 2011: 445). A something that feels like something, which often does not feel good. These everyday sensibilities can constitute an enduring, and exhausting sense of the normal (Berlant 2010, Stewart 2007). As Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth note, in the introduction to their *Affect Theory Reader*, “affect is in many ways synonymous with force or forces of encounter” but affects “need not be especially forceful,” though they certainly can be (2010: 2). Indeed, “it is quite likely that affect more often transpires within and across the subtlest of shuttling intensities: all the miniscule of molecular events of the unnoticed” (*ibid*).

Following the geography of what happens helps us to attend to those “events and background noises that might be barely sensed and yet are compelling” (Stewart 2011: 445). Not to force moments of encounter into submission to the discursively “really-real” (Geertz 1973: 112), but to return to the scenes and gestures wherein such affects hang suspended or idle nearby. Stewart asks how atmospheric phenomena “sometimes and for some people hang together to produce a felt, or half felt, or barely felt sense of something happening” but which nevertheless structure a way of living in and through the world (Stewart 2011: 449).⁴⁹ Affects, as Stewart understands them can be extremely “ordinary.” Stewart’s “ordinary affects” can be “experienced as a pleasure, and a shock, as an empty pause or a dragging undertow, as a sensibility that snaps into place or a profound disorientation” (Stewart 2007: 24). They can be felt in a begrudgingly endured dance. Attending to these sensations forces us to reckon with the way in which experiences come to matter, or by failing to matter might tell us something about the convergent practices of effacement involved in their continual categorical positioning amongst other phenomena which belong to the order of things which haven’t *really* happened.

Stewart likens this attentional register to what Heidegger would call *worlding*;

⁴⁸ To try to make a distinction between these two things would risk replicating the logics through which claims of sexual violence, are constantly delegitimized.

⁴⁹ Stewart writes, “[w]e could say that there are some important aspects of atmospheric life as we now know it: the collective saturation of the senses; the voracious productivity of the marketing industry; the hard-edged, caste-like quality of relations of race, class, and gender; the seamless sprawl of the built environment; chronotypical transformations of time and space; and so on. But how are such elements constituted as an atmosphere for living?” (Stewart 2011: 449).

an intimate, compositional process of dwelling in spaces that bears, gestures, gestates, worlds. Here, things matter not because of how they are represented but because they have qualities, rhythms, forces, relations and movements (Stewart 2011: 445).

Returning to affects in the context of contact improvisation, it has been important for me to think about the transfers of affective energy which anchor themselves, quite literally, in weight exchanges. Daniela explained to me that in some dances she felt that her partner was “dancing *on* her” not with her. She said, “they just keep trying to get a lift.” These dances, like the ones in which she felt people were “sliming,” on her, upset what was supposed to be a mutual, receptive sharing of movement in contact improvisation. Dancing *on* somebody, whether by trying to get lifts, or by “forcing them to deal with it in some way” diminishes their capacity to move, physically and affectively. Feeling an unwanted gaze on you as you move about a room can be a kind of burden.

I don’t mean to confuse the work of setting, maintaining, and respecting boundaries with the notion of the bounded-subject, especially because the boundaries we often set speak to our participation in a world of experience which does not simply end at the surface of the skin. I am curious though, as I mentioned in the introduction, how these literatures which trouble the bounded body might varyingly speak to the work of setting boundaries.⁵⁰ In my own life, I have felt that learning how to set and respect boundaries has been incredibly important and so I wonder how these literatures might speak, or fail to speak to, that work.

In this research, I have attempted to follow the injunction of Derek McCormack to think “of spaces and places in terms of their enactive composition through practice” (McCormack 2014: xi). What is practiced in spaces changes those spaces, changes how those spaces extend in front of us. Thinking about the ways in which we are extended into the world, and the world is extended into us asks us to think differently, to attend differently, to impact. In this sense, I

⁵⁰ These literatures are not merely affect-centered. The theoretical contributions from posthumanism, new materialisms and (feminist) science and technology studies from Donna Haraway to Karen Barad have likewise contributed to an understanding of the porosity of the body, complicating secular liberal modern notions of the body as a discretely bounded agent (see Barad 2007, 2012; Braidotti 2013a, 2013b; Federici 2020; Haraway 1988, 1991, 2016).

consider the encounters in a contact improvisation dance as a composition of affective forces traversing bodies.

Room for Maneuver

“Start by walking about the room...”

“It’s basically written into law that any dance improvisation class begins there, by walking around the room. Notice your surroundings, notice the other bodies in the space. Feel your feet on the floor, heel, ball, toe sequencing in each step. Yadda yadda yadda, it’s always the same” Colin says, laughing. A ripple of tepid laughter spreads out across the room, it is true, it usually starts there.

A woman next to me laughs as we make eye-contact. Making eye contact, while trying to roll your eyes is its own little vertiginous intimacy. Another man, walking nearby, looks at her as he parallels her ambling trajectory through the room and says “no, actually these days the law is everybody has to introduce their gender pronouns before we can do anything.” He delivers the words “introduce their gender pronouns” with a mocking nasality, clearly meant to signal what he felt was an entirely ludicrous endeavor. He laughs, and keeps walking, heel-ball-toeing his way through the room. She stops, heels, balls and toes, planted firmly in the ground.

It happened in rooms. What happened in these rooms made large rooms feel terribly large, and wonderfully small, wonderfully large, and terribly small. Grievances suffered lose attentional traction, tempered as they are amidst the din and traffic of twenty other bodies, blurry and indistinct. Din, to be assailed with loud, continued noise. Din, to impress through constant repetition.

Between Fragile Interludes and Tender Intervals⁵¹

Berkeley's Tuesday jam had been drawing steadily fewer people as the summer wore on, though nobody seemed concerned as to why we were such a rapidly-dwindling few. The numbers would later swell only to diminish once again in a cycle that seemed to repeat itself, appearing as a natural fluctuation so innocuous as to warrant no great attention. Nevertheless, I always paid a great deal of curiosity to who might next be walking in the door of the ballroom. The queue of shoes, lined up outside the doors in the small entrance hall, gradually began to furnish my imagination over the course of the summer. I would try to figure out who I might find inside, based on the types of shoes I found outside in the foyer which doubled as a sort of changing room for the unabashed.

This Tuesday we were six in number. Myself, Ira, Eddie, Andrew, Sara, and Peter. Ira and I stood shoulder to shoulder in the center of the room as a quiet electricity swarmed up around us while the others started gradually to move about the room.

At the end of last Tuesday's jam, Ira had mentioned to me that he hoped we might find a moment to "move together" next week as we had not found the time that night, busy as we were amidst other duets. This mention had sent a complex wave of sentiments through me. I felt terrified at the prospect of dancing with one of the most skilled practitioners I had met thus far, sure that he would instantly detect my embodied ignorance of the form but excited about the opportunity to engage in what was sure to be, for myself at least, an excellent opportunity to learn.

Standing with our shoulders together, we dig our heels into the floor, pouring our weight through our feet to the tips of our toes and rocking ever-so-indiscernibly back and forth. Each of us is slightly off balance, supported by the other's body, attached at the surface of the arm. The oak floor of the ballroom beneath us is forgiving as it answers to the shifts in weight. I find myself distracted by a particularly squeaky column of wood in the floor, which whispers every time our weight shifts towards it. Its delicate audibility seems to be rhythmically keeping the time of our shared encounter. I feel small gravitational adjustments shuttle up and down my

⁵¹Vladimir Nabokov writes, "[m]aybe the only thing that hints at a sense of Time is rhythm: not the recurrent beats of the rhythm but the gap between two such beats, the grey gap between black beats: the Tender Interval. The regular throb itself merely brings back the miserable idea of measurement, but in between, something like true Time lurks" (1969: 538).

spine in a precarious monotony. Our bodies are sequencing the little flickering calculations, confetti stimulations involved in the effort of just standing there.

Before long, one foot and then another slips out of our tiny test of duration. We break into a slow walk around the room. We migrate between the bodies of the other dancers and parallel the walls on all four sides of the room. Some bodies are tangled up in knots on the floor; duets and trios. Others are sitting on the wooden benches that stretch along the sides of the room, sipping water, chatting discreetly, putting on and pulling off socks and kneepads.

Sharing our weight as we walk, each of us is slightly off balance but supported by the other person's body, attached at the surface of the arm. The *point of contact* moves into the fingers. Our hands are stretched out in front of us, the tips of our fingers form a triangulation. Our fingers are like a flock of geese in formation, breaking through the sky, carving out a space for our duet in the ballroom.

Gradually, we enter a full and complex movement with what seems to me to be no discernable pattern or rhythm. Every development seems to organically emerge from the necessity of physical conditions. Moving fluidly in and out of the floor, spiraling up into fireman-carry shoulder-lifts, and pushing against each other as if attempting to displace one another to opposite corners of the room. Every reorganization of weight or subtle change in circumstance seems to require my full and undivided participation.

Our next tumble into the floor loses momentum and comes to something vaguely reminiscent of stillness. A sort of confusion begins to descend on me as I feel his body stop providing the somatic information I've been training myself to attune to. I stop moving. "Wait," he says. He doesn't speak for a moment, and I'm suspended between the echo of that last and lonely syllable and the heavy silence that rests between us. "We've been dancing at this rhythm for a while now," he says. "Things are very adrenalinic, and dynamic. But it's so unpredictable that its becoming predictably unpredictable." His words indicate a kind of frustration, but his tone is gentle.

"I know," I say, with the tone of a child who has just been delicately reprimanded. At some level I "know" this, but at another I feel as though the moments preceding his intervention seemed to me to be entirely unpredictable and spontaneous. Something has been interrupted, something cannot continue in the same way it had. I feel a loosely patterned haze of dull cogitations start to filter back in to my thinking.

Beginning again, he says: “you know, even an anti-rhythm is a rhythm. Anytime you have more than one point of reference, you have a rhythm.” I feel a sort of delay. “Anyways,” he says. “I want to try something else.”

“I don’t know what it will be, but I’m just letting you know,” he says. Where I had been unable to discern a rhythm, Ira had become attuned to a veritable pattern of things.

Hesitation, Interruption

Michael, one of my interlocutors, told me that we might need “something faster” when it comes to consent in contact improvisation. We need “some immediate physical response and openness to perceiving the other’s immediate physical response.” He said, “we can try to read each other’s nervous systems and have this vocabulary, when someone stops breathing, stops talking—you might think, ok maybe they’ve frozen, I should alter the situation so they can have the time to get out.” He noted that we are already developing that kind of training in contact improvisation. “But,” he said, some of us have been taught not to pay attention to these sensations. He said, “people that are habitually threatened...have to learn to read other people’s signals to survive.” He continued, “it’s the fact of your privilege that makes you blind, you don’t pay attention to certain things.”

Many of the improvisers I met during this research related to me what they found to be a troubling misconception with regards to contact improvisation. They noted that many people think that it “is all about flow.” Danielle Goldman has noted that “breaks in flow” actually constitute what she calls “the crucial grit” of contact improvisation (Goldman 2010:107). I will return to Goldman’s notion of the crucial grit in the third chapter, as I will return to the importance of breaks in flow, but it is worth noting that Goldman theorizes these breaks in flow as disruptions not simply in movement, but also in discourse and cultural practice (*ibid*). These breaks in flow, according to Goldman, “insist upon the importance of difference” (*ibid*).

Attempting to rectify this common misconception, many dancers emphasized to me the importance of interruption, hesitation and a certain clumsiness. As contact improvisers Andrew Harwood and Chris Aiken note in a promotional flyer for a workshop which they conducted in France in 2014,

At its origins contact improvisation combined moments of incredible beauty and flow with moments of incredible awkwardness, clumsiness and disorientation. As contact has evolved and experienced dancers have developed incredible capacities for creating flow there has been a tendency to try to eliminate as many of the awkward moments as possible. This often leads to running through the gamut of known physical techniques and making the same choices over and over again.

As Novack demonstrates, different aspects of the form have been emphasized in different points throughout its history. She says, “[w]hereas contact improvisation in the early '70s had been risky to perform” and emphasized rawness and unpredictability, an “emphasis on flow and facility of movement” emerged in the late 70s and early 80s and “encouraged dancing that was often extremely smooth, controlled and continuous” (Novack 1990:154). She notes that by the mid ‘80s this emphasis was “being countered by an interest in conflict, in being surprised and not doing the expected action” (ibid: 158) In other words, breaking a kind of flow.

I am interested in thinking about these “breaks in flow” as moments which open up possibilities for *things to go differently*. These moments have the capacity to interrupt a kind of repetition, if only in a minor way, or if only for a moment. However, I am interested in attending to these breaks in flow not as exclusively “positive” or “creative” moments, but as potentially ambivalent or ambiguous, or even violent. They can, in other words, go in many different directions.

I have been interested in the way in which many literatures on improvisation, and people’s descriptions of their experience of improvisation might tend to suggest that improvisational practices help one to break their habits, their habits of bodily comportment. As Albright notes, contact improvisation can teach us to “resist our first response” giving us the capacity to respond differently and “dwell in possibility” (Albright 2003: 258).

Perhaps it is more precise to say that improvisers endeavor to break habits, not that improvisation itself breaks habits. As Nancy Stark Smith has said, “I’ve also come to realize that it’s possible to practice the physical techniques of contact improvisation and *never make the choice to improvise*” (Stark Smith in Schaffman 2001: 9).

In this sense, I have been interested in how the practices of contact improvisation might be useful for a politics of consent, by breaking patterns, and allowing for a certain interruption. In this research, I have been inclined, on several occasions to look towards the practices of

contact improvisation as practices which might suggest something akin to what philosopher Alia Al-Saji understands as the double dimension of “hesitation.”

Al-Saji’s “phenomenology of hesitation” explores how racialized perception operates through the creation of “blindness” which make one “unable to see otherwise” the racialized and sexualized body. Through our habitual schemas, one sees through an “exclusionary logic of objectifying, sexist and racist, vision which ‘cannot see otherwise than objects’” (Al-Saji 2014: 152). Al-Saji calls for an ethics of hesitation that opens to “unanticipated (and not immediately cognizable) difference—an affective openness that usually grounds the dynamic and improvisatory character of perceptual habits” but which is foreclosed through the calcifying logics of racializing perception (*ibid*). In other words, hesitation allows things to become or be perceived, otherwise. The becoming-receptive of perception works against the calcification of objectifying schemas, by opening the capacity for things to go differently, or be seen differently.

Hesitation, for Al-Saji, is “an ambiguous phenomenon” (*ibid*: 151). Thus, her appeals to hesitation as a possible venue for upsetting entrenched ways of being and perceiving might, as she says, “appear problematic” (*ibid*: 150). Not only does hesitation “seem to undermine one’s agency,” hesitation “in bodily movement and action tends to characterize the lived experience of systematic oppression” (*ibid*: 151). Al-Saji adds, “those in positions of privilege hesitate the least; indeed, the projective sense of ease and mastery of one’s surroundings, presumed by the ‘ontological expansiveness’ of white privilege, seem to foreclose hesitation” (*ibid*).⁵² Indeed, one might expect to *feel at home* wherever they go (see Ahmed 2006).

Al-Saji, through the philosophy of Iris Marion Young, notes that “hesitancy” is “also typical of ‘feminine’ bodily comportment in our culture” (*ibid*: 151). For Young, the “root of feminine ‘hesitancy’ is located...in the societal patriarchal gaze that systematically positions ‘feminine’ bodies as mere objects, and in response to which women come to live their bodies on such terms” (Al-Saji 2012: 151). Al-Saji notes, following Young, that understanding the inhibiting effects of social objectification on women’s agency means understanding the hesitancy of ‘feminine’ embodiment as more than the tentative suspension of habit,” this tentative suspension of habit being at the root of her phenomenology of hesitation (*ibid*).⁵³ It must be

⁵² Shannon Sullivan refers to the “ontological expansiveness” of white racial privilege (see Sullivan 2006).

⁵³ As Linda Martín Alcoff says, “[w]e see through our habits; we do not see them” (in Al-Saji 2014: 138).

conceived, she says, “not as the indeterminacy within habit” but rather as the “*overdetermination* of “feminine” body schemas and habits” (*ibid*).

In this sense, I understand breaks in flow as forms of hesitation in their double dimension. I understand breaks in flow as essential moments in which we are confronted with the possibility of things going differently, because we break away (again, if only in a minor way) from the reproduction of our habitual patterns. However, I am also aware that these moments of hesitancy, or a certain disorientation, fall unevenly on some bodies more than others. Installing hesitation in the experience of those who, in contact jams, do not hesitate, are not receptive to their partners and expect to seamlessly feel “at home”, seemed like it might be very useful. However, I was frequently “stuck” or caught in the knot which Al-Saji outlines which is that a sort of *overdetermined* sense of hesitancy *characterizes* the lived experience of so many. The distinction between overdetermined hesitancy, and indeterminacy within habit, comes to be a fundamental one.

It might seem troubling to place a kind of hesitancy at the center of experience, which stalls the process from which we proceed from affects to thoughts about those affects, particularly when, as I mentioned, our experiences are so often delegitimized by patriarchal logics. However, our experiences, for example, of somebody’s “yucky vibes” might also be trafficked by racializing logics, or ‘othering’ logics. The body which is yucky, might also be the body that is different from my own, which I have already designated as ‘other.’⁵⁴ It may feel uncomfortable to depart from what is overdetermined in our experience. It may feel uncomfortable to set a boundary, it goes against the overdetermined logics of being accessible, accommodating, available and not fully one’s own.

This is an unresolved knot, but it provides the ground for further questioning. Hesitation, Al-Saji claims, puts the “immediacy of affect into brackets” (*ibid*: 147). It brackets, the “ontological expansiveness” by which “all is felt to be given,” and in this way “the naturalized immediacy, repetitive overdetermination, and reactive directionality, would be destabilized” (*ibid*). Hesitation, offers the possibility for interruption, by modulating the temporality of affect. Here, affect “can hold open the interval of hesitation, leaving the space, the time, for more to come” (Al-Saji 2014: 145). Hesitation is certainly not an exhaustive response to the logics of the

⁵⁴ See Ahmed 2006; Ameeriar 2017.

reproduction of racialized or gendered perception, but it has been a tension which has occurred throughout this work.

Affect, for Al-Saji is a temporal phenomenon, Bergson notes that “affect is felt when the body hesitates in the course of habitual action” (ibid: 143).⁵⁵ Hesitation defines the structure of time for Bergson, “the ontological interval wherein *time makes a difference*, wherein it acts in experience” (in Al-Saji 2014: 142).⁵⁶ These tensions inhabit this work, and they inhabit them in a way that keeps me stuttering, hesitantly.

⁵⁵ See Bergson’s *Matter and Memory* (2012). Al-Saji says, “to allow discomfort is to make the time within experience for hesitation to occur; this suspends for an interval the reflexes of white privilege that project comfort, seamlessness, and expansiveness in all contexts” (Al-Saji 2014: 150).

⁵⁶ Similar perhaps to Lefebvre’s “theory of moments” which was interested in moments as *significant* ruptures in time in which dominant orthodoxies are open to challenge. What Sara Ahmed has called “queer moments” are moments in which instances of disorientation have the possibility to digress or detour from the reproduction of habituated normativity (Ahmed 2006). These moments, she says, “block bodily action: they inhibit the body such that it ceases to extend into phenomenal space” and thus constitute itself in a particular way or in a particular direction (Ahmed 2006: 66).

Chapter Two

I interviewed Emily during one of the lunch breaks at the Montreal Annual Jam. The Annual Jam occurred in November and took place over a long weekend, it included workshops and classes, as well as unstructured open jams. The jam took place at a choreographic studio in Montreal, housed in what was, in the early half of the twentieth century, an Anglican church. Cathedral windows let light into the various studio spaces which had been partitioned off and which were filled with different workshops and activities, happening on a staggered schedule over the weekend.

We sat on a fake leather couch in the lower level of the building, in a kind of hallway which connected the various studios, the main ballroom, and the kitchen which had been set-up to serve lunch for the jam attendees. As we were talking, dancers filtered through the hallway. Emily is a dancer based in New York, who teaches contact improvisation. Knowing she would be at the Montreal jam, I wrote to her asking if I could interview her.

This conversation took place on the last day of the weekend-long jam. We had been talking for a while about her relationship to contact improvisation, and about the politics of consent in the form. As we sat there in the hallway, several people passed by and asked if they could sit in. I told them about the context of the interview, that it constituted part of the research for my master's thesis. As was the case for many of the other interviews I conducted over the course of my fieldwork, what started out as a one on one interview turned into a kind of group conversation as more and more people asked if they could join the conversation.

As we continued talking, other dancers squeezed onto the leather couch and spilled out onto the floor, sitting cross-legged in the hallway. We were joined, among others, by a man with whom Emily had just shared a dance before coming to meet me for my interview and another woman I recognized from other jams in Montreal.

At some point, Emily told us, "you know, last night here at the jam I was so distracted by some of the behavior in the room, I almost had to stop dancing." She continued, "I am so full of concern for how some people are being danced with that I kind of can't dance, I'm immobilized." She went on to tell me that she had watched a man, whose behavior she considered to be quite problematic. She said, "it wasn't anything really outrageous, but there was

a kind of manipulating, or uninvited teaching in a way that is usually like power-over, generally male-presenting to female-presenting.”

She said, “you know, when I see this, I just think, to me, you’re not even doing contact improvisation, you’re just doing something else.” Emily explained to us that, after seeing this man dancing in this way with another woman, she “put herself into the dance.” Attempting to get him to see the error of his ways, she interrupted their dance, making it a trio, from which the other woman soon exited.

After dancing with him for a while, she told us, “he started hooking me so I said, ‘please do not use your hands like that, when you use your hands like that, I do not have options.’” Hooking, in this context, refers to a way of catching another’s body in some way that limits their options for motion. It could be an instance of catching one’s arm or torso, for example, within the crook of your arm or leg or using your hands to grab them. It can be a way of using the other dancer’s body for leverage or counterbalance. It can often be directive, or limitative (diminishing one’s capacity to respond in a dynamic way using their full range of motion) and used to tell another dancer where to go or keep them from moving in certain ways, or in certain directions. It is this sense which Emily is referring to.

However, hooking is also frequently talked about as a kind of reflex that arises when one tries to stop a fall. Someone who is falling might try to ‘hook’ onto the body of their partner to catch themselves, or somebody might try to keep their partner from falling by catching them. Typically, contact improvisers tend to practice refraining from doing this (though it may be a reflex) in order to allow themselves or their partners to fall, and in doing so, learn *how* to fall. As one dancer explained to me,

If I’m falling, I need my arms and legs to be free so I can support my fall, or use it to create new movement. If you try to catch me and say, grab my arm, I can’t use my arm, and I could get hurt.⁵⁷

Emily continued, “so I said to him ‘please don’t hook me’ and he got upset and said, ‘so I can’t hook?’ She continued, “so I asked him, ‘well why are you hooking me?’” to which he

⁵⁷ The arms and legs, in this context, are often referred to as the “landing gear.” I was often told to “free up my landing gear” or move in a certain way that would allow me to have “my landing gear free and ready.”

responded, “to use you to do this thing.” Emily exhaled and then continued, “I said ‘that is not part of this form: *using people*. You say you are using me to do what you want, there’s a politics to that, if you are dancing with a woman, as a man, in terms of power, that’s a problem.”

Histories of an Intervention and the “First Rule of Contact Improvisation”

Richard Kim, a contact improvisation practitioner, teacher and blogger has charted the progression of the conversation about consent in contact improvisation, and broken the history of said conversation down into four ‘periods’ which stretch from the inception of the form in the early 1970’s to the present day (Kim 2020). This periodization was initially presented during the *Consent Culture in Contact Improvisation Symposium*, which I attended on Zoom in April of 2020. I would like to outline his periodization in what follows, but would like to do so with the following caveats.

Kim’s periodization is useful, ethnographically, to understand how contact improvisers emically might characterize the changes in the conversation on consent as one of progressive development. The teleological underpinnings of such a periodization posit the conversation as one which has evolved over time. Thus, it is as if one has arrived at the present moment, from which we might look back on the history which has brought us here and chart the progressive ethical sharpening that has paralleled a sort of increasing clarity. Choosing to historicize the conversation in this way is, more than anything, an attempt to capture the historicities that are proper to my informants and which are meaningful to them.

Each of Kim’s periods are characterized by changing attitudes, understandings, and degrees of attention and rigor in terms of addressing and bringing about consent culture. The periods are divided as follows:

- 1. “Beginnings”**

1972 (*Magnesium*) – 1983 (*Contact at 10th and 2nd*)

- 2. “Warning Signs”**

1983 (*Contact at 10th and 2nd*) – 1997 (C125+3)

- 3. “Say No”**

2003 (Martin Keogh’s “101 Ways to Say No to Contact Improvisation”) – 2017 (#MeToo and the “Montreal Zine”)

4. “#MeToo”

2017 (#MeToo) – 2020 (Present Day [April 2020])

The first period, “Beginnings,” stretches from Steve Paxton’s 1972 performance of *Magnesium* to *Contact at 10th and 2nd*. *Magnesium* is hailed as the “seminal work” of contact improvisation, as I mentioned in the introduction (Novack 1990: 61; Kim 2020). The period stretches through *Contact at 10th and 2nd*, a national conference on contact improvisation organized by Steve Paxton in 1983 (see Novack 1990). As Novack remarks, “the continuities and changes from 1972 to 1983 became clear” during this conference which included performances, jams, and panel discussions (Novack 1990: 101).

The “Beginnings” period is characterized by its lack of formal documentation of ‘incidents’ (ostensibly meaning incidents of transgression), however the lack of formal documentation cannot be equated with the absence of such events (Kim 2020). It is important to recognize that although this timeline charts the progressive accumulation of attention paid to the dynamics of non-consensual touch (and other forms of transgression) in contact improvisation, these dynamics are not new. In other words, the problem of non-consensual behavior is not new, while the language or conversation of consent may be. As I mentioned in the introduction, and as Kim elaborates in his timeline, this initial period was characterized by a largely homogenous corpus of practitioners (Kim 2020). Most dancers were of the same race and social class (see Hennessey 2016, 2018; Goldman 2017; Suseno 2019). Kim notes that the ethos of egalitarianism which characterized the initial investigations in the form never expanded to consider how the form’s diversification (or relative lack thereof) might require re-thinking the original propositions of egalitarianism through a more critical lens of social privilege and power (Kim 2020).

The second period of the timeline stretches from *Contact at 10th and 2nd* through C125+3 (*ibid*). C125 was a conference convened for the twenty fifth anniversary of contact improvisation in 1997 (twenty-five years after *Magnesium*’s debut) (Novak 1990). C125+3 was an event of similar genre following three years later in 2000. Kim has dubbed this period “Warning Signs” which reflects the initial emergence of conversations and publications regarding the topic of boundary violations in contact improvisation (Kim 2020).

In 1996, Contact Quarterly publishes a double issue on “Sexuality and Identity” which includes Joanna Cashman’s essay “*Personal Boundaries in Contact Improvisation*” (Cashman 1996). In 1997, during the CI25 conference, Dena Davida and Martin Keogh organize a group panel discussion titled: “Contact Improvisation: The Politics of Touch in an Age of Sexual Harassment”(personal communication with Davida).⁵⁸

The third period of Kim’s timeline is inaugurated by the publication of Martin Keogh’s “*101 Ways to Say No to Contact Improvisation*” in 2003 (Keogh 2003; Kim 2020). This publication most explicitly introduces the topic and is perhaps the most frequently cited and criticized today. This period, “Say No,” stretches from CI25+3 and Keogh’s publication to the publication of what has come to be known colloquially as “the Montreal Zine” during the so-called #MeToo moment in 2017 (Kim 2020). This period witnesses the drafting and informal publication of many jam guidelines. A central preoccupation of those working to build consent culture in contact improvisation has been to create, archive, and implement guidelines internationally.⁵⁹

Many have and continue to uphold what is referred to as the “first rule” of contact improvisation. The most notable instantiation of this philosophy is the so-called “101 Ways” piece (sometimes also referred to simply as “Martin’s piece” or “Martin’s essay”) which promotes what many have called the philosophy of “the first rule.” As Richard Kim writes:

It’s called the First Rule of CI, or the Only Rule, or...maybe the Fundamental Principle. Its shorthand version is “take care of yourself,” but I’ve heard it expressed as, “above all else, you are responsible for yourself” (Kim 2013).

As Keogh explains in his 2003 piece:

⁵⁸ I am very grateful to Dena Davida for sharing the unpublished transcription of this conversation from 1997 with me.

⁵⁹ In 2017, Benjamin Pierce created a public Google Doc compendium of jam guidelines from around the world which continues to reign as the most up-to-date and comprehensive resource on the matter and includes various examples of jam-guidelines from across the world, as well as community resources for dealing with incidents, and a collection of writings on the subject (<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Os8c2ukZRS5cnJhJv0SuBX5MrpGKAMZk6U3i-Pbfezk/edit>).

In Contact Improvisation, there is a basic principle that each person takes responsibility for him- or her- self. I am the only person who can be inside my body, so I need to keep a part of me awake—the part that can sense and communicate (physically or verbally) my needs, limits, and desires. I need to keep myself safe (Keogh 2003: 61).

In the wake of Keogh's piece, many voices have emerged as critical of both the article's upholding of the "first rule," and of the first rule itself. Many have noted that the so-called first rule is at best insufficient and at worst actively works against consent culture in contact improvisation (see Beaulieux 2019; Harrist 2019; Gottlieb 2018; Rea 2017; 2018; 2019).

The "first rule," loosely conceived, equates taking care of oneself (and thus, not falling prey to unwanted sexual advances) with one's capacity to "say no." Michele Beaulieux, perhaps the strongest critic of the first-rule philosophy notes that "the first rule is problematic for multiple reasons: it sides with privilege, is difficult to use, fails to prevent violations, promotes victim blaming, and changes who participates" (Beaulieux 2019). As Kathleen Rea has noted, "In situations where consent becomes blurry due to being on the lower end of a power imbalance, I think the tenet that we each are responsible for protecting our own boundaries falls short" (Rea in Beaulieux 2019:48). I will continue the discussion on the first rule in what follows.

The final (and contemporary) period of Kim's timeline, "#MeToo," stretches from the 2017 publication of the "Montreal zine" to the present moment (Kim 2020). The Montreal zine, published in early 2017 and edited by Brooks Yardley, compiles the experience of 16 female dancers in Montreal who share their experiences with contact improvisation (Yardley 2017). The zine, titled "*Respecting Boundaries/Coexisting Genders: Women's Experiences of Feeling Unsafe in Contact Improv*," offers a rigorous and provocative account of women's experiences in the form and is accompanied by a host of relevant resources and suggestions (*ibid*).

From the 2017 #MeToo moment onward, the conversation about sexual assault and harassment in contact improvisation has become implicated in what Kim calls an "explosion of writing" (Kim 2020). Not limited to the written form, there has also been a wave of protests for example, at the Ontario Regional Contact Jam, and the Montreal Regional Jam (Coppersmith 2018), and the West Coast Contact Improvisation Jam (Beaulieux 2019; Harrist 2019).

Additionally, a number of conference panels, symposiums, and public accountability processes have taken place.

Following the emergence of critiques addressing the shortcomings of the so-called “first rule,” Nancy Stark Smith, shortly before her passing in 2020, published a letter in her capacity as coeditor of *Contact Quarterly* titled “What First Rule of CI?” (Stark Smith 2020: 13). Stark Smith remarks that, as a member of the first group of dancers practicing with Paxton in the earliest days of the form, she does not recall any such suggestion to *only* or *primarily* take care of oneself (*ibid*). She notes that, from the beginning, the form encouraged “both an awareness of our own limits and (mostly physical) safety, and, and awareness of those around us” (*ibid*). She wonders whether a sort of “telephone game” phenomena took place, gradually truncating the original proposition (which implied an expanded awareness, both of oneself and others) into a “reduction of values, intentions and all-too solid dogmas and rules” (*ibid*: 13).⁶⁰

Despite disputes over the term’s prevalence, it is nevertheless present in much of the writing on consent in contact improvisation and is thus important to attend to. Many of my interlocutors explained having learned the “first rule.” One woman said, “the dominant language has been that you take responsibility for yourself, each person takes responsibility for themselves, and that’s what everyone taught me.”

Sarah Gottlieb has published several pieces collected in a series titled “*Myths to Break Down: Moving Towards Ethical Communication and Ethical Sexuality in CP*” on Richard Kim’s blog (Gottlieb 2018). In these essays, Gottlieb deconstructs a number of “myths” which persist in the form, actively working against consent culture in contact improvisation. One of the myths that Gottlieb deconstructs is that “Saying ‘No’ Is Easy” (Gottlieb 2018). As a myriad of voices within the #MeToo movement have made clear, saying “no” is in fact incredibly difficult, and fully trafficked by other intersectional politics and power dynamics.⁶¹

As Gottlieb says, the “emphasis on educating people about how to appropriately

⁶⁰ Stark Smith notes that there were “no explicit rules as far as I remember—only an atmosphere and practice of encouraging mutual safety, support, and discovery. (And the suggestion to put one foot back when catching a hurtling body so you could spiral on the way down and not just be knocked over.)” (Stark Smith 2020: 13).

⁶¹ As Beaulieux notes in her article, “[a]sserting boundaries in a forthright manner is not fun and may be particularly difficult for women who have been socialized to please, who have reason to fear male anger, and whose voices and trust have been repeatedly disrespected” (Beaulieux 2019: 48).

respond to unwanted sexual touch after it happens, versus developing a deeper understanding of the underlying dynamics that create instances of sexual violence in CI, is problematic” (Gottlieb 2018). Importantly, she notes, instead of focusing on teaching or learning “how to say no, leave a dance, or better protect themselves against unwanted sexual/ sexually-charged/ sexually-ambiguous attention” the emphasis should rather be on making people “responsible for not transgressing others’ boundaries with their own sexual agendas and for developing awareness about sexual consent” (*ibid*). As Beaulieux puts it, “a talent and skill in fending off sexual advances should not be a prerequisite for participating in CI” (Beaulieux 2019:49). Beaulieux remarks that, “by sending the message that the violated will need to fend for themselves, the individual-responsibility mandate,” i.e. the first rule, “gives those who repeatedly violate license to operate” (*ibid*: 49).

This is Where You Lift Me

“You say you are using me to do what you want, there’s a politics to that, if you are dancing with a woman, as a man, in terms of power, that’s a problem,” says Emily. The woman I recognized from other Montreal events, Claire, interjects saying, “you know they have these guidelines up on the wall, or at the beginning of the jam that say ‘no grabbing or no uninvited teaching’ and that vocabulary is there, but the problem is that it means different things to different people.” Emily says looks at the man who has joined our conversation, with whom she had just shared a dance before coming to meet me, she says “I mean for us, our dance was super grabby, but it was super fun.”⁶²

Emily looks at me and pauses, “actually,” she says, “I saw you dancing with this problem person.” She says, “I thought, wow, that’s so interesting, we are supposed to be talking about consent today and she’s dancing with that guy. I wanted to ask you about your experience.”

I listened to the recording of this interview many times in the following months. Every time I did, I seemed to live out this moment as a rather unending one, the tension was drawn out further by the eerie reverb of the microphone on which I recorded it. Emily’s tone is incredulous, but curious. I can hear myself stutter.

⁶² “Grabby” dances, in this context refers to the usage of the hands to grab or latch. Like ‘hooking,’ and for similar reasons, grabbing is typically avoided.

“Well, I guess it’s interesting to me too,” I say. Throughout this conversation, this “problem person” was, to me, a kind of anonymous figure, someone in the room full of some two hundred dancers. He was undistinguished from the rest, but for his obvious display of these inappropriate gestures. That such obvious behavior was not immediately obvious to me, has now been made clear by Emily’s comment.

“Well, can you tell me who it was?” I ask. Emily responds without hesitation, “well, did you have a grabby dance?” I think through the dozens of dances I’ve shared in the past two days. Sure, I think, I’ve had a few grabby dances. Many of them—like the one Emily shared with the man who was now sitting next to me—were fun, enjoyable. Yet, as I sift through my memories of the different dances I’ve shared over the past day, this ‘problem person’ starts ventriloquizing through many of them. I begin to see, in flashes of recollection, instances in which people had been directive, for example, with their touch. I start to remember dances, or moments in dances which had been begrudgingly endured.

Did this mean that I couldn’t point to my dance with the ‘problem person,’ couldn’t pick it out from the bunch and tell Emily who it was, what my experience with them was like, because it was only one of many dances which had failed to register as ‘problematic’? Perhaps because it constituted an ongoing sense of normalcy? Had it gotten buried, in other words, in the pile? Had it come to constitute that sense of atmospheric saturation which Kathleen Stewart speaks of, the barely felt background noise, the ongoing sense of the familiar (Stewart 2011)? Had I perhaps written it off as mildly irritating, a waste of my time, but not ‘problematic’? If so, did this mean that I was everywhere resigning myself to dances which were irritating and begrudgingly endured?

I ask Emily what he looked like. “Medium height, brown hair, white guy.” This does not narrow it down. I continue to be unsure of who she is talking about, and intensely ashamed of that uncertainty. I should know, shouldn’t I? A workshop lets out, spilling its participants into the hallway. Emily catches my eye, “that guy.” She points to a man walking towards us, “with the yellow shirt,” she says. I remember him, I remember our dance, and one moment in particular. We had been bent over with our hips connected. It was as if we had been standing shoulder to shoulder and then bent over, both of us, to tie our shoes. This is a position I found myself in many times, but like any “position” in contact improvisation, there are not particular ways of moving which should, necessarily, proceed from this arrangement.

I had been resting in that shape, listening to it take form. I was feeling the point of contact between our hips which would occasionally migrate into our shoulders. Then he spoke; “this is where you lift me.” Taken aback, I asked what he meant. He said, “from this position you can lift me, you just have to get a bit lower, into your glutes, and give me your hip as a platform.”⁶³

Acquiescing, I took his weight onto my hip and lifted him off the ground. I assumed I had made some sort of mistake. I took his weight on as a kind of burden. I assumed, without hesitation that I had not been accommodating enough, this assumption was an ordered reflex in my body. I remember having walked away from that dance, frustrated. At the time, I was frustrated because the dance had resembled other dances I had been in which proceeded as if following a kind of formula, operating on auto-pilot. I do this, then you do this, then I do this, then this is where you lift me. As Nancy Stark Smith has remarked, “I’ve also come to realize that it’s possible to practice the physical techniques of contact improvisation and *never make the choice to improvise*” (Stark Smith in Schaffman 2001: 9).

While the dance bothered me, I had written it off as boring and formulaic, but not necessarily problematic. I certainly hadn’t thought to give this man the appellation of the “problem person.” I had thought of these dances as simply “not good dances” and I had been resigned to that dissatisfaction. I thought of this man as the one amongst us, in our duet, who had been *not truly improvising*—simply following a kind of formula. “This is where you lift me.”

I had initially thought of this ‘formula’ as part of a kind of monotony: practicing the physical techniques, as Stark Smith says, but not improvising. But in fact, this formula, this exercise in monotonous resignation, constituted a kind of relay circuit. The formula was not, could not be *merely* a kind of abstracted gesture or sequence of gestures. It was a concrete expression of our gendered positionalities, they were inscribed in our movement, our ways of relating to the movement. Our dance was an echo chamber, or a platform, for our habitual ways of relating in the world.

Did I feel that my ‘boundaries’ were crossed? If we consider boundaries, for a moment, as a kind of scaffolding of the subject, those parameters through which the subject is constituted by its own outside, my boundaries remained regrettably intact. I remained almost trapped within

⁶³ By “platform” he is referring to a kind of “shelf” that one can make with the pelvic bone. One can use the hip as a sort of platform to lift others, or to give structure to their movement

them, within a closed feedback-loop of embodied gendered performativity. This is where you are, this is where I am, and this is where you lift me. Did the fact that I did not necessarily feel my boundaries were crossed, point to my incapacity to set boundaries, or to understand where they arguably should have been?

I don't have answers to these questions. They nevertheless chronicle, how "incommensurate elements hang together in a scene that bodies labor to be in or get through" (Stewart 2011: 452). What's more, these questions speak to a life lived amidst profoundly contradictory demands, without resolution.

I finished telling Emily the story of my dance with this man. She sighed deeply, "what's the labor being put out by people like us in the name of inclusivity?" "You know," she continued, "we go through so much work trying to get people to learn, but I just think sometimes, with people like that, like maybe this isn't the right form for you in this moment. If people were actually practicing the form, there wouldn't be so many problems, there just wouldn't be so many problems." I told Emily that I wasn't sure I knew how to make distinctions, to know, in other words, what was and wasn't contact improvisation.

"I wish we had danced together now, she said."

Strategies to Differentiate Between Things

I asked Emily what she felt most optimistic about in the form. She told me, "a lot of things, but the form is only as good as what we do with it." "It is precarious," she said. "It's not like contact improvisation will *do* anything specific, it depends what we do with it." "But," she said,

over and over again, it teaches me how to hang out in a space of disequilibrium, how to be in a space of unknown; a physical energetic space, that feels like a fundamentally queer proposal, and we need more of that in terms of strategies that can go in many directions. You know, we have only ten years or something before the climate crisis is irreversible. Imagining ways of being that allow for being in a disoriented, but responsive state of being.

She continued, “the more I practice it, the more I feel able to show up to other things in my life. How I am when I am confronted by my own privilege, when I am confronted by things that make me uncomfortable, how do I organize myself? How do I keep showing up?”⁶⁴

Later in our conversation, Emily was continuing to describe this responsivity she had mentioned throughout our conversation. She told me, “it’s about developing practices, strategies, training proprioception.” She said, “if I can extend into space, proprioceptively, then there might be a different sensation, a different care, a capacity to shift between my body, our body, your body.” “If I can feel the impact, then I can make a lot of different choices.”

Emily shared with me a phrase which she has picked up from her practice with Feldenkrais, a somatic education method. She said, “they say, if you know what you’re doing, you can do what you want.” “It’s about finding strategies to differentiate between things.” While rotating her hand ever so delicately through the axis of her wrist, passing between two positions a fraction of an adjustment apart, “as soon as I know that *this*,” she said, referring to one position, “is different from *this*” referring to another, “I have more options in the space between the two, more agency.” “But,” she said, “if I call this and this the same thing, I can’t tell the difference, and I have fewer options.”

In my understanding of this responsivity that Emily is talking about, it implies as she says, “a different care,” developing a capacity, to “shift between my body, our body, your body.” It is, as she says, about impact. We might say it is about feeling how one *affects and is affected*. It is, as I understand it, an attunement to a complex assemblage of extra-individual sensations, which inhere in, or perhaps inspire a sort of disequilibrium. This capacity which Emily talks about, as I understand it, doesn’t preclude the simultaneous work of “setting healthy boundaries.” That I may have initially thought otherwise, may well have been my biggest error. Which, in any case, led to my having been immeasurably humbled, again and again, by this research.

As I mentioned in the introduction, I had initially been interested in the interventions that contact improvisation and consent might pose vis-à-vis one another. As I see it now, I see these

⁶⁴ Emily explained to me that she taught in a university setting in which most of her students were young students of color, the first in their families to attend university. She explained that she was interested in finding ways, as a teacher “to pedagogically make the material relevant, to stay responsive in that.” She said, “I am having all the time, different levels of stakes in that context, to unpack my assumptions; who feels safe lying on the floor and closing their eyes, who feels comfortable with me as a white person putting their hands on them, or not, why?”

‘interventions’ less in terms of antagonistic tensions, and more in terms of reparative tensions.⁶⁵ The version of consent culture which dancers were attempting to bring into being, had a speculative dimension in which consent was addressed not simply as what it already is, but what it *could be*.

To say that I “see” it now in terms of reparative tensions is not to say that I have been given sight, nor that sight has come to bear on a fixed thing, an “it.” It is more to say that it has been ‘sited’ as Haraway might say. That is, it has become situated, or a kind of situated knowledge (Haraway 1988). I cannot attempt to speak as the ‘view from nowhere.’ I speak from the viewpoint of someone who has not figured, not even in the slightest sense, any of this out. I speak from the viewpoint of someone who has imperfect self-knowledge, and who cannot speak of any of this from any semblance of distance. I speak from a very intimate place, which keeps asking me to question my own assumptions; I made and unmade many of them over the course of this research.

I am interested in what Joe Dumit calls, in the context of his work on “Writing the Implosion,” a process of making maps of one’s knowledge and one’s ignorance, to “wake us” to the everyday and the way it is connected (Dumit: 2014). Dumit writes, “[t]he everyday, it seems, conspires against us, or with that part of us that wants to live in an everyday in which objects are mere parts of the world and it all makes a certain kind of sleepy sense” (*ibid*). So, what I write here is a cartography of ignorance, a map of things in the process of making, and unmaking sense. Along the way, I have encountered *many* gaps, gaps which are attached to stories about those gaps. Stories, as Dumit says, “about unimportance, difficulty, obscurity, inefficiency (too little time or bang for the buck), and exhaustion speak to the ways in which your knowledge and attention and caring have been shaped” (*ibid*: 355, 356) There are also “counterstories about this ignorance, accounts of others who know and care so you do not have to” (*ibid*).

Dumit notes, in teaching his students this process, they often react to the ‘messiness’ generated (*ibid*: 357). He asks, “do we think that stories of objects and facts and practices should be straightforward and not imploded? How much do we value efficiency and condensation over partial connections, extra accountability and more homework?” (*ibid*: 357, 358). As a *result* of

⁶⁵ I use the term “reparative” following Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s conceptualization of “reparative” and “paranoid” positions (see footnote #74).

this process, one encounters “thicker weaves of dependence, accountability, and care” (*ibid.*: 358).

A Bigger Undoing

Another dancer, Eric, described to me how he appreciated the work of Kathleen Rea for the emphasis it placed on “educating newcomers.” Eric, like many other dancers with whom I spoke, referred to what he called a “vulnerable time” when he first began practicing contact improvisation. He said, “you’re engaging in all this touch and sensuality and the only other place you usually have that is in sex and sexuality.” “So,” he said, “the de-patterning is a long process that is more than just a half hour talk or a couple of classes, it’s a much bigger undoing.”

Eric explained to me that part of the practice of contact improvisation involves adding “layers” to the way one gives and receives touch, implying it within a broader spectrum of intimate touch which doesn’t necessarily correlate to, or index the touch we often think of as sexual. Eric explained this process of gradual layering to me as one of “de-patterning,” part of a “bigger undoing.” When I asked Eric about what that bigger undoing implied for him, he spoke about having made mistakes, about having hurt people and having been hurt, he spoke about having crossed other’s boundaries and having his own boundaries crossed. He said, “we like to think it’s just like ‘oh, I just communicate my boundaries’ but we have to know where they are, and that’s really tricky”.

Eric explained to me that after having practiced contact improvisation for a number of years, he can now feel “when something is happening, and what is happening,” by which he meant that he was becoming attuned to the different feelings, affects, or sensations that come up in a dance. He said, compared to when he first began learning, he now has “a broader perspective of availabilities, and from that I have more agency.”

In another conversation, I sat on a grassy hill with two women, Daniela and Rebecca. We were eating lunch together after having spent the morning dancing together. I asked Daniela about how she has seen the conversation on consent change in recent years. She told me, “when I learned contact twenty years ago this was never addressed.” She said, “It was all about physics and bones and muscles and how the floor and gravity works, and it was a bit like ‘yeah stuff happens underneath that but we’re not including that in the teaching.’” She said, “I knew that was in there, deep buried was what I needed, and I was just going to endure until I got it figured

out, because there didn't seem to be another way to find out what I needed to find out about connecting to people, and relation and holding my center while connecting to someone else's center, I was an intrepid, persistent person."

She said, "so now, in dances, I say, what do I have to do to make myself comfortable? And now I can do that really fast. If I try and try and I still can't get comfortable..." She began again, "because you know, I'm a real 'yes' person." "But," she said, "if I still can't do it, then I have to say no." Rebecca interrupted, "but, in this, do you see your own accommodating, your compromising?" Daniela responded, "yes, I think it's partly conditioning, but it's also a skillset to be able to withhold my immediate judgement, to say, ok, benefit of the doubt, let me see if my skills can meet you."

We continued talking about disorientation and discomfort, and how contact improvisation can be disorienting in multiple ways. Rebecca said, "I'm thinking like, there is discomfort and a certain amount of risk, which is an aspect of the dance that appeals to me, I have to feel willing to feel that." "But," she said, "there's another discomfort where I feel like it's against my will, it's not like a challenge where I am uncomfortable and there is something there for me. It's more like, I'm uncomfortable and I don't know why I am doing this." Daniela said, "yes, at that point you're disconnected from yourself, there's a collapse or a dissociation, it's really disorienting, and can be really emotional." Rebecca responded, "I feel like I am getting to know that specific discomfort at this point, when I started, I did not know it. I didn't feel that I had the right to act on this specific discomfort."

Following the Rolling Point of Contact

As I mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, the different ontological and speculative stakes of both contact improvisation and consent might well emerge most strikingly at the intersection between the two phenomena. That is, at their *point of contact*. This point of contact is not a clean point of convergence, nor is it a hybridizing encounter, it can also be a place of friction or what Anna Tsing might call a "zone of awkward engagement" (Tsing 2005: xii).⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Tsing uses "zones of awkward engagement" to address the relational configurations which are the products of globalization but which might otherwise be effaced by conceptions of seamless flow (Tsing 2005). These "zones of awkward engagement" are those "situations in which the worldly instantiations of

Following the rolling point of point of contact is not simply an ad hoc methodology adopted for the sake of this thesis. It is also one of the basic premises of contact improvisation and it is involved in what my interlocutors point to as a kind of conceptual work implied in the form itself. As Emily explained to me, “it forces you to keep changing, adjusting, change how you *conceive* of what you’re doing, how you orient yourself in what you’re doing.” In this sense, the rolling point of contact is an essential structuring principle for embodied inquiry. Following the rolling point of contact might well be akin to what Heidegger referred to as an attempt to “follow the movement of showing,” (Heidegger 1972).⁶⁷

As I mentioned, improvisers in this form often point to a phenomenon called “the gap,” a momentary suspension of reference points, capable of upsetting a sort of “momentum of being.” With regards to its capacity to break a momentum of being, this gap has been addressed as a kind of disruption in the habitus’ condition of continual, iterative reproduction. Improviser Kent De Spain refers to a phenomenon proper to the gap which he calls ‘hovering’ (De Spain in Goldman 2010:107). He says, “sometimes, in the hyperawareness of improvisation, there are microseconds of stillness between movements...where I sense an actual muscular tension that feels like my body wants to go in several directions” (De Spain in Goldman 2010: 107).

Another “zone of awkward engagement” which is similar to (and not wholly separable from) the notion of the gap is a kind of “tie-up” or a knot. While the two phenomena are similar, the differences which do exist are key. These knots happen often in contact improvisation. As dancers follow the point of contact, they often wind up tangled up in one another; somebody’s arm may be wrapped around another’s legs, their torso is trapped underneath somebody else’s body. They are in a kind of knot, their options for movement are restricted by the configuration they find themselves in.

Unlike in the experience of the gap, which Nancy Stark Smith describes as “where you are when you don’t know where you are,” in these tie-ups, one is perhaps uncomfortably aware of exactly where they are (Stark Smith in Albright 2003: 258). While tangled up, your head may

information, capital, and humanity do not flow but collide, grate against one another, push each other out of the way” (Rockefeller 2011: 568). The notion of “flow” in contact improvisation is central to the following chapter.

⁶⁷ See also Johan de Jong’s *The Movement of Showing* (2020) which “explores why Derrida, Hegel, and Heidegger conceive of their thought as a ‘movement’ rather than as a presentation of results or conclusions” (de Jong 2020).

fall into someone else's armpit, perhaps you have a foot in your face. Instead of not knowing where you are, you know exactly where you are and are confronted with the reality of what it means to *be there in that way*. We might say that the tie-up is the immanent counterpart to what smacks of transcendence in the language of the gap.

One experiences a kind of proliferation of options in the gap. So much so that one can actually feel the micro-actualization of different movement potentials in the body (as De Spain's quote illustrates). On the contrary, in a tie-up, one experiences a kind of restricted range of motion, a diminished set of options for movement. This might be felt as a sense of stuckness, or even impasse. The dancers with whom I practiced often told me that one should not try to avoid these knots. While they are indeed instances of restricted motion, they perhaps paradoxically hold the key to the discovery of new movement pathways. As Ian, the instructor of several workshops I attended during my summer in California told me, "these are the tricky spots that teach you how to really be creative, you have to find your way out while staying connected to the point of contact." When these knots happen people often disengage. They detach from the knot, and reorganize themselves in less tricky configurations. Ian told me,

you can do that too, you can get out, but those spots when you don't know how to go forward, those spots are your teachers. Those moments that seem really unresolvable will really teach you how to move. They force you to use your body in a way you never have, they force you out of your patterns

In this sense, both the gap and the tie-up generate novel movement pathways. However, whereas the gap does so through the multiplication of options, the tie-up does so through the restriction of options. In other words, through constraint. I am interested in theorizing from a kind of *situated knowledge* which might emerge from tie-up. Following Donna Haraway's notion of situated knowledge as a mode of theorization which belies the supposedly-impartial observational "god trick" of masculinist technoscience, we can conceive of situated knowledges as "apparatuses of bodily production" which theorize from places of 'situatedness' rather than

from hardened stances of “objectivity” or “neutrality” (which, as Haraway points out, tend to be synonymous with the perspective of white male technoscience) (Haraway: 1988: 591).⁶⁸

The tie-up might seem more aligned with situated knowledge (at least in the way in which it is typically cited) in the sense in which it refers to a more distinct instance of *situatedness* (so-situated, in fact, that it is almost immobilized). However, both the tie-up and the gap imply particular instances of what Haraway might call “mobile positioning” (*ibid*: 585). As one’s position in the dance changes, their gaze also changes, the place from which they conceive of things changes. As Haraway would say, their practices of “siting (sighting) change” (*ibid*: 595). The tie-up speaks to complex relations of entanglement, quite literally. Both the tie-up and the gap, like Haraway’s situated knowledges, belie simple ideas about self-transparency.

Con-Sentire

My so-called interlocutors point towards a cluster of propositions which inhere in the notion of consent but are undoubtedly in excess of that phenomenon we typically, or metonymically understand *as* consent. We often understand consent, in a sense, as inextricable from an individual’s volitional, self-transparent capacities. As it is legally defined, consent is free, voluntary and informed (see Wolf-Meyer 2018; Fischel 2016). Consent as it is oftentimes understood in its broader implications, has come to constitute a kind of operationalizable leitmotiv stretching across all manner of so-called public and private realms of social life. As I understand it, the dancers that I met who were working to make contact improvisation more consensual, were oftentimes working beyond the notion of consent as a merely liberal-individual apparatus. Their conversations, practices, and struggles to articulate, address and practice consent in the context of contact improvisation oftentimes went beyond the liberal notion of consent. This happened in different ways. Many conversations necessarily involved more complex reckonings with intersectional politics, conversations about power, agency, accountability and community (as opposed to merely individual) resilience.

⁶⁸ By extension, we might consider that the preponderance of readings of the “neutral” phenomenological body replicate this “view from nowhere.”

As I mentioned in the introduction, many argue that contact improvisation is a particularly *useful* practice, within which to cultivate the skills needed to navigate consent (see T'ai; Williams 2016). Gina T'ai has written that "[t]o practice CI is to practice consent..." (T'ai 2017). During the discussion at C125 titled "Contact Improvisation: The Politics of Touch in an Age of Sexual Harrassment" a woman notes that the sensitivity which dancers cultivate and practice in contact improvisation "could be a model for sensitivity training in sexual harassment for corporations or [other] institutions." She said, "I think that we really need to investigate what we are doing here and use it wisely."⁶⁹ Indeed, one of the practices contact improvisation cultivates is developing a capacity, as she says to "recognize resistance," we might feel somebody's resistance by developing a capacity to attune to their body. Practices of attunement like these are cultivated in contact improvisation and might go beyond a simpler framework. She says, "part of the contact training that is so amazing, is the sensitivity to the minute resistances."

It is possibly akin to the distinction which Robin Bauer, in his "*Queer BDSM Intimacies – Critical Consent and Pushing Boundaries*" makes between what he calls "critical consent" and "liberal consent" amongst practitioners of BDSM (Bauer 2014). Critical consent validates and affirms the need for consensual (in this case) sexual interactions without inscribing them in the discourse of harm-reduction or the liberal notion of contractual free-individuals acting of their own accord (*ibid*). The equation of consent with unproblematic self-determination has been troubled by feminist interventions, which according to Bauer, "oppose this idea, pointing out that women especially have been socialized into consenting to male dominance in a patriarchal culture...therefore, even if a woman consents to dominance, this does not mean she does so of her own free will" (*ibid*: 76). In a Facebook thread discussing consent in contact improvisation, one woman wrote that "arguably, under patriarchy there's no such thing as pure, authentic consent."

This perspective echoes that of Eroca Nichols who notes, in the context of her contact improvisation teaching, that when it comes to consent "we aren't in touch with what our body means when we actually say yes" (in Coppersmith 2018). She says, "a 'yes' under capitalism means 'yes, I'd like to survive' when there is no possibility for a no that keeps us surviving, there's no agency" (*ibid*). This resonates with what Bauer has called a "feminist criterion" that

⁶⁹ From the unpublished transcription of this event (personal communication with Davida).

people “must have real choices open to them,” choices which “depend not only on material but also on emotional realities” (Bauer 2014: 80).

Consent has nevertheless constituted, and continues to constitute, a *vital* intervention into a spectrum of relational configurations which too-frequently proceed in egregiously coercive, extractive, and violent ways. I do not mean, in any way to diminish the importance or necessity of consent, particularly in the context of sexual consent. I struggle to say anything at all about consent, when the work of fighting for consent culture is both hard-won and *very* far from finished. We live in a world which is absolutely marked, at every turn, with heinous abuses of power which exist on a spectrum of coercive structures. Even those domains in which we consider ourselves to be ‘free’ are nevertheless constituted by coercive structures, whether we perpetuate them, or are subjected to them. In any case, it is usually not simply one or the other. Likewise, it is not my intention to point to the complexities or opacities which might be associated with consent as warranting of any withdrawal of our commitments to bringing about consent culture and (sexual) autonomy⁷⁰.

The version of consent which those dancers I met were striving to practice, or were *calling for* (which is to say that it hasn’t necessarily yet arrived) points to a dimension of consent which goes beyond self-responsibilization. Perhaps closer to consent as *con-sentire*, feeling-together, dancers were engaged in asking how consent can go beyond the individual’s volitional capacities and address larger structural imbalances, and modes of care which are not simply about individual freedom as the binary opposition of social constraint. From the departure from the ‘first rule,’ to Emily’s ‘putting herself into the dance,’ to exercises which often worked on *mutually* “practicing setting boundaries,” there were many instances which called for a caretaking which went beyond placing the onus on the individual’s capacity to take care of themselves. Not all instances of “caretaking” were welcome, they often missed their mark, and risked replicating forms of violence they had perhaps set out to ameliorate. Care, in any case, is

⁷⁰ It is important to note that, as Shanya Cordis has noted, “emerging somewhat predictably following the explosion of #MeToo has been a corresponding backlash surrounding the excesses of the movement” (Cordis in Cordis and Ihmoud 2018). She notes that the most troubling aspect of this “logic of excess” is the “conflation of sexual violence with sexuality, and the ostensibly opaque and indeterminate notion of consent (and refusal)” (*ibid*). “This rhetoric,” Cordis says, conflates “gender violence with the presumably innocent, albeit clumsy, attempts to navigate sexual flirtation and propositions” (*ibid*). “However,” she argues, “such conflation cripples our ability to have nuanced discussions around sexual autonomy and consent” (*ibid*). (See Berry et. al 2017).

not a neutral medium and can often be the distributor of hegemonic modes of dictating how or what a body or a life should be.

I am interested in pulling (if only in a minor way) sexual and bodily autonomy out of, or away from, the logics of liberal capitalism in which it has, and continues to be inscribed. In doing so, it is imperative to attempt to resist foreclosing on our capacities to think about agencies which might not, or not yet, or perhaps never should be, fully *legible* to us.⁷¹ To think that we know everything about what agency looks like in contact improvisation would be to continue to insist upon some sort of universal body, which might usually be synonymous with the agency we conceive of through the logics of white, settler-colonial, heteronormative and ethnocentric categories of appraisal.

In this regard, it is important to address the ways in which the project of consent can, like anything else, become the expressive mode through which the reproduction of violence can occur. We should not forget the historical exclusions upon which the notion of consent was predicated.⁷² Or it can become, as Hennessy has described the non-actualized (or ambivalently actualized) “radical potentials” of contact improvisation, by way of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s phrase; “kinda subversive, kinda hegemonic” (Sedgwick in Hennessy 2016: 105).

This phrase of Sedgwick’s, as Maggie Nelson has said, points to the “rut” into which “so much criticism has fallen into of pointing out how a certain phenomenon has both subversive and hegemonic effects” (Nelson 2017). Theorization which emerges from this ‘rut,’ Nelson says, has “proven so durable since (at least) Foucault” (*ibid*). It is consistent with what Sedgwick has elsewhere critiqued as “paranoid” forms of reading, which have become somewhat requisite in academic work (See Sedgwick 2003). Eve Sedgwick refers to the “hermeneutics of suspicion,” which has become a mandatory injunction within much of critical theory, rather than what she calls a “possibility among possibilities” (Sedgwick 2003: 126).⁷³ She notes that, to “theorize out

⁷¹ Here I am thinking through the work of scholars like Saba Mahmood whose work on feminist theory and the docile agent offers essential interventions into white liberal feminisms and feminist theories (see Mahmood 2001) and the work of indigenous scholars Audra Simpson and Glen Coulthard on rejecting the colonial projects of *recognition* (Coulthard 2014; Simpson 2014). See also Povinelli 2002.

⁷² As I mentioned in the introduction, consent, in a broader sense, and particularly in a historical sense, has been constituted by several fundamental exclusions.

⁷³ Paul Ricoeur identifies the “hermeneutics of suspicion” as characteristic of the works of Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche (in Sedgwick 2003 see Ricoeur 1970). A hermeneutics of suspicion has become a kind of mandatory injunction within much critical and social theory, it is constituted by a series of techniques of

of anything *but* a paranoid critical stance has come to seem naïve, pious, or complaisant” (*ibid*). In this regard, I am interested in thinking about what consent and contact improvisation might *give* to one another, without foreclosing on our capacities to make sense of the speculative possibilities born of their interaction with one another.

As I mentioned in the introduction, consent and contact improvisation function in a kind feedback loop. I imagine it as a conversation between two very different people, who are nevertheless engaged or invested in having a conversation, and being touched by the differing opinions and sympathies of their interlocutor. In the same way in which contact improvisation might point to the speculative qualities of consent which are in excess of the version of consent which implies the self-contained liberal subject, consent, intervening in contact improvisation, pushes the form to go beyond those aspects of itself which are too attached to the “seamless” and supposedly egalitarian “flow” of movement.

Each phenomenon, when thought in relation to the other, allows us to address the phenomena’s ontological and speculative dimensions. There is an ontological dimension, in the sense in which the discourses and practices implied by each phenomenon ask us to be different kinds of subjects (or assume that we already are). Where these different ontologies bump up against each other, there is a kind of ‘gap’ which, much like in contact improvisation, has the potential to open up new movement patterns. There is, accordingly, a speculative dimension, in the sense in which each phenomenon is addressed not simply as what it already is, but what it *could be*, perhaps considering the interventions posed by the other.⁷⁴

This might be similar to what Derek McCormack has called an “affirmative critique”, which is “a style of critique that does not let some of the problems and difficulties associated with the object of critique foreclose opportunities for making more of and valuing the excessive qualities of this object through forms of modest experiment” (2014: xii). McCormack adopts such a style of critique as an “ethico-political” experiment “facilitated by conceptual-empirical participation in ecologies of practices organized around moving bodies” (*ibid*: xi). Such forms of

revelation or “convergent procedures of demystification” (Ricoeur: 1970: 34). Sedgwick relates these hermeneutics to what she calls “paranoid” forms of reading (*ibid*).

⁷⁴ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, adopts her understanding of the *reparative position* (as opposed to the paranoid position) from Melanie Klein’s work on the paranoid or reparative *positions* (as opposed to developmental stages) (Sedgwick 2003, see Hinshelwood 1991). In the paranoid position, which Sedgwick associated with the hermeneutics of suspicion, the subject’s projective anticipation of the future leaves no room “to realize that the future may be different from the present” (Sedgwick 2003:146).

experimentation, are necessitated by an attempt “to grasp the value of forms of affective life that are always potentially in excess of the economic, geopolitical, and biopolitical formations in which they are implicated” (*ibid*).

The Me and the We and the Stars

Emily and I sat on the leather couch with Adam, the man with whom she had just danced, and Claire. Adam brought the conversation back to our conversations about accountability, he said, “We allow ourselves to become loyal to a finite sphere; we have to be loyal to life, otherwise we create these divisions and we entitle ourselves to be disloyal.”

What are we loyal to? How does creating and filling and emptying gaps again, like in Dumit’s map of our ignorance point us towards more accountability, more care? Attending to those things which we’ve tuned out, making them matter. How might making the difference between two different types of touch bring more accountability, more loyalty?

Emily says, “I love that you’re bringing it up that way. It’s about the planet, respect for life-force, aliveness. To try to practice at that scale is often intangible. How am I responsible to the stars? What is my responsibility to the stars?” She says, “you know, fleetingly I telescope my focus on the four of us here as an ecosystem, to understand, we are an ecosystem within an ecosystem.” “There’s a kind of multiplicity,” she says, “It’s a way to practice the skill.”

“There’s a kind of accountability. What I observe is the me and the we and the me and the we,” she says. “You’re training the attention and the physicality to be able to do that, it can go in many directions.” “You’re training the muscle that is specific to us, then that muscle is more ready in my life, in my own body.” “How do I show up when something needs me to show up? Maybe it will make me able to be responsible to the stars finally,” she says.

Adam says to Emily, “earlier you were talking about trying to be responsible, awake, attentive, when you feel confronted by discomfort.” “The challenge,” he said, “is not to wait until you feel discomfort, but to look for areas of discomfort in every moment.” “Because then,” he said, “you wake yourself up to what’s going on outside you.”

I say, “I am selectively tuning out a bunch of things, If I were to start to think about them, I would feel uncomfortable.” “Yes,” he says, “and that’s the very definition of privilege, to not do that.”

“Entirely,” Emily remarks, “and so I think, as a kind of scale, maybe I can figure out how to hang out in some disequilibrium, to train the scale that is happening, where there’s comfort and discomfort happening all the time.” “I’m super invested in contact improvisation,” she says, “it’s not the answer to anything, I don’t have an idealism about it, but I have some irrational optimism about how other things might be possible.”

“Other things in the form?” Adam asks.

“No,” Emily says, “in the world.” “I had an amazing conversation with a friend, we were talking about racial justice and climate justice, and she said to me: ‘it’s all about hanging out in the decomposition,’” “And,” she said, “that’s work for me because I’m usually like, ‘Do something! Do something!’ She told me, it’s ‘all about extending the capacity to hang out in the decomposition, and the politics of that,’” Emily says, “that was a recent, humbling thing and I’m thinking about how to do that more.”

Apostrophe, Syncopation

The speculative dimensions of both contact improvisation and consent imply a cluster of propositions (oftentimes at odds with one another) which may need to be spoken about in a kind of apostrophic way. Speaking *apostrophically* means speaking through dual registers of omission and address. Apostrophes, as a kind of punctuation, signal omission; where something has been left out. An apostrophe as a kind of literary device signals an address to something or someone which is not present. They also mark a possessive quality; the things we possess that aren’t really ours, the way we are possessed by them. It signals a series of conversations which we might have in a kind of constrained language, one which is everywhere marked by omissions and absent presences.

An apostrophe cuts what we say and do, down the middle, breaking up logics of reproduction on one hand, while simultaneously quickening the pace. In this sense, it might be a kind of syncopation, accenting the unaccented beats.⁷⁵ Those fundamental gaps in the middle which keep us from speaking with a kind of enunciative certainty, or a righteous elocution. I keep stuttering in what I write, trying to mark my own ‘decomposition,’ my own ‘bigger undoing’ with words. I keep asking myself how it is possible to say anything at all about consent

⁷⁵ See Fred Moten’s *Black and Blur* (2017).

when there is such a desperate, immediate need to make it *clear*. I fear that my writing, which is so opaque, legitimizes these kind of abhorrent positions which point to consent as an opaque and complicated thing, and by doing so disavow it. That is not what I wish to do.

I have struggled with how to think about the potentially reparative dimensions of phenomena which might be implied in the practice of contact improvisation, like disorientation, while acknowledging that these phenomena are also implied in the ongoing forces of structural violence. For example, disorientation might be celebrated in contact improvisation as something which allows one to somehow interrupt the repetition of certain culturally-inflected patterns of embodiment. This might be akin to what Emily was talking about when she was talking about being in a state of disequilibrium; unsettling the “sleepy way” in which the world seems to make sense, unless we start to pay attention, as Adam pointed out. However, disorientation, or disequilibrium, can also be a kind of embodied default, one which is sanctioned by structural violence (see Goldman 2010; Bibler 2020). We are *taught* to exist in a kind of fragmented relation to ourselves; some of us more than others. As some of us are taught not to trust ourselves, as one woman told me, “you’re taught that the experts know.” Meanwhile, others of us are taught that we *are* the experts.

How can we think about disorientation as the mode through which we stay attached, in a lateral way, to the ongoing reproduction of what constitutes a sense of normalcy, or the everyday? At the same time, experiences of disorientation so often allow us to “shake off” this “force of the ordinary.” What’s more, they often ‘shake off,’ our sense of what is, or what it is to be ourselves, by unsettling our feelings of self-transparency, awakening us to our incomplete knowledge of things (see Garret-Brown 2011, Harbin 2012)⁷⁶.

⁷⁶ Feminist philosopher Ami Harbin writes that typically, “[w]hen philosophers have considered disorientation at all, they have tended to regard it as an extreme condition, typically figured as a threat to agency and, a fortiori, to moral agency. Disorientation is seen as isolating, overwhelming, and as an antithesis to the cultivation of virtue and moral maturity” (Harbin 2012: 262). However, she argues that instances of disorientation “can strengthen relationality, heighten sensitivity to vulnerability, draw attention to dynamic experience, and spur political prioritizing” (ibid: 271). While she acknowledges the “burden of disorientation,” she writes that “[b]eing disoriented in body can mean that what is appropriate to say, who is appropriate to touch, how it is appropriate to look and move, and what kinds of emotions are appropriate to express become more open questions—the social norms that govern them are made questionable” (ibid: 276) See also Garret-Brown 2011.

So many of the phenomena about which I speak; the tie-up, disequilibrium, operate in a two-fold way. They are potentially pedagogic resources for interrupting the ongoing force of embodied reproduction, developing practices for making distinctions and new movement pathways in the body. Much like the dual dimension of hesitation which I mentioned previously. However, they also potentially signify the force of structural violence lived in the body; a disorientation we take on as our own attempt to be more accommodating, a certain sense of enduring commitment which often keeps us begrudgingly attached to a rolling point which brought us somewhere we may not want to be.

This reversible two-fold aspect of things has brought me to a knot I can't get out of in an easy way, so I readjust and get in my own way in a new way. I stutter while writing because I have chosen to attend, in this thesis, to things which might seem 'minor' in the face of more obvious or pressing concerns regarding the way structural violence plays out in the form of contact improvisation. I don't in any way imagine this to be 'enough,' or to have captured a full picture. A thousand theses could have been written about consent in this context; they may have chronicled the egregious instances of abuse of power, the ways in which people are varyingly complicit in reproducing that violence. They would certainly be more useful. They may also have been unable to attend to instances of decomposition along the way.

Chapter Three

“What is interesting to me, about...contact improvisation relative to social structures, whatever they may be called, is that it’s a game in which your opponent is yourself and it takes two people to win” (Paxton in Paxton and Ranier 1997: 21).

Flow

In André Lepecki’s essay, *Choreographic Angelology*, he proposes a “political-choreographic critique of the still strong notion of *flow* as dance’s—and sociality’s and economy’s privileged identity and goal” (Lepecki 2018: 299 emphasis mine). I would like to use Lepecki’s analysis to complicate the troubling purchase of flow in contact improvisation. Lepecki begins with a critique of flow starting from Friedrich Schiller’s observations of an English country dance in 1793 (Lepecki 2018: 297). Schiller reflected on this dance as the representation of “an ideal society” (*ibid*). He said,

Everything has been arranged in such a manner that each dancer has already vacated his position by the time the other arrives. Everything fits so skillfully, yet so spontaneously, that everyone seems to be following his own lead, without ever getting in anyone’s way. Such a dance is the perfect symbol of one’s own individually asserted freedom as well as of one’s respect for the freedom of the other (Schiller in Lepecki 2018: 297).

Lepecki describes Schiller’s project of an “aesthetic state” (Aesthetischer Staat), in which the flowing, uninterrupted, and seemingly-spontaneous flow of this dance “demonstrated the possibility of a perfect society just as it expressed the ideal degree of freedom one could hope to achieve in it” (*ibid*). The dancers moved fluidly and unimpeded without collision. As Lepecki argues, “Schiller’s image has fixed itself as central to the political and aesthetic imagination of the West,” and the notion of free-flowing motion has become “exemplary of an ideal body politic” (*ibid*).

Many have noted contact improvisation's emphasis on "flow," and the various moments in the history of the development of the form which marked a departure from this emphasis, as Goldman explains through Nancy Stark Smith's resistance to the "harmony business" (Goldman 2010: 107). As Goldman remarked of the "crucial grit" of contact improvisation, one must remember "that sometimes one must use one's body as an obstruction rather than *go with the flow*" (*ibid*: 110).

As Lepecki notes, between the mid 1800's and the mid 1900's "flow emerged as a pervasive concern in the arts, science, pedagogy and industry" which mobilized "ideology, pedagogy, aesthetics, politics, and technology informing and being informed by scientific discourse, *particularly physics*" (*ibid*: 298 emphasis mine). Flow then became the grounds for "a new, supposedly efficient and healthy, normative subjectivity" one which was unimpeded and harmonious. Neoliberal capitalism is likewise characterized by free-flowing, unimpeded flow as a sort of leitmotiv. Lepecki notes that "fluid movement flowing out of the body center" became seen as the ideal expression of both sincerity (as social and psychological expressivity) and of health (at a national and individual level) (*ibid*).⁷⁷ Flow thus became a sort of "template" for thinking about the ideal state of a range of social, aesthetic, political, economic and clinical ideals (*ibid*). As a result, a parallel regard for "repression, censorship, and tyranny as blocking or antiflow emerged" (*ibid*: 298).⁷⁸

Lepecki argues that Schiller's image of a "flawless evolution of fluid bodies in space, without bumps, stumbles, tripping, delays, or blockages" was positioned as the opposite of tyrannous and repressive apparatuses which sought to restrict movement (*ibid*). Indeed, oppressive structures do limit movement. However, Lepecki argues, these regimes conspire to restrict "*certain* movements" not movement as a kind of abstraction (*ibid*). He says, "in the logic of our neoliberal times, strict control and harsh discipline promote widespread 'interpassivity:' a constant motion in previously established and monitored streams of 'networking,' in which 'logistics' imposes smooth circulation so that capital may profit from its harnessing of flow"

⁷⁷ "Fluid movement flowing out of the body's center" or a similar phrase is a quite common refrain in contact improvisation.

⁷⁸ Lepecki notes that Deleuze also, in some sense, fell into this "political-kinetic dichotomy" (Lepecki 2018: 298). Stuart Alexander Rockefeller has written an extensive article on the increased presence of the term "flow" in anthropological literatures, and he likewise traces the developments of the term through the works of Deleuze and Guattari, as well as Bergson (Rockefeller 2011).

(*ibid*). Indeed, we are encouraged to move, smoothly, in some directions and not others. “Within this logic,” he says, “the highest degree of conformity is to succumb and to serve a physics of flawless flow that both precedes and forecloses one’s political, historical, and aesthetic agency: notably, one’s capacity to opt for a different kind of movement” (*ibid*: 298).

Stuart Alexander Rockefeller has written an extensive article on the increased presence of the term “flow” in anthropological literatures, beginning in the 1980s and 1990s, appearing most frequently to talk about the nature and effects of globalization (Rockefeller 2011). He notes that the term is often considered innocuous, and common-sense (*ibid*). In fact, he argues, flow is typically evoked to denote a kind of “pure” movement, and in doing so, conjures up an image of flow as “agentless movement with no starting point and no telos” (*ibid*: 558). As such, it can frequently “elide agency” and tends to suggest a sort of “managerial perspective⁷⁹” (*ibid*: 558) In other words, flow privileges “form (unbroken, agentless movement) over any content” (*ibid*: 560). David Graeber argues that using the image of flows “to talk about global culture” is “a classic fetishized image of capital acting of its own accord, metaphorically treated as a natural phenomenon...and, simultaneously, identified with an image of the liberation of human creativity and desire” (Graeber in Rockefeller 2011: 565).

What is effaced by dancer’s emphasis on flow and continuity in movement, which reads, oftentimes as liberation, or the natural? During the C125 panel, a man asks, “how do you get into a flow state if the person that you’re exchanging weight and balance and flow with is going to say: ‘I don’t like the way you touched me there, I thought that was inappropriate.’” A woman responds by asking, “what constitutes a flow experience?” She says, “I think that there’s a mythos sometimes, that operated at a certain point in Contact that it was always about going *with* the flow.” What does constitute a flow experience? This is a very important question considering, as Lepecki does, that flow is always already channeled in particular streams which enable certain movements more than others.

⁷⁹ Rockefeller says that flow “does several things if your job is to oversee and manage the functioning of a complex organization or situation” (Rockefeller 2011: 566). “As a formal term, it facilitates the abstraction of many kinds of activity into a single category” but it also “enables an observer to talk about movement at a large scale without saying anything in particular about how that movement is generated at a smaller scale” (*ibid*: 566). In this sense, flow elides a kind of accountability.

Lepecki notes the intimate relationship between physics and flow and we might also ask what the stakes of the so-called “just physics” approach to contact improvisation are. What is the content of the movement which is referred to as a kind of “pure” movement? As Daniela remarked of her first experiences learning contact improvisation twenty years ago, “it was all about physics and bones and muscles and how the floor and gravity works” and yet, she said, “*stuff happens underneath that*”.

The Archetypal Event of Standing

Standing with our shoulders together, we dig our heels into the floor, pouring our weight through our feet to the tips of our toes and rocking ever-so-indiscernibly back and forth. Each of us is slightly off balance, supported by the other’s body, attached at the surface of the arm. The oak floor of the ballroom beneath us is forgiving as it answers to the shifts in weight. I find myself distracted by a particularly squeaky column of wood in the floor, which whispers every time our weight shifts towards it. Its delicate audibility seems to be rhythmically keeping the time of our shared encounter. I feel small gravitational adjustments shuttle up and down my spine in a precarious monotony. Our bodies are sequencing the little flickering calculations, confetti stimulations involved in the effort of just standing there.

In a minor form, this standing is akin to what is called “the small dance” or “the stand,” one of the most fundamental exercises in contact improvisation (Novack 1990). Usually practiced as a solo-exercise, the duet form of the proposition is often a point of departure, a sort of warm-up for a dance. However, I will argue that the small dance, as a practice, implies a peculiar shuddering of the categorical distinction between solos and duets; imperiling the category of the self-contained individual which is ostensibly constitutive of solo-acts.

Albright has noted that the small dance facilitates “an ecological consciousness,” in which one becomes aware of the “intriguing possibilities of interdependence” (Albright 2003: 262). She notes that such a practice generates “a sense of responsibility,” not as “an oppressive duty towards others, but as an ability to respond” (*ibid*). Importantly, she reminds us that this interdependence, or ecological consciousness, does not inspire the loss “of all sense of personal boundaries, such that any distinction between self and other melt into homogenous goop” (*ibid*).

The ‘origins’ of the small dance date to Paxton’s initial prototypical movement explorations which eventually became some of the most basic propositions of the form. The practice, as part of a loose reportorial corpus, invites dancers to experience their own movement as enabled or trafficked by a subtle sense of the ways in which forces like gravity and momentum affect the body as it stands. Thus, the stand becomes a small dance.

As I mentioned, leading up to the Oberlin residency, Paxton had been interested in exploring “pedestrian” movements (the quotidian physicality of the body such as standing and walking) in contrast to choreographic dance phrasing (Pallant 2006). He was interested in attempting “to break down the distinction” between these two ostensibly discrete categories (Pallant 2006:11). These initial studies resulted in the improvisational piece, *Magnesium* in which the dancer’s movements were characterized by frequent collisions and falls. In addition to these moments, the piece also includes several minutes of what Paxton called “the stand” or “the small dance.”

The small dance has been described as “a meditative exercise to develop sensitivity to one’s own weight and balance” wherein dancers “experiment with minimizing muscle tension and then noticing the subtle shifts of weight which result” (Novack 1990: 62). The exercise consists in becoming aware of the micro-adjustments involved in the work of standing (without falling). As Paxton has remarked,

What is happening in standing is that you are looking at your reflexes holding you up...Letting gravity take the limbs down, you are letting the spine rise against gravity. And then you just hang out there and you start to *feel the event that is holding you upright*, that is keeping you from falling (Paxton in Nelson 2017:39 italics mine).

In other words, it is a sort of *event of uprightness*, a pedestrian labor one typically pays little attention to. Paxton has noted that standing is itself a sort of “basic archetypal event” (Paxton in Nelson 2017:39). Karen Nelson has suggested that the basic element of any contact improvisation dance is developing a capacity to “meet your partner’s small dance with your own small dance” (Nelson in Sengco 2017).

Seaweed, Sleepwalking

It's an eerie sight; twenty or so people standing in a room, their eyes closed, facing different directions, still but for the gentle sway involved in the labor of standing without falling. They look almost somnambulistic; the heads loll about, relieved of the rigor with which they usually keep themselves upright. They look a bit like plants which droop when the fruit is too heavy.

Ian, eyes open, weaves gently through the attendees at the workshop, stopping every few paces to close his eyes and become still. He dictates instructions: "let your head become heavy," "relax the tongue in the mouth, the forehead, let your arms hang at your sides." He says, "feel how you rock slightly back and forth, to the sides, feel the smallest unit of effort which keeps you standing." "Can it be smaller? Can you do less?" he asks. "Just think about moving your arms up from your side, but don't do it, just notice. Notice how your body sets itself up, notice how the work of lifting your arm starts long before your arm leaves your side."

"Don't do it, just notice." I feel the muscles, the fascia, the bones start to articulate with one another. I feel a subtle sense of aliveness, which I had not sensed before, start to shuttle up and down my arm, stretching across my shoulder and back, down into my core. I can feel an awareness rooting down through my feet, into the floor. Just by thinking about moving my arm.

"Feel yourself like a piece of seaweed swaying in the water" he says.

I feel a slight departure in myself, leaving the architecture of my body behind and becoming atmospheric. I try to return to the task at hand. I feel the muscles in my diaphragm contract as if I were going to scoff. I notice what's involved in scoffing. Don't do it, just notice.

The allusion to seaweed brings me back to some other order of thinking, another register in which I want to laugh to diffuse the pang of embarrassment I suddenly feel imagining myself as a piece of seaweed. But I stay connected enough to the sensation—my body's capacity to witness the scoff as a nascent thing—it becomes a kind of commentary on itself. Ok, seaweed.

"You're like a piece of seaweed, the seas aren't turbulent, you're far from the surface, but everything moves slightly." I feel more range of movement, I feel a broader sensation of the way gravity is acting on me. "Your body is traversed by movement, but you are connected to the floor." The movement is not just back and forth, or side to side—things feel more spherical. "What would happen if you were this piece of seaweed and the water suddenly drained out?" Ian

pauses his itinerant pedagogy for a moment and becomes still. “You would become limp, there would be no motion.”

Ian instructs us to find a partner, “the closest person to you.” I look around, of roughly twenty people in the workshop, Ian himself is the closest person. He doesn’t seem phased by the prospect of continuing to instruct the workshop while dancing with me. “But” he says, “I may have to leave at some point.”

“Stand shoulder to shoulder with your partner. Don’t share any weight, just yet. Just let your shoulders feel each other’s presence. Feel how the slightest touch influences you.” Ian is speaking to the room, projecting his voice. It’s right in my ear, but I like how his projected voice betrays the intimacy of our duet, opens it up to the room of other bodies.

“Start to lean, just slightly into the other person. Feel yourselves like one larger seaweed. Feel into their bones, feel the floor *through* their body.”

I give Ian my weight, through the shoulder. Sometimes we are caught in a counter-balance where we lean on one another. Each of us is slightly off-balance. If the other disappeared suddenly, we would fall. “Give a bit more weight until maybe you have to come off one of your feet, let the connection migrate beyond the shoulder. Use your back, your chest, your head, whatever, to meet your partner. Follow the point of contact.” Gradually we start to give each other so much weight that we must reorganize our bodies so as not to fall, or we start to gain momentum and move through the space.

Suddenly, Ian interrupts our duet. He doesn’t say anything, he just removes himself, and when he does so, I stumble forwards a bit. He puts his hands on my shoulders as if to say, “stay here a moment” and he walks off. I see him approach another duet and start to give them feedback.

Caught Up in a World

In a footnote of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* he quotes George M. Stratton’s *Vision Without Inversion* in which he says, “[w]e remain physically upright not through the mechanism of the skeleton or even through the nervous regulation of muscle tone, but *because we are caught up in a world* (Stratton in Ahmed 2006: 159 emphasis mine).⁸⁰

⁸⁰ See Merleau-Ponty (2013).

Indeed, we are caught up in a world which proceeds in front of us in a rather pedestrian or “sleepy” way, a somnambulistic way.

Michael Jackson, in his essay, *Knowledge of the Body*, establishes that anthropological literatures have the tendency to “assimilate bodily experience to conceptual and verbal formulations, and to regard practices as ‘symbolic’ of something outside themselves” (Jackson 1983: 327).⁸¹ Jackson refers to the scholarship of Merleau-Ponty and Binswanger and notes that both scholars declare that meaning “should not be reduced to a sign which, as it were, lies on a separate plane outside the immediate domain of an act” (Jackson 1983: 328). “For instance,” he says, when our familiar environment is suddenly disrupted we feel uprooted, we lose our footing, we are thrown, we collapse, we fall.” (*ibid*). Such falling, Binswanger says is not “something metaphorical derived from our physical falling” (Binswanger in Jackson 1983: 328). It is “a shock and disorientation which occurs simultaneously in body and mind, and refers to a basic ontological structure of our Being-in-the-world” (Jackson 1983: 328).

In this sense, Jackson notes, “uprightness of posture may be said to define a psychophysical relationship with the world so that to lose this position, this ‘standing,’ is simultaneously a bodily and intellectual loss of balance, a disturbance at the very center and ground of our Being” (*ibid*). To, for example, “go weak at the knees,” speaks to a fundamental interrelation between affective sensibilities, and the felt-sensations of a body.⁸²

The training in disorientation offered by contact improvisation, has been lauded for its political potentials. Goldman refers to Albright’s argument that contact improvisation’s “emphasis on spontaneity and play; its privileging of disorientation and fluidity; and its willingness to confront “others” in a complex, bodily way, where boundaries begin to blur” has the capacity to “retrain and retheorize bodies” in politically efficacious ways (Albright in Goldman 110). Albright maintains that the practice has the capacity to “revise conventional notions of identity and geography, creating in their stead a somatic experience that reconstructs our identity from the inside out” (Albright 2013: 218).

⁸¹ Through the classic works of Marcel Mauss on the techniques of the body and Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of habitus, the body emerges as the material ground of historically and culturally inflected processes (Bourdieu 1977; Mauss 1973). Additionally, as Talal Asad has argued, when the word ‘body’ is used in anthropological literature on the body, it is used “more often than not as a synonym for the individual whose desire and ability to act are taken as unproblematic” (Asad 2003: 68).

⁸²Or, Teresa Brennan might say, affect itself is “the physiological shift accompanying a judgement” (2004: 5).

Elsewhere, Albright, through readings of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (2013) and Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* (2006) remarks that "we only begin to understand our orientations when we experience disorientation" (Albright 2013). Contact improvisation, she says, "embraces moments of disorientation, both the physical experiences of being off balance and the psychic experience of not knowing what comes next" (*ibid*).

Goldman critiques the taken-for-granted notions which underlie Albright's claim, mainly, that one can "retrain" their body in the face of complex and ossified relations of racism, sexism, and the like (Goldman 2010). She also intervenes in Albright's seeming-romanticization of disorientation, arguing that there "are times when disorientation can be a burden, if not outright debilitating" (Goldman 2010: 110). Indeed, as Sara Ahmed reminds us, "disorientation is unevenly distributed: some bodies more than others have their involvement in the world called into crisis" (Ahmed 2006: 159). Accordingly, in the context of contact improvisation "what role does disorientation play when the 'normal' already constitutes a state of acute crisis?" (Bibler 2020).

I don't want to collapse what may be very salient distinctions between what we might think of as different kinds, or orders of disorientation. In the previous chapter, Daniela and Rebecca pointed to a distinction between different types of discomfort; those which are perhaps implied by the technique of contact improvisation, and those which imply a kind of dissociation. I am thinking of these different types of disorientation as, on the one hand, what Emily described as a sense of being "disoriented but ready" and on the other, a more dissociated-disorientation which often characterizes an enduring sense of discomfort. When I began this research, I conceived of disorientation in a quite broad sense. As I practiced the form, I became increasingly attuned to these different types of disorientation, and increasingly aware of how that distinction mattered deeply to many dancers I spoke with. I felt more able to make distinctions between different sensations, like degrees of rotation in one's wrist.

Stratton's quote continues "...because we are caught up in a world. If this involvement is seriously weakened, the body collapses and becomes once more an object" (in Ahmed 2006: 159). As Ahmed writes in her *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, "it is from this point, the point at which the body becomes an object, that Fanon's phenomenology of the black body begins"⁸³ (*ibid*). Thus, the world which proceeds in front of us, and in which we are

⁸³ See Fanon's *Black Skin White Masks* (2017).

“caught up” is a world which is, as Ahmed says, “more ‘involved’ in some bodies than others” (*ibid*). Disorientation can be a violent experience, and can constitute the ordinariness of everyday experience.

However, Ahmed theorizes that Queer *moments*, are those moments within which instances of disorientation have the possibility to digress or detour from the reproduction of habituated normativity. They “block bodily action: they inhibit the body such that it ceases to extend into phenomenal space” and thus constitute itself in a particular way or in a particular direction (Ahmed 2006: 66). They prohibit the body from proceeding into the world which is in front of them in a simple kind of way. Ahmed asks how “queer politics might involve disorientation, without legislating disorientation as a politics” (*ibid*: 158). I am reminded of Emily’s proposition to think about the disequilibrium which exists in contact improvisation as a queer proposal.

Constraint

We are much too familiar with the logics by which our lives are everywhere made over as a seeming tension between individual freedoms and social constraint. In the context of improvisation, I am interested in attempting to stay committed to a theorization which does not posit individual freedom as the binary opposition of social constraint. This is not to say that I carried out that project with great analytical precision, but rather that it constituted a kind of refrain which I tried to place at the center of my research. In this regard, I am interested in Elizabeth Povinelli’s characterization of the “liberal, binary concepts of individual freedom and social constraints” (Povinelli 2006: 2).

Povinelli characterizes a set of presuppositions which “circulate through the subjects and institutions of liberal settler societies, informing how people talk about themselves and others, how they govern themselves and others, and who they think they are or who they think they should be” (*ibid*: 5). She describes what she calls, on one side of this binary, the “autological subject,” that subject which is conceived as a constellation of “discourses, practices, and fantasies about self-making, self-sovereignty, and the value of individual freedom associated with the enlightenment project of contractual constitutional democracy and capitalism” (*ibid*).

On the other side of the binary, the autological subject is conceived as being *subject to* a series of “discourses, practices, and fantasies about the social constraints placed on the

autological subject by various kinds of inheritances” (*ibid*: 4). “As people go about their ordinary lives,” she says, “they continually constitute these discourses as if the discourses were the agents of social life” (*ibid*: 6). That is, “as if there were such a thing as the sovereign subject and the genealogical society, as individual freedom and social constraint, as if the choice between these Manichean positions were the only real choice available to us” (*ibid*). “They do this,” she notes, “as if all other actual and potential positions and practices were impractical, politically perverse, or socially aberrant” (*ibid*:6).

In the context of improvisation, expressive “freedom” is often understood (if mistakenly) to be antithetical to formal constraints. In this regard, improvisation is often heralded as a practice of becoming “free” of various forms of social or technical conditioning, provoking a disruption in the habitus’ condition of continual, iterative reproduction. In this thesis, I am indeed interested in the disruption of repetition, but rather than thinking of it as a tension between freedom and constraint (a tension which might loosely correspond to one between individual interiority and exterior authority) I think of constraints as *constitutive* of improvisational rigor. However, I wish not to indulge in any fantasies about “liberation,” particularly in its capacity to emerge at the expense of or in lieu of social constraints.

If contact improvisation considers itself an improvisational practice, it must account to the way constraints are involved in the practice, whether through heuristic constraints or through accounting to the ways in which each of us is differently *constrained*. As Hennessy asks, “[a]ren’t the best improvisers aware of the frames they’re breaking, the lines they’re not coloring within, the ways that rupture and noise, break and alternative can be perceived or punished?” (Hennessy 2016: 318). He elaborates, “by ‘the best improvisers’ I mean those who are on alert for habitual patterns, and who understand how easy it is to default ideologically, to yield not to the other, the unknown, the potential, but to the already established, the known, the comfortable” (*ibid*).

During my research, it was not uncommon for dancers to employ constraints or heuristics in order to engender new or different ways of moving, or to break patterns. For example, dancers might refuse “offers” throughout a dance, only use or refrain from using particular body parts, or have “only slow dances.” In my fieldwork, I encountered these heuristic constraints in the form of pedagogic exercises, but I also frequently spoke with dancers who were using self-imposed

constraints.⁸⁴ For example, one night I began dancing with a man, the dance began very slowly and did not leave the floor, it continued this way for some time, until he ended the dance. He told me afterwards that he tends to have very fast, athletic dances but that this particular night he was interested in investigating slow, subtle movement and staying primarily on the floor. He was interested in attempting to interrupt a pattern of adrenalinic dances in order to experience what became of his dancing when he slowed down.

If contact improvisation conceives of itself as a “non-hierarchical” practice, conceives of the bodies of its practitioners as discontinuous with the reproduction of structural conditioning lived at the level of the body, how can it break any of the frames which Hennessy mentions? How can it, accordingly, color outside of any lines if one doesn’t account to the ways in which such lines are drawn? As I mentioned in the introduction the dancers in this ethnography often lamented the conflation of ‘consent’ within the form as some sort of restriction of expressive freedom. They noted a contingency of dancers who considered consent (or rather, more appropriately, what is asked of dancers *in the name of* consent) as some sort of diminishing of their capacity to truly improvise. Additionally, there seemed to be a kind of conflation of *constraint* with what the form has historically resisted as *codification*. These are, importantly, very different things and not to be confused as synonymous with one another.

One could argue that while the form never became *codified*, let’s say institutionalized or formalized in a strict-sense, that certainly does not mean it was in any way relieved from the ongoing reproduction of normativity. Perhaps it has been, alternatively, more inclined to reproduce structural violence or hegemonic bodily norms inasmuch as it has believed itself to be “free.” Expressive range of motion cannot come without an analysis of constraints, the way these constraints varyingly *constrain*, and the way each of us might intentionally or unintentionally constrain one another.

Following Goldman, improvisers are intimately familiar with the phenomenon of constraint (Goldman 2010). As Goldman notes of improvisation, “the emphasis on spontaneity and intuition” which people often refer to “often implies a lack of preparation, thereby eliding the historical knowledge, the sense of tradition, and the enormous skill that the most eloquent

⁸⁴ Kimmel et. al explore how “[c]reativity may take guidance from self-imposed task constraints or heuristics such as ‘avoid doing what comes to mind first’, ‘get off the beaten path/out of your own patterns,’ ‘try to surprise your partner,’ ‘surprise yourself,’ or ‘try to reject offers when you can’” (Kimmel et. al 2008).

improvisers are able to mobilize” (Goldman 2010: 5). In this regard, constraints add a sort of thickness to improvisation. Goldman conceives of contact improvisation as an “embodied practice of self-readiness” (Goldman 2010: 25). She notes that, “at its core, contact improvisation is a practice of making oneself ready for a range of shifting constraints” (*ibid*: 97). While improvising, she says, “one both respects the constraints of reality and tries to violate them” (*ibid*: 145). Goldman likens practices of improvisation to Foucauldian “*practices of freedom*” (in part to distinguish between her notion of “freedom” and any undue fantasies about liberation (in Goldman 2010). As Foucault notes,

I have always been somewhat suspicious of the notion of liberation, because if it is not treated with precautions and within certain limits, one runs the risk of falling back on the idea that there exists a human nature or base that, as a consequence of certain historical economic and social processes, has been concealed, alienated, or imprisoned in and by mechanisms of repression. According to this hypothesis, all that is required is to break these repressive deadlocks and man will be reconciled with himself, rediscover his nature or regain contact with his origin, and reestablish a full and positive relationship with himself (Foucault 1997: 282).

For Foucault, these practices of freedom are expressed through what he calls the “care of the self” (in Goldman 2010: 144) Foucault explains that these forms of care include physical and mental exercises in which the “subject puts himself into a situation in which he can verify whether he can confront events and use the discourse with which he is armed. It is a question of testing the preparation...so that we can behave as we must when the event presents itself” (Foucault in Goldman: 144).

Goldman argues that the “crucial grit” of contact improvisation is constituted by what she calls “breaks in flow” (Goldman 2010: 107). For Goldman, and for many theorists and practitioners of contact improvisation, it is important to intervene in what they perceive to be a common misunderstanding regarding the practice: that it is “all about flow.” Goldman likewise notes an increased ‘gracefulness’ which gradually came to stand in for the “chunky collisions” characteristic of the early *Magnesium* days (*ibid*). It remains vitally important to remain committed to what she calls the “crucial grit” of contact improvisation, in order to destabilize

this common misconception. These breaks in flow can be moments in discourse and movement which, among other things, “insist upon the importance of difference” (Goldman 2010: 107).

One such “break in flow” comes in the form of Nancy Stark Smith’s intervention where she explains that she has,

learned a lot from contact improvisation about coordinating with the forces-that-be: accepting gravity, falling, following momentum, blending with a partner’s movements-i.e. ‘going with the flow.’ But lately, I’ve been feeling feisty...I find myself playing against the forces—making myself heavy instead of light when a lift starts, adding a splash to the easy pouring of weight, insisting instead of yielding, adding fierce to gentle, no to yes. It’s a start. I’ve been in the harmony business a long time now (Stark Smith in Goldman 2010: 107).

While I find Goldman’s analysis of “grit” useful, I want to problematize such a term precisely because of its connotative relationship to a certain form of *perseverance*. “Grit” tends to illicit a kind of Weberian notion of work ethic, endurance and self-determination that I find troubling in the context of this research (see Weber 2002, Berlant 2011).⁸⁵ Why stay in the tie-up? Why begrudgingly endure dances? Why practice, as Goldman’s reading of Foucault suggests, techniques of preparation?

Goldman notes that “one begins to see the power of a bodily training such as contact improvisation which seeks calm, confident choices even in situations of duress” (Goldman 2010: 97).⁸⁶ I see several ways in which Goldman’s theories might interface with the context of consent in contact improvisation, and I find them troubling. If contact improvisation finds its origins in martial forms such as aikido, are we not simply settling for a sort of practice of self-defense? That is, am I saying that contact improvisation teaches one to break patterns of embodied reproduction, through calm confident choices, and such a training is useful for when we find ourselves in situations of inevitable duress? That reading would be quite dim and would

⁸⁵ See Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (2002) or Lauren Berlant’s concept of Cruel Optimism (2011).

⁸⁶ Early contact improvisers “investigated stillness and sought ways to improvise in the midst of unfamiliar falls” (Goldman 2010: 25). “By doing this,” she notes, they found ways “to make choices and maintain physical safety in moments of duress” (*ibid*).

again put the onus on people to protect themselves. Does it, like the description of the tie-up in the first chapter, merely teach us to be flexible, to *persevere*?⁸⁷ Does Foucault's notion of the care of the self, mark any real departure from the self-responsibilization so critiqued in contact improviser's criticisms of the "first-rule," to take care of oneself?

Could it alternatively suggest that we might prepare ourselves for ourselves, to get in or out of our own way? Can we attempt to find, as Jan Ritsema has said of improvisation, "a language in which we stammer ourselves?" (Ritsema 2004). Can we interrupt ourselves, allow ourselves to be interrupted? What if the 'situation of duress' were a scene in which we were faced with a certain discomfort which bears in the wake of departure from bodily reproduction? Can we think about Foucault's 'care of the self,' or 'technologies of the self' not only as acts of self-actualization or will, but also as acts that imply an undoing of the self or the subject? (Foucault 2005). Fred Moten has said, on the back cover of Goldman's work, that she "studies the massive volitional resources that one unleashes in giving oneself over to being unleashed" (Goldman 2010).

Tracy McMullen, a scholar of critical improvisation studies, in the context of an interview with Judith Butler, explains through Bourdieu's classic works on the habitus how we go through our lives following few explicit embodied 'rules,' but rather operating according to what Bourdieu calls "a feel for the game" (McMullen 2016: 21; see Bourdieu 1993). I focus here on the interview between Butler and McMullen, because I feel it draws out some very important and interesting perspectives. I find Butler's reading of improvisation, and the ways in which it is brought out through the interview with McMullen to add a critical dimension to the concept of constraint in improvisation. Butler describes this "game" as a "scene of constraint" (Butler in McMullen 2016: 22; see Butler 2004). This scene of constraint is structured by the logics of the habitus' iterative reproduction according to, for example, gendered performativity. For Butler, gender "identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (*ibid*: 34).

We are, according to Butler, never fully coincident with the ways in which we are interpellated as subjects, neither are we fully self-transparent. The subject, in its relation to these

⁸⁷ Daniel Mang asks an important question of contact improvisation, starting from a contention of the oft-levied assumption that the "nature of the form (CI) is intrinsically subversive" (Mang in Adkins and Mang 1996: 64). Mang asks, "how incompatible with postmodern late capitalism—which requires flexible, self-determined, creative individuals...the traits we cultivate in CI really are" (*ibid*).

“rules,” embodies and “repeats the law—but this repetition is not mechanical or completely predictable” (McMullen 2016: 23). “The law,” in other words, “is not perfectly repeated through the subject” (*ibid*). This non-coincidence happens less through performative acts of willful defiance and instead arises in the contingency of our relations to others. Butler, invites us “to [know] unknowingness at the core of what we know, and what we need” (Butler in McMullen 2016: 22). Butler refers to gender as an “improvisation within a scene of constraint” (Butler in McMullen 2016: 23). As McMullen notes, the subject “is constituted in and through the law, but it also *does* the law⁸⁸” (McMullen 2016: 23). “The subject’s agency,” McMullen notes, “is too often confused with the liberal humanist individual who can pull herself up by her bootstraps and transcend every social structure as if she resides outside of it” (*ibid*).

Butler notes that improvisation may be a rather peculiar practice which involves both improvisation, and rule-bound behavior. She says, “we wouldn’t understand improvisation if there were no rules” (Butler in McMullen 2016: 25). McMullen describes how she interprets improvisation as a kind of “opportunity to break the *repetition compulsion* of performativity” (McMullen 2016: 27). To this, Butler responds that “repetition compulsion” is a concept developed from the psychoanalytic literatures which attests to the ways in which we repeat all manner of things, without knowing why (Butler in McMullen 2016: 27). However, “the forms of repetition are never predictable; it’s not mechanical, which means that things happen in the course of repetition compulsion that are unanticipated and new” (Butler in McMullen 2016: 27). They happen in spite of us. These instances of departure are not necessarily aggrandizing acts of resistance against repetition, they can be agonizing.

McMullen responds that she believes that improvisation works to cultivate a practice in which one attempts *not* to repeat, or to refrain from doing “the predictable thing” (McMullen 2016: 28). Butler’s response marks an important intervention, she says, “for me, that makes it too volitional.” (Butler in McMullen 2016: 28). She says, “that makes it really deliberate, and

⁸⁸I am interested in likening this formulation to the conceptualization of gesture outlined in Carrie Noland’s work, *Agency and Embodiment* (2010). Noland explores how the notion of gesture (as learned techniques of the body) is a dual process of inscription and inscribing whereby signifying processes are both embodied and “put to the test” (Noland 2010: 2). In other words, the way in which “culture is both embodied and challenged through corporeal performance” (*ibid*). Noland’s work aims to situate an account of subjective agency which is situated between the “two most influential theories of subjective agency” (*ibid*: 8). That is, between the “determinist, constructivist theory that depicts subjects as pliant material on which culture inscribes” and the “neovitalist approach that tends to exaggerate the subject’s capacity to express and fashion itself” (*ibid*).

chosen, and enlightened and conscious,” when in fact, “a lot of us end up in non-normative or even new positions by virtue of processes and in relation to formations that we don’t fully understand” (*ibid*).⁸⁹ It is, “a different kind of agency than the one that would presume a kind of enlightened or deliberate action” (*ibid*). This agency, we might note, does indeed mark a departure from the volitional subject, and it often emerges *through* the social, not in spite of it.

Butler notes “the part of improvisational practice or art that I have been most drawn to is the social dimension; the fact that people very often improvise with one another” (*ibid*). Indeed, one might wonder whether one can ever really improvise ‘alone,’ in the strict sense. This “improvisational scene... involves one person saying something and another person responding and some kind of reality being built through that listening, pausing, responding” (*ibid*). “That,” she notes, “is a kind of ‘acting in concert’” (*ibid*). “So,” Butler continues, “this gives us a relational understanding of agency more than an individual, deliberate one” (*ibid*). She notes, “my agency is determined or formed in part in that exchange; it doesn’t well up from within me” (*ibid*). “It’s something that happens,” she says, “between me and the other person, and in that sense it is something that emerges from the relationship itself” (*ibid*).

Butler describes what might happen in a scene of “jamming;”

Very often one musician has to compensate for the limitations of another—like you start jamming and you realize this person only knows how to do X...or that they can’t really make a transition, I’m the one who has to initiate the transition. Or, say, here’s a person who doesn’t know how to respond to this kind of provocation but can respond to another, so you end up accommodating each other or compensating for one another and there are also questions of strength and weakness that arise; what you can be together actually has to be found out in the course of the improvisation...it’s not always an equal or a symmetrical scene (*ibid*).

“Receptivity,” Butler says, is very important “to the production of something new” (*ibid*). “Letting something happen to you and being moved by something in a way that you hadn’t planned? And letting something emerge as a consequence of that?” (*ibid*). This, she says, “seems

⁸⁹ In other words, we often “break” the rules in spite of our best attempts to dutifully follow them.

to be a model of agency or action that's not based on mastery." (*ibid*).

What if, in light of Butler's "improvisation within a scene of constraint," we considered Steve Paxton's conceptualization of contact improvisation as "a game in which your opponent is yourself and it takes two people to win" (Paxton in Paxton and Ranier 1997: 21). I wonder if this might be a useful way in which we can depart from the logics of self-transparency and responsabilization that something like the first-rule might suggest. Improvisation within a scene of constraint is not an instance of a solitary individual triumphing over the difficult circumstances in which they have been implicated. Oftentimes our departure from the repetition of habit happens in spite of us, because of the ways in which we are called into the world, called to respond. Or, because of the way the world is receptive to us, and we to the world. How can we attempt to remain committed to what Tracy Nicholls has called, in this regard, an "ethics of improvisation?" (Nicholls: 2012, 2020).

Conclusion

Writing Contact Improvisation

“Is not being moved, or rather, put into motion by the informants exactly what we should mean by an enquiry?”
(Latour 2005: 48)

This thesis is a place holder for a series of questions which are, to me, unanswerable, they still hang in my midst. More than anything, they hang suspended in the several other theses which I wrote over the course of struggling to write this one. As I mentioned throughout, this thesis was written while stuttering, while hesitating, and while breaking my own ‘flow.’ Some of these stumbles have been useful, I have interrupted myself, been immeasurably humbled, and been drawn further into entanglements which asked me to care in different ways. I was “called to respond” in a different way than I may have originally anticipated.

In writing this thesis, I have tried to follow several methodological propositions which constituted the form of my ongoing relation to the content of this research. Equally as important as the methods which were ‘employed’ in the moments in which I was able to practice contact improvisation with other bodies, were those methods which were employed in the writing of this thesis and which strove to maintain some of *the texture of the form itself*. The vast majority of what is written here was written in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which made dancing with others practically impossible. Writing a thesis in the context of the social-isolation or “social-distancing” wrought by the pandemic has also been a rude reckoning and has further convinced me that *study* is a social phenomenon. Or as Fred Moten suggests, of what he and Stefano Harney call “study”:

study is what you do with other people. It’s talking and walking around with other people, working, dancing, suffering, some irreducible convergence of all three, held under the name of speculative practice. The notion of a rehearsal—being in a kind of workshop, playing in a band, in a jam session, or old men sitting on a porch, or people working together in a factory—there are these various modes of activity. The point of calling it “study” is to mark that the incessant and irreversible intellectuality of these activities is already present (Moten in Moten and Harney 2013: 110).

To consider study in this way is both to insist upon the irreducible intellectuality of something like contact improvisation, but it is also to mark its disturbing absence in light of the biopolitical reorganization of the social in response to the pandemic.

This writing has attempted to follow the genre of anthropologists and others writing about affect, like Kathleen Stewart whose efforts recall no attempt to finally “know” affects, but rather to “fashion some form of address that is adequate to their form; to find something to say about ordinary affects by performing some of the intensity and texture that makes them habitable and animate” (2007: 3). In this regard, I have attempted to produce here a writing which might capture a sense of *what a contact improvisation dance might feel like*.

In one way or another, I have attempted to mirror a peculiar rhythmic time-space that characterizes contact improvisation. Writing *through affects* does several things. Among them, it marks what has been for me, a deeply affective writing and researching process. This dimension of our scholarly practice rarely makes it onto the page. Refraining from disclosing the affective nature of our work upholds what has been widely-criticized as the performance of academic sterility and analytical “objectivity.” Additionally, affect theory has constituted one of the most influential bodies of literature which has troubled the notion of the discrete, bounded body and as such, as I have written, I am interested in what it might give (or fail to give) to the analysis of this context.

This writing is populated by unresolvable tensions. Rather than try to resolve them, I have tried to keep them at the center of my inquiry. Performing a written analysis which unfolds in a way which mimetically resembles some of the felt-sensations of a contact improvisation dance, might help us to keep these productive tensions alive. Contact improvisation relies on the tension (or the rolling point of contact) between at least two bodies to generate movement, but it also implies a kind of ‘blurring’ of the faculties through which we might otherwise conceive of ourselves as discreet, thus troubling the clear-cut distinction between one body and another. In this sense, it comes to host a series of vitally important inquiries and tensions involved in asking what it means to make the practice more consensual for its participants.

I’ve attempted to deliver or detail some of the movement and force, gestational and compositional processes which are peculiar to contact improvisation. What does it mean to be writing about moving bodies, which one might conceive of as processes of becoming, but about

which one is forced to write in a discursive register? Like contact improvisation's rolling point of contact, the mixture of scenes, reflective passages, and analytical meditations in this thesis come to bear in/directly on one another; touching in moments, losing contact or becoming out of sync in others. In doing so, they constitute a *sense* of the problems with which I am concerned here, detailing along the way, the fundamental detours and disorientations which are involved in the process of making sense. Thinking through the rhythmic nature of affects allows us to catch our breath between the passage of *moments*, to realize that we want this, or we want this to be over.

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