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Rocking and Rolling: Sex, Politics and Contact Improvisation

Along with the rock music of [the late '60s and early '70s], dancing both reinforced and crystalized an image of the self: independent yet communal, free, sensual, daring [...] also associated with contemporary social movements and practices such as the civil rights movement, youth culture, and drug-taking, and with values such as rebellion, expressiveness, and individualism within a loving community of peers. Dancing encoded these ideas in a flexible and multi-layered text, its kinesthetic and structural characteristics laden with social implications and associations. (Novack 1990: 38)

The culmination of her doctoral fieldwork in the 'eighties, dance anthropologist Cynthia Novack's *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture* (1990: 38) has long provided the all-too-rare book-length publication which extensively analyzes our "temporary community of experience" (as she calls it) of Contact Improvisation in its first fifteen years of existence. She so vividly captured the spirit and meanings of this North American dance revolution of my own lived experiences within this seminal ethnohistory.

In the dawn of the 'seventies I was a 21-year-old white woman from a middle-class family, but single parent household, raised in the United States. The progeny of Hollywood and Broadway artists and writers from a settler Eastern European Jewish

lineage, having literally been handed down the vocation of artist. Alas, my bohemian mother, the feminist writer, and despite her call to the elderly in *Write the Story of Your Life* (1980)—the outcome of her own masters' research--never completed her own memoirs for me to consult and so to construct a deeper genealogy, although she lived to a lucid 92. Within the pages of her book she proposed a key metaphor for understanding and analyzing my own story when she advised us all to consider our lives as if a book and in terms of chapters. I was then a fresh dance and theatre graduate from the University of California at Irvine ready to face the wider world. With cat in carrying case and \$200 in hand, a burgeoning dancer and actress replete with idealism, I left behind home and family in Los Angeles, to hitch a ride up the Californian Pacific Coast Highway drawn to the vibrancy of the youth culture movement in San Francisco. And so began my young adult life in the psychedelic 'seventies, at the beginning of the aftermath of the Summer of Love. This adventure would indelibly mark my lifelong world view.

I'll be offering you this story in the vintage language and outlook of that era but gently infused with insights evoked by the current socio-political landscape in 2022, one which disrupts the idealistic and ethical foundations found at the heart of CI practice at its inception, as Keith Hennessey has done so thoroughly in his zine "Questioning Contact Improvisation" (2018). His primary source, dissertation question: "How do predominantly white alternative cultures defeat their intentions and wishes by reproducing mainstream or hegemonic injustices?" (2018: 1). With his collection of searing questions resonating in my mind, I began revising my initial account of this narrative journey with the epiphany that our dance form, however democratizing, feminist and humanist in its origins, was indeed troubled, for example, by exclusion and

exploitation. As CI originator Steve Paxton mused in his recent interview with Indian dance researcher Roynona Mitra, “[t]here has not been a lot of success, for instance, in America, with black or brown people engaging with contact improvisation. It is a predominantly white movement practice” (2018: 13). And despite the opportunities it has provided for women to take the unconventional role of supporting and carrying men, in light of our current culture of consent and the #metoo movement, it can and sometimes does violate boundaries of what is respectful touching and intimacy. During her fieldwork with Contact Improvisors in Montréal, Claire Vionnet witnessed how “[t]he physical closeness creates a vagueness around boundaries [...] creates a blurriness between a dance touch and an erotic caress” (2021: 332). This revisionist thread will be gently seeded throughout the text and expanded below in Postscript #1.

Returning to the context of the ’seventies, presentational and participatory dance¹ (see Nahachewsky 1995), for so many of my friends and acquaintances had become more than an irrepressible urge to express one’s exuberant physicality, a modern mating ritual, or even a university degree program leading to professional career options. In the folds of this rebellious, postmodernist movement in the Western Euro-American art world in these early years, dancing would come to embody a democratic ethos, a vehicle for progressive social change.

Full-time devotion to the vocation of dancer was soon to become my passionate life-long profession. For the next half a century I navigated my way among various sectors of the North American artistic dance world, assuming the roles of dancer, improviser and choreographer. I soon became a community and university educator, researcher, and curator, and later an essayist and editor of artbook anthologies in artistic

dance ethnography (Davida 2012) and live arts curation (Davida 2019). My latest exploit, in this elder life chapter, is the conception and editing of a journal for live arts curators with global reach and inclusive, decolonial aspirations (Davida 2022). But it was in the early days of my engagement with Contact Improvisers that grounds were laid for my orientation as an activist (see Wikipedia 2022), a compound of artist and activist, as I became caught up in the tides of shifting geo-political circumstances, waves of social revolutions and global crises. It has been a turbulent 73 years.

As this essay unfolds, I'll take us on autoethnographic excursions from the 'seventies and 'eighties, weighing in on the social, political, and personal impact, on myself and others at that time of certain art worlds and academic circles of dance studies. I'll recount stories of my entanglements (pun intended!) with our emerging dance practice of Contact Improvisation. Assuming a first-person posture as insider-observer, I position myself as an auto-ethnographer whose "thick description"² seeks to uncover the meanings of artistic dance worlds through their cultural contexts. You will read about my initiation into (what I perceive as) the second wave of the North American CI community while living in Minnesota, my adventures as a community and university teacher of CI in Montréal. I'll open a few windows into the trajectory of our all-women's Catpoto Dance Collective and finally, revisit *Each Man for Herself*, my first efforts to craft a Contact-infused performance work. Along the way, you will discover some of the ways in which my exploits in academia—which include teaching a university course in Contact, engaging with dance theorists, presenting conference papers and composing book chapters, penning a doctoral dissertation--have deepened and illuminated my frames of reference and terms of engagement with Contact Improvisation.

Perhaps it is serendipity to be called on to write about my youthful dance exploits as a septuagenarian. It does seem like a fortuitous time to look back and take stock, and especially to make sense of the impact of Contact Improvisation on my every day and professional life. And so now, surrounded by archival notebooks, I am poised to begin this story. I'll be diving into images and sensations that lie buried in neurological, kinesthetic and muscle and tissue. This has demanded considerable effort as I strive to activate the cells storing images locked in my diminishing long-term memory. I am hoping to stimulate them through the visual artifacts that remain on my shelves in the form of photos, handwritten notes, posters, transcribed interviews, early writings and even the text of my doctoral dissertation.

This anthology was envisioned by Cooper-Albright as a collection of long form critical essays serving to illuminate thought pathways for dance researchers and Contact Improvisors alike. For these purposes, I'll strive to strike a delicate balance in style and substance to appeal to both theoreticians and practitioners. I hold the belief that academic writing need not (and ethically speaking, ought not) be hermetic nor pedantic. Perhaps even engaging to read. And so I'll attempt to do all of this—for both the doers and thinkers among us--with a touch of irony and playfulness.

Discovering activism

Wandering the streets and parks of the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco in the early 'seventies, I became irresistibly caught up in the vortex of what came to be called an American "alternative culture." A self-identified "child of the New Age" (see

Sutcliffe 2003). (I was indeed a “seeker” and did wear flowers in my hair.) But it wasn’t until I experienced a new kind of free-flow high-touch dance class in Minnesota called Contact Improvisation that I understood how a revolutionary dance form might embody my marching-in-the-streets political activism.

Before the moment of first contact with Contact Improvisation in 1976, my daily vocational practice as a fledgling Nikolais Modern dancer and Physical Theater actress (think Grotowski and Iowa Theater Lab) remained secluded from my “social life” as an activist and community volunteer. Although throughout art history artists have espoused political ideas in their work, the artmaking and the politics in my life had remained unrelated. After all, my work as a fledgling actress and dancer had thus far been dictated by authoritarian choreographers and theater directors. With their absolute power over my aesthetic life and choices, so-called “creative work” had not proved a democratic process. I practiced dance and acting as if a place for sheltering from storm of the violence of social struggle. Consider this fragment, from the pages of my doctoral dissertation: “I still recall [that] the rigorous ballet bars and studious modern dance classes actually provided me with a haven from the turmoil of political work” (Davida 2006: 69). Walking into the calm orderliness of a dance studio to focus on stretching and strengthening my body in predetermined movement sequences provided a welcome refuge from marching and shouting in emotion-saturated protest marches with police and tear gas standing by.

The possibility of re/integrating art, politics and everyday life, the postmodern Judson Dance Theater’s credo of artistic collaboration (see Banes 1977, 2003) to which I was soon become devoted, was not yet brought to consciousness. And now, from the vantage point of the advanced age of 73, it is clear that my decades-long engagement

with the revolutionary premises of Contact Improvisation, and despite the over abiding whiteness of our community, was one of the primary forces that anchored my world vision as an activist. Might I serve to improve the world one Contact duet at a time?

Late American dance teacher and choreographer Mary Fulkerson penned a revelatory herstoric essay in 1996 within the pages of the *Contact Quarterly*, articulating her personal understanding of the postmodern dance's socio-political ethos and how it was democratizing the professional dance world at the end of the century. Like Novack, she deftly seized the *zeitgeist* of the dance-as-politics moment as I experienced it, when she wrote,

“The post-modernist search for the real person in dance, the whole person, the holistic act of performing, and the non-manipulative approach to the audience [...] By the end of the ‘60s, the experimental forefront of the dance had become democratic, personal, human scale, individual, idiosyncratic, and less presentational [...] for some dancemakers of this time, the codes of practice involved examination of the morals of decision-making [...] Yvonne Rainer’s] essential message was “No” to all forms of social dominance or intimidation within performance and practice of dance [...] Her collaborators, dancers of the group Grand Union [...] inherited her social charter [...] and with it a desire to resolve the problem of how to create dance work which put its ideas into practice (Fulkerson 1996: 40-41).

It was with little resistance that I cast behind my hard-earned Modern Dance skill set to enter this postmodern dance world, shaped by the Judson Church Group which laid the breeding grounds for Steve Paxton's (and others') experimentations. Learning about the legacy of Rainer's *Trio A* (see Rainer 1974: 62-3), and workshopping with members of their progeny Grand Union (of which Paxton was also a co-founder in 1970), crystallized for me the proposition that any and all movement might be dance. There was no turning back if everything was possible. The once-radical handful of idiosyncratic dance styles and schools from the first half of the last century now belonged, in my mind, to a Modernist past.

A brief literature revue + university studies

And so, my academic studies have always progressed along with my professional training and dancing. In view of my scholarly leanings, here is a brief review of the some of the key literature that formed a foundation to and shaped my thinking and dancing.

There is still a limited amount of academic writing on Contact Improvisation and yet, from evidence in this anthology and the resources on display at the CI@50 celebration at Oberlin College, there is now a vibrant body of personal accounts, research and archival collections for our field of study. More recently, challenging critical, socio-political analysis is arising (see for instance, Chaleff 2018, Goldman 2010, Hennessey 2018, Royona 2021, Vionnet 2021), and which expands the theory and practice of Contact Improvisation studies, and its teaching continues to proliferate in academic settings.³

At the heart of the body of literature lies the *Contact Quarterly*, founded in 1975 by Nancy Stark Smith (Nelson 1975). Although Stark-Smith didn't favor academic writing, within its covers was always to be found found essays, poetry, debates, issues, events, letters and lists of "contacts" from an increasingly global community of practitioners. The earliest issue on my bookshelves, of what began as the *Contact Improvisation Newsletter*, is Vol. 2, No. 1: Fall of 1976. It's now sticky 36-year-old pages needed to be oh-so-gently pried apart but were well worth breaching. (As a high-touch advocate I persist, despite the digital turn to e-books, in loving holding paper books-as-objects in my hands, feeling their textures and turning their pages.)

Initially a collection of letters, Vol. 2 No. 1 counted 34 pages. Co-editors of this issue were Lisa Nelson, Steve Paxton and Nancy Stark Smith. In Stark Smith's editorial she describes the newsletter as a publication that "[...] attempts to be a vehicle for ongoing communication. By people related to Contact Improvisation. To people related to Contact." (Nelson 1976: 1). On the cover: a rodeo cowboy and his horse crashing into a dramatic twisted fall, with both landing in a clump inside the back cover. The table of contents includes 23 authors' letters, essays, notes on techniques and definitions, commentary, performance reviews, and poetry. The contacts page reveals the names of 37 practitioners. Might this be the portrait of a "first Contact generation"? (I have long thought of myself as part of a second cohort.) Since the recent, heart-rending passing of Stark Smith in 2020, the *Quarterly's* staff has begun its transition as a resource and archival site. Thinking about archives, I have often wondered if cyberspace—so recently appearing in human history and to which we have become so dependent--will be able to hold all these traces of humanity for eternity...

It was in 1977 that I plunged into the postmodern dance literature, beginning with late dance historian Sally Banes' seminal *Terpsichore in Sneakers: Post-Modern Dance*, with her chapter on Paxton's role in "organizing and disseminating" (Banes 1977: 57) this burgeoning dance movement. Largely based on her interviews and casual conversations with him, her account details the influences, inquiries, critiques, and preoccupations of Paxton as he took leave of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company. As she tells it, preoccupations with walking ("the currency of Paxton's populist stance") and other "everyday things," commonplace objects and egalitarianism fostered his early work in formulating Contact Improvisation (1977: 57-60). A few years later, drawing from her own doctoral research, Banes drew a portrait of the day-to-day process ethos of the collective creative process and performances of Judson Dance Theater, in which Paxton played a role, in her ethnography *Democracy's Body: Judson Dance Theater 1962-1964*, revealing a set of beliefs which I set into motion when founding a cooperative dance venues and company and dance touring networks (Banes 1983). Throughout the years, Banes' herstories and ethnographies have continued to reinforce the standpoint that, with a post-modern dance form like Contact Improvisation, artistic dance might be pleasurable and playful, and also revolutionary, egalitarian and humane.

During CI's foundational years in the late '70s and early '80s, the first book-length writing that probed deeply and wholistically into the cultural significance and world view of the Contact Improvisation community was Novack's self-defined ethnohistory *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture* (1990). As for many other "old timers" (as we were called at CI@50), this has long been a foundational sourcebook. Arising out of extensive fieldwork, and although penned thirty

years ago and only fifteen years into its emergence, Novack's book remains a formidable analysis of the social and artistic dancing in North America in general at that time. It provides a scaffolding of socio-cultural context from which to interpret the emergence of the form. It is not without its critics, such as Goldman who disputed Novack's upbeat characterizations of the CI as "a loving community of peers," and asserted that in her study Novack had not paid adequate attention to issues of racial divisiveness, appropriation and exclusion (2010: 7). And yet for me, it remains a primary source of inspiration and knowledge about the form as it was perceived at the time, although by its white and middle-class practitioners and theorists. Novack and I shared the perspective of dance ethnography, and I participated in the study as one of her "informants."

At the core of Novak's book is lies a cultural account of the regularly occurring "temporary communities of experience," which early in the herstoriography of Contact became the commons for practitioners. This is of course a reference to the dance "jams," a term Contacters certainly borrowed from the jazz music world, in which artists improvise together bound by an agreed-upon set of mutually understood parameters. This concept of short-term community-like gatherings also describes the social bonding created in the course of Contact classes, working groups, companies, festivals, conferences and seminars.

During my Master's in Movement Studies at Wesleyan University (from 1985-1995) it was not only the discovery of Novack's ethnohistory, but also the teachings of Irene Dowd on "functional anatomy" (1981) and with whom I studied, along with the writings of her mentor Mabel Elsworth Todd on "the thinking body" (in 1937!) which would deepen my knowledge of the subtle complexities and dynamics of the body's

architecture and physicality to further guide me as I began teaching and performing Contact.

Embarking on my own doctoral research on meaning in a “*nouvelle danse event*” in 1997 and now in my fifties, it was Novak’s book (1990)—along with Joann Keali’inohomoku’s ground-shattering 1969 essay “An Anthropologist Looks at Ballet as a Form of Ethnic Dance”—that drew me initially into the fold of dance ethnography as a research methodology and so the tradition seeking meaning through cultural contexts. A fledgling dance anthropologist, I went out into the field of a dance studio and theater “at home,” as an insider-ethnographer seeking understandings of an O Vertigo “dance event” through several years of participant observation. My research question: “What is the meaning of this postmodern dance event in our culture?” The who, what, when, where and why we choose to dance this way. I unearthed a plethora of answers from among all kinds of dance event participants by way of long-term, systematic fieldwork, fieldnotes, writings and data analysis from which to write an ethnographic account (Davida 2006). Following this thought pathway in this essay I am enquiring: what might be “Contact Improvisation dance events” and why do some of us choose to dance this way within this cultural context.

First Contact in Minnesota, becoming a postmodern dancer

To begin this first-person account, I am thinking through a particular thread of my young adulthood in Minnesota. A decade of regimented Modern Dance training interspersed with ballet barre exercises, had left my knees and spinal column in

continuous pain and fruitlessly striving for the impossible, less-than-healthy, “ideal” dancer’s body. The damage to my body sustained from years of this training had left me wondering if I would be able to bear the demands of professional dancing. And in fact, when attempting to catch with bravado a man jumping up into my arms in a university theater production in 1969, an injury to the vertebra of my lower lumbar spine provided an existential challenge to my intended career. It became a matter of leaving behind the structural strain and stress of the Graham, Cunningham and Humphrey techniques that had left detrimental traces throughout my joints, muscles, fascia and tendons. A “forced arabesque” was no longer in question, so how might I become a professional dancer? It was dance improvisation and the postmodern dance embrace of the “everyday” body-- in which no specific way of dancing was imposed or mandated-- that provided the answer. It was with a sigh of relief that I left behind the impossible struggle to acquire an 180^o split stretch.

Opening the first of my albums, a small photo sparks the reminiscence of my first contact with Contact. Here we are, dance educator Wendy Oliver and me in 1973, immersed in a playful and almost symmetrical counterpull balance in Mary Cerny’s exploratory classes at Nancy Hauser’s modern dance studio in Minnesota. Mary was a protagonist of the first wave Contact teachers, who were just discovering and discussing what might encompass the components of its pedagogy. How we might move in this way, falling and rolling together with abandon, and without injury?

From the first exploratory “small dance,” in which we assumed a relaxed stance while allowing the play of physical forces to cause us to rock, tilt and sway, it was clear that we were moving on new premises. Sharing weight with a dance partner through a

rolling point or surface of contact would require an openness to the kind of intimate, sustained touching rarely shared among strangers. These were the early days of the so-called “sexual revolution,” and this CI kind of weight-sharing through a mutual point of contact seemed to me a new landscape for the exploration of a new kind of sensual touching as a form of communication guiding the duet dance’s trajectory and intensity.

In the space and time of the Minnesota class series with Cerny, I moved decisively into the world of this postmodern dance ethos which would embrace my life-in-the-real-world as a feminist, pacifist and humanist, as well as my everyday way of moving through the world and forming intimate relationships. Here we were, men and women on (almost) equal footing (pun intended), moving together sensitively, cooperatively, sharing weight. I was irresistibly drawn into the pleasures, freedoms and socio-political philosophies of this new direction for artistic dance.

Introducing *Improvisation en Contact* in Québec

I entered Canada as a landed immigrant in 1977. The choice to leave the place of my birth during the horrors of the Vietnam War came with a sense of relief that I would be entering the relative (if imperfect) calm of a peacekeeping, socially democratic country. Forty-five years later and despite the rise of a small but vocal far right extremist movement becoming more visible in Canada, I remain grateful to live in this model of social democracy. The island of Montréal became my home for its beauty, cosmopolitanism, and the vibrancy of its *Québécois* and European cultures. In view of my previous home cities of New York and Los Angeles, Montréal was relatively,

decidedly multi-cultural and non-violent society. In love with the French language since childhood, I set out to become bilingual. The effervescent local artistic milieu, but for a few exceptions, seemed to embrace my desire to offer new dance world phenomena into their dance milieu, motivated as always by community building: Laban-based creative dance, the idea of the independent choreographer, dance presentation and curation, and of course, Contact Improvisation. My integration was not entirely painless, as I remained in the mind of a few local dance protagonists a brash colonialist outsider (the ugly American). This was a turbulent societal moment in which the *Québécois* were striving to define and consolidate their endangered cultural identity within, as they would say “a sea of English in North America.” Language was at the heart of provincial identity politics, but artists were cherished, and funded, because seen as harbingers for the creation of a distinct *Québécois* culture. The Canadian project for reconciliation with First Nations’ peoples on whose unceded territories we settlers were living and dancing would have to wait for several decades.

That same year in 1977, the Québec Ministry of Culture had launched the first public consultations in view of distributing a new fund to at last foster professional dancing and pedagogy (see Davida & Lavoie Marcus 2012: 155-170). There were a handful of dance studios and a few fledgling Modernist companies, but only Les Grands Ballets Canadiens and Les Ballets-Jazz had been receiving provincial support. The multiple festivals and presenting organizations, university programs and professional dance academy, the scores of choreographers and hundreds of performers that now form our dance ecosystem, were yet to materialize. In a small second floor walk-up loft downtown in 1980, I co-founded Tangente with three colleagues, an inaugural dance

presenting venue for which I remained artistic director and curator until 2019 and to which I eventually invited duet performances by Steve Paxton and Lisa Nelson, and Lisa Nelson and Nancy Stark Smith (the latter called “Dances by heart”).

Only a few days after arriving in Montréal, I came across a poster announcing a Contact Improvisation class with Andrew Harwood, who was living across the country in Vancouver at the time. At the end of the workshop he encouraged me to teach, and his sister Carol Harwood along with other workshop participants joined my first community classes in the downtown feminist gallery Powerhouse. Judson Dance Theater aficionado Vicky Tansy had just moved south of the island of Montréal near the US border to build a countryside dance retreat, and her inner-city students also gravitated to my first class. They were certainly drawn in by the announcement of “improvisation,” the basis of Vicky’s teachings in her own mix of dance and theater work. And like so many others who had become captivated with this kind of dancing, I began a multi-year pilgrimage to numerous intensive Contact workshops and gatherings across North America.

In those early years as the Contact community was immersed in formulating a framework for its pedagogy, in lieu of attempting to define and accredit a circumscribed teaching technique, debates among its early proponents led to a more unrestricted approach, a period fleshed out in another chapter of this book. The *Contact Quarterly* and various symposiums then served as a forums for discussions among teachers and other practitioners. In moving through various workshops around North America, I realized that a general consensus was arising over certain concepts, definitions and activities (exercises), although differing viewpoints on how precisely to teach Contact were in evidence. From my personal notes: “I spent August [1977] at the Vermont Contact

Conference [where] I first became aware of the different styles, philosophies, and approaches people were developing in their Contact work” (Davida 1977). Another chapter in this book will unravel the evolution of the pedagogy in depth.

While teaching these open community classes in Montréal, I began seeking out various opportunities to introduce Contact to my new co-citizens. Invitations to facilitate classes and workshops in a multitude of contexts—schools, summer dance workshops, arts programs--began to multiply. A new dance program was just being formed at the *Université de Québec de Montréal*, and department founder Françoise Riopelle offered me a *charge de cours* (a course in dance improvisation) in which to offer Contact Improvisation to theater students, and soon after to dance and non-dance students within the new undergraduate program for dance majors. This position as a “part-time lecturer” at the university was to span 23 years.

Adapting Contact Improvisation as a field of study and practice to the demands of an academic course plan was a task that all university Contact teachers have confronted. My efforts were supported by a series of workshops for teachers in techniques and strategies for university course planning. In end, it required creating of a set of measurable goals and outcomes, practical and writing assignments and readings, for students and how they might be graded for their efforts. I created strategies to thicken the discourse around the history and politics of CI, although the academic literature in those years was yet quite sparse (1985-2007). Together with the students, we fostered in-depth critical discussions that moved beyond the usual “what am I feeling and thinking after the dancing” and assignments that supported students in identifying and articulating the meanings arising from their movement choices and preferences. In the course of teaching

these university courses, I also had the fortuitous occasion to support the appreciation and blossoming of certain “atypical” dancing bodies, for instance, wheelchair dance student France Geoffroy and large-bodied actress Sarah Touchette. Although elusive and fluid at first, seemingly impossible, creating an academic syllabus for Contact Improvisation in view of non-dancers and dance majors alike proved a meaningful and achievable goal.

To note: in 1998, Thomas Kaltenbrunner ventured to forge a first comprehensive and detailed handbook of the history, structures and basic exercises for teaching Contact, attempting—successfully, I would argue—to capture as much of the existing agreed-upon lore as possible. As a natural medicine practitioner, in his book Kaltenbrunner presented CI generally as a path to self-discovery and detailed teaching techniques. He also briefly discussed issues such as its embodiment of cultural values (1998: 33-35), laid out questions about its politics (1998: 41), and mentioned pre-#metoo concerns about boundaries between sensuality and sexuality (1988: 61-62).

The novelty of Contact Improvisation in Québec during the 'eighties and 'nineties often caused students during the first few course session, in classes with names like “*Mouvement expressif*” and “*Atelier d’exploration en danse,*” to exclaim: “What we are doing is really quite interesting, Ms. Davida, but when are we going to begin actually *dancing?*” My inevitable response: “What a crucial and exciting question it is! ‘What is dance?’. This was the fundamental inquiry that propelled the rise of the postmodern dance movement in the United States!”

The Catpoto Dance Collective⁴ (1977-1980)

Following a common pattern in the Contact community, my initial community classes in 1977 soon gave birth to a working group of ten students interested in devoting more time to exploration and practice, and so meeting 2 or 3 times a week. By fall of that first year, three of the workgroup members, all women, were meeting with me regularly and also attending multiple workshops. We soon committed to forming a collective dance company that we named Catpoto in January 1978 (after *quatre poteaux* which translates as “supporting pillars” and in the vernacular “old dependable buddies”). We were: Carol Harwood (a dancer), Gurney Bolster (a new recruit), Evelyn Ginzberg (already a Contact aficionado) and myself, later briefly joined for a time by Sylvie Saint-Laurent (a gymnast). All young white, well-educated middle-class women, we were like-minded peers: a sorority of experience. We soon began teaching three classes a week together to forty students of mixed skill levels. It took several months to negotiate our differing aesthetic outlooks and to consolidate the purpose of our collective. We forged guiding structures in support of the process which integrated elements of Laban Movement Analysis and theatrical techniques: “[we worked with] scores which include[d] shape awareness, an opening of space between dancers, solo development, working with contrasts and blending, exploring emotional textures inherent in our dancing” (from my notes, Davida 1978). Each week included a continuous four-hour dance marathon, a skill sharing session and an invitation to outside dance colleagues to observe our work and offer us commentary. Although my cache of hand-written notes made no mention of the political aspects of our work together, to my recollection we certainly felt that we were engaged in a transformative dance practice, one that might foster new potentials for the professional dance milieu in terms of embracing female dancers’ strength, proposing

unlimited and novel choreographic possibilities, and in embodying humane social relationships.

We began exploring our resonance for the wider “*nouvelle danse*” (the Quebec equivalent of postmodernist dance) community, seeking opportunities to present our dancing in public spaces. First performances were informal demonstrations in parks, and even cafés. In the cultural context of Montréal in 1977, what we were doing was strange and unfamiliar to most onlookers. I took note of this expression of surprise from an onlooker during our first café demonstration, in between the tables and chairs: “*On se touche beaucoup, eh?!*” which roughly translates as “You sure are touching a lot!.” But it wasn’t long before we were invited to join the programming of local cultural institutions, and even to perform and teach in public elementary schools, community colleges and universities.

That we were four women, all heterosexual, was initially serendipity, as our gendered identities became only gradually significant to our practice. For instance, we became a foil for the all-male presenting Mangrove contact group who once, on tour traveling from California, in spring 1978 shared an evening’s public presentation with us in our Montréal studio. For that event, we did put into motion certain questions about the performance of gender, as Catpoto and Mangrove presented separate sets, ending the evening by dancing together. We held an audience talk at the end of the evenings asking questions. Was our biological sex an aesthetic destiny/destination? What were the possibilities and limits of women’s strength and capacity to lift, carry and catch each other? Did characteristics arise in the dancing that might be seen as gender-specific? Did the homo-social nature of our group free us from needing to confront problems of gender

power and equality? In the end, relational playfulness and (as I recall) a feline sensibility was usually present. That we were all women certainly brought us to explore the full extent of our capacities as supporters, lifters and carriers and became a distinguishing characteristic of our identity as a group.

We soon rented and renovated our own studio space in a spacious room with a sprung wood floor at the back of *Café Les Entretiens* on Rue Laurier. It housed our practice sessions, open community jams, public workshops, and public showings and performances. Our dance space in Montréal quickly became a destination for the ongoing circulation of nomadic Contact teachers and performers travelling through North America. During those years, as did other Contact groups and individuals, we became the local impresarios for workshops and performances by Contact Improvisors on tour. It began in 1977 with Jerry Zientara and Melanie Hedlund, then Byron Brown and Steve Paxton. At the Les Entretiens studio, we later hosted Mangrove, Fulcrum, Andrew Harwood with Helen Clark and in a third cycle Michael Linehan, Kris Wheeler, Nancy Stark Smith, Lisa Nelson, Mary Cerny, Jim Tyler and John Gamble. In turn, this informal, collegial “Contact touring network” offered Catpoto a reciprocal North American tour in 1978 that included workshops and presentations in Toronto (at the Women’s Gallery, Carol Shaeffer), Ann Arbor (at Mirage), Chicago (at Link’s Hall, Bob Eisen), Cleveland (hosted by Bob Martin), Minneapolis (Wendy Oliver), Portland (Bert Weiss) and Peterborough (at Public Energy by Bill Kimball). About the dynamics of this cooperative interconnectedness across the increasingly international CI community, Banes observed, “Like the food co-op movement that flourished in the same decade, and motivated by the same populist spirit, Contact Improvisation sets up a network for

distribution (of dance rather than vegetables) outside the big business of the dance world” (1977: 68). As a community of dancers and audiences, to memory, although overwhelmingly white, we came from various social classes and age groups, and it was common to have families with young children watching the dance.

Programmed into a series of performances in 1978 at the *Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal*, visual arts curators had decided that we were newly forged genre of postmodern performance art. And the curators at the *Musée du Québec* in Québec City brought us in to perform our improvisations within an exhibit of tactile art. A judicious curatorial match! We were also presented at artist-run visual arts centers *Articule* in Montréal and *La Chambre Blanche* in Québec City, adapting ourselves to art spaces with a sprung wooden floor. And so it was that we entered the institutional art world, frolicking through art galleries as museum visitors walked gingerly around and among us as we improvised. As for the fledgling professional *Québécois* dance community, they soon accepted us as if an experimental dance company when we made appearances in dance evenings and multi-media events. Montréal dance critics and writers announced our new company in newspapers and magazines (in this pre-social media era) enthusiastically through interviews, attempting to describe and explain the dance form for neophytes. It is interesting to note that while variously describing our dancing as lying somewhere between sport, dance and (in one headline) “group cuddle,” these Montréal dance writers perceived Catpoto’s Contact Improvisations as playful rather than political.

Certain *nouvelle danse* creators became particularly curious about the movement form, drawn to the unusual mix of dancers with traditional and so-called “non-skilled” (really non-dance trained) bodies, new choreographic possibilities, and the novel

approach to partnering. As with all movement systems, techniques and practices, Contact Improvisation—despite its status as open-ended movement research—to my mind had indeed given rise to a distinctive, recognizable aesthetics of relaxed bodies in off-balance free-flowing motion propelled by mutual support of each other through physical contact and weight-sharing, and with few (although occasional) signs of classical ballet and Modern Dance “vocabularies.” I must say that, looking backwards, this vulnerable, off-balance, trusting and released body could only have emerge from the context of white privilege, one that did not have to maintain the tension and alertness to danger, the predicament of so many bodies of color in North American culture.

By 1979, Catpoto’s burgeoning interest in “contact choreography” in the last phase of our dance collective before we disbanded, led us to invite Canadian choreographers Marie Chouinard and Paula Ravitz to imagine structured improvisations that shaped our dancing into poetic, metaphoric “compositions.” As each of us turned our attention to other pursuits, these initial explorations became the touchstone for my next chapter: a decade of feminist performances.

The Woman Question (footnote): *Each Man for Herself (1983-1985)*

As a pivotal movement form within postmodern dance, contact improvisation has given me to the tools to test [the] assumption [that d]ance-making which embraces women’s physical strength also embraces the possibility of transcending the legacy of social forces that have asked

women to be second to men. [It] is founded on principles of egalitarian participation (Kreiter 1996: 41).

Royona Mitra: Do you think touch within choreography can be used as a political tool? [...] Steve Paxton: I do think that at the very beginning of contact in its earliest years, what was considered extraordinary about it was that women supported men. And in all dance prior to that, that I had experienced—ballet, modern dance, folk, etc.—there was always this relationship of men supporting women, and women being in need to be supported by men. So yes [...]. (Mitra 2018: 14)

As for Kreiter, those early days of Contact Improvisation had always been for me both a social and a physics experiment. Even Paxton later noted, in his interview with Mitra, that women's abilities as lifters and carriers, fostered in Contact Improvisation, were considered an extraordinary phenomenon in the dance world at large at the time. Our temporary gatherings provided a laboratory for reimagining, among other things, reconstructing feminist gender identities for postmodern dancers.

I have self-identified as a feminist for as long as I can remember. Born over a century ago in 1920 in Massachusetts, my late mother was a free-spirited bohemian, card-carrying communist, natural foods advocate, PhD., practicing psychologist, proponent of Eastern Mysticism (Vedanta) and post WW2 American second wave feminist. Think: Rosie the Riveter returning from WW2, *Ms.* magazine, the origins of the fight for the Equal Rights Amendment to the US Constitution (still not achieved at this writing). It

must be recognized that despite all good intentions (and now we would say intrinsic bias), the Women's Liberation Movement then was largely predominated by white and middle-and-upper class women. It was given momentum by the determined entrance of newly empowered women moving into the post WW2 workforce, university, and public life. This maternal inheritance was clearly ingrained since birth, as some earliest memories are those of my rebelliousness against authority and quest for self-sufficiency. It was finally within the Contact Improvisation community, in which no limits were set by gender-assigned vocabularies and dynamics, that I could finally explore the physical possibilities of "dancing equality" with male colleagues. The goal here was not necessarily to cultivate displays of feminine bravado and muscularity, but to foster the efficient use of weight, momentum, counterbalance, tensile strength, leverage and other physical forces.

It is interesting here to note that in Banes' origin story of CI she recounts how in Paxton's early explorations, during a Grand Union residency at Oberlin College in 1972, he worked with a group of eight men "on the basic duet form [and] what happens when the partners give weight, lift, carry, wrestle each other, give in to the floor and gravity, all in a way that breaks out of typical male habits of aggression or fear of tenderness." She reminds us that this was a period of sympathetic responses to the feminist movement as "men's groups were forming to investigate male roles" (1977: 64), or in today's terms, masculine toxicity.

I devoted increasing time to Contact dancing, became progressively more proficient at lifting, carrying, counter balancing and otherwise supporting the weight of male-presenting Contact partners as they pulled and propelled themselves upwards in our

duets. Despite the early injury to my lower lumber spine, my skeletal structure was proving robust, as I danced with care for and attention to my weaknesses. And then one day, I fell into sync with a most sympatico Contact partner: Daniel Godbout. From our initial touch, it was clear that we shared an affinity for fluidity, spiraling and ease of motion. We were soon jamming regularly and facilitating workshops together in a countryside retreat. A vocational sport swimmer and lifeguard by training, his aqueous movement quality and love for the watery medium led him to form the underwater dance trio H₃O with which he created a series of video dances. (It is no coincidence that I was also a lover of water, joining a water ballet company as a teenager and completing my final paper in the Laban Analysis course in a swimming pool, entitled “I always wanted to be a mermaid.”) As innate a “rider” as I had determined to be a “carrier,” Daniel relished being airborne, and so a collaborative duet choreography for a woman who lifted and carried men (with care!) sprang to life between us.

Our idea was to offer this gender role-reversed composition as a feminist assertion, a “choreographic vocabulary” to challenge the limits of female performer’s capacities to maneuver the weight of their male counterparts. It was intended to advocate for women’s agency and strength in the highly stereotyped Euro-American artistic dance tradition of heterosexual partnering, as Paxton noted above. I chose a mischievous, empowering title for the performance work: *Each Man for Herself: A pas de douze for one woman and eleven men*. Daniel and I toured these performances within the intimate galleries of the Canadian artist-run space network, situating our performances in the interstice of dance and performance art. The dance composition alternated three layers of

scored material: our live duet dancing, images captured on slides of a public performance in a shopping center and a series of improvisational tasks with ten local male participants.

As the audience entered the gallery they came upon, as if a backdrop in the upstage area, a semi-circle of ten chairs occupied by “non-dancing” men. These willing performance volunteers were recruited locally by each gallery’s curators. Their lack of performing experience and dance training was of the essence, bringing poignancy, I thought, to their presence and actions as they waited nervously to be called into action. I gave them simple instructions only minutes before the performances: to wait quietly until, at various improvised junctures, I directed my attention to each of them in turn by literally reaching out to them. They would then rise and walk towards me to center stage, search for some way to climb up onto my body to be held and carried back to their seats. I remember what ensued as a novel kind of “structural, male gaze,” as they scanned the bony “shelves” offered by my standing body for possibilities of support for their arms, legs and spine. I carried them with tenderness, and their vulnerability is still imprinted in my memory.

Another layer of *Each Man for Herself* pictured Daniel and me on slide projections (the sophisticated technology of the ‘eighties) as we created a public performance of Contact duets in the *Complexe des jardins* office building, filled with workers and shoppers during their lunch break in downtown Montréal who stopped to stare. We were dressed in conservative business clothing: he was outfitted in suit and tie, I wore a skirt and jacket with low-heeled shoes (a playful challenge to stability and balance). As if a couple of odd, rogue business associates indulging in a new kind of fitness routine without changing into workout clothes.

The third layer at the core of the performance, was a series of Contact duets into which we scored the prevalence of my role as carrier and Daniel's as the lifted and carried partner. His lithe body was (as always) prone to supple spiral pathways and ever-so-sensuous in its relishing of flight and lightness. After several years of dancing and teaching together, we moved through our duets with great skill and ease. Although never life partners nor lovers, our dancing had always emanated camaraderie, pleasure, playfulness and joy.

Woven altogether and interspersed in succession, the three scenarios created a multifarious display of female strength, support and caring along with possible new futures for dance partnering⁵.

Post-script #1: Through the lens of current, urgent political imperatives

It was by chance, shortly after CI@50, in October 2022 during the Dance Studies Conference, that I discovered Indian dance researcher Mitra's critical, troubling essay on "un-making" Contact Improvisation, when it garnered recognition as the most distinguished academic research paper of the year. In her text she asks what the practice of Contact Improvisation might possibly signify within her own Indian culture which has so long fostered a social caste called "the untouchables," doesn't for allow public touching between men and women and favors the solo dancer. She contends that:

However, although its healing, generative, and connective properties have been celebrated in dance studies, there is still an unmet need to identify and examine choreographic touch, especially as it shapes CI, as a

discriminatory practice, through the intersectional lenses of race, caste, and gender politics. This is a necessary corrective to the body of work on CI and contact-driven choreography, in order to challenge 1960s/1970s Global North dance attitudes that have equated its touching bodies with counterculture liberation. (Mitra 2022: 9)

There have always been exclusionary politics, dangers and ethical quandaries lurking within the CI community. How could it be otherwise, as humans congregate in groups to share touch and intimacy? With the temporal distance of five decades since its founding, it is evident that our Contact Improvisation gatherings have never proved welcoming and safe spaces for everyone and every body. Nor has our white, Global North dance form been able to embody an ethos of democracy and artistic revolution when implanted in cultural contexts with vastly different mores of touch than those of my own Euro-American heritage.

My presence at thorny discussions during meetings of artists and arts scholars throughout the years, along with recent experiences, workshops and conversations in 2022 during the CI@50 celebration at Oberlin College in the USA and the Dance Studies Association Conference in Vancouver, have galvanized my thinking in this essay. In the clear light of the dissonant voices of certain CI practitioners and researchers, it is evident that our “loving community” has really never existed without its challenges and challengers.

From the outset, it is true that I was/we were always aware that, at least in the Euro-American/Global North context, few (if any) people of color have chosen to join our classes and jams; that sexual predators loomed among us; that not all atypical dancers and

bodies of color felt equally welcomed on our dance floor. So, what might I have done then to transform my contact class, our Montréal jams, into more hospitable places? As a resolute humanist and against racism, I recall wondering at that time if people of color were assembling in more amenable spaces (such as night clubs and rock concerts). Hadn't the Summer of Love and Woodstock Music and Art Fair, after all (I reasoned) been safe places for peaceful interracial camaraderie? (I wasn't there, so were they really?) In the end, I trusted that they were fostering a dance aesthetic that better resembled their own cultural zeitgeist, preferences and experiences in other places. My recent correspondence with Catpoto member Carole Harwood yielded yet another set of premises that reinforce this presumption, with echoes of Novack's book excerpt at the beginning of this chapter, when she wrote:

I find myself comparing Rock & Roll to CI. At first R&R was a Black dance form which grew out of Black music that was danced to. Then, it rapidly moved into other cultures, to the point where eventually any color could jive together, anywhere. This happened faster in social dancing like Rock & Roll because there were no art and culture issues to muddy the water. Also, the fact that music, popular music like Rock & Roll was central to the dance also accounts for the rapid democratization of this form. CI was and remains essentially a non-musical dance form. Steve Paxton was a modern dancer rebelling against the strictures of rigid dance technique and narrow artistic views [...He was] a dance intellectual. CI was not born "on

the street.” Its roots are art driven, which might also account for a certain insularity. (Harwood 2022)

From my first experiences in teaching Contact Improvisation I was aware that not everyone felt comfortable engaging in this kind of public display of sensual touching and being touched, and that what in view of #metoo we now call non-consensual touch, might always threaten to surface as we danced. As dance researcher Vionnet further clarifies, it is a matter of “how intimate boundaries are redefined under circumstances of close proximity and how subjective the feeling of intimacy might be” (2021: 324). As I recall, in conversations with my students I never insisted that this way of dancing might be a desirable or comfortable activity for everyone, always reminded them that they can graciously refuse or walk away from an unwanted dance. Taking control of my own boundaries as I danced was personal. As the victim of rape a decade earlier, I had finally rediscovered a place for sensuality and intimate touch that felt (almost always) nurturing and not threatening, although I have always preferred light touch skin-to-skin in my dueting.

Grounded and shaped through five decades of practice and research, today I feel poised to look at Contact Improvisation through a clear revisionist lens like that applied by Rebecca Chaleff to its contemporary techniques; her challenging assertion that by “radicalizing the ordinary” we Global Northern postmodern dancers were in fact “activating whiteness.” This is how she terms this ethos that formed the foundation of the entire enterprise of American postmodern dance (see Rainer’s “No Manifesto,” 1974: 62-63). She asserts that lying within the idea of the “everyday,” “neutral,” body that

propelled our dance revolution, one which “largely rejected technical and virtuosic performance” (2018: 71) (although we have certainly reclaimed virtuosity in CI performances!), belies the reality that not every body can be read in this way. In fact, she claims, these notions actually exclude bodies that are black, brown or otherwise marginalized within these “pure” white spaces, places she explains that uphold the “supremacy of whiteness” (2018: 79). And I am beginning to understand more fully the exclusionary politics of the past. Even as I begin to imagine possible futures for Contact Improvisation, I discovered during the CI@50 Oberlin gathering that new support networks and websites, codes of ethics and critical research are becoming established within the practice and that CI is being transformed as it takes root in disparate countries and cultural contexts in the Global South.

As I complete this writing process, recreating scenes from my past life in Contact Improvisation circles in the ‘seventies and ‘eighties, I am keenly aware of how complex and sensitive a task it has been to reconcile past and present perspectives. And so, along with my colleague Keith Hennessey and his provocative zine *Questioning Contact Improvisation* (2018), I owe a debt of value to three young writers from the “feedback group” of our writing workshop at CI@50--Lisa Clark, Flora Campise and Meldy Ijpelaar—for their invaluable, no-holds-barred critique of my tendency towards naïve idealism. They urged me to not gloss over the question of racism and privilege and so to “unravel the demonstration of whiteness” in the writing of this chapter.

Postscript #2: And now, having excavated the distant past

At this writing, it is fully fifty years since the genesis of the first experimentations leading towards the conception of Contact Improvisation with Steve Paxton's first experimental presentation "Magnesium" in the Oberlin College gymnasium and public performances at the Weber Gallery in New York City. It is sixty years after the Judson Dance Theater convened in Judson Memorial Church to reconfigure Euro-American artistic dance.

Tracing my own trajectory in the communities of these dance worlds has reopened the memory of how it was that this revolutionary postmodern movement of the 'sixties and 'seventies (and 'eighties), as we perceived it then, was to profoundly change my life as a dancer. If not the quintessence of freedom for every body, as it was indeed a decidedly white and privileged community, Contact Improvisation did propose a new kind of democratic dancing that stood in stark contrast to the Euro-American Modern Dance's dominance of the art dance world by a handful of charismatic and autocratic choreographers and their stylistic schools of dance.

My decades-long immersion into Contact Improvisation is now deeply embedded into my soma, woven into the fabric of my every step I take. From first small dances, fallings, liftings and carryings, counterbalances and rolling points of contact duets, I have always felt kin to our sensorial community of shared experience. However idealistic, we sincerely believed that it was by dancing together we might bring more humanity to (at least our corner of) the world through our touch revolution (Nelson 1996). Time is now overdue to more fully democratize and decolonize our practice by directing our attention towards urgent issues like inclusiveness, sustainability and safety (and more). Deepfelt

thanks to Steve Paxton, Nancy Stark-Smith and Lisa Nelson (and all of my contact teachers and partners) in opening the door for me to this transformative dance world.

I will leave you with a final anecdote that continues to inhabit my consciousness. Just weeks before her passing, to determine her lucidity, I asked my mother “What is the meaning of life?” to which she answered without hesitation “Love.”

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1Notes

. It was in 1995 that dance anthropologist Andriy Nahachewsky proposed a disruption in the traditional typography of artistic dances, moving us beyond the usual stylistic and tribal/national categories (ballet, modern, jazz, folkloric, social, etc.). He proposed that we to center our nomenclature in the “identity of the recipient of the communicated dance message” through four genres: participatory, presentational, sacred and reflexive (self-focused) dance (1995: 4). Might Contact Improvisation be seen as spanning all of them?

2. Anthropologist Clifford Gertz introduced the concept of “thick description” as a way of seeking the significance of human behaviors within the cultural context from which they take their meaning, offering the example of winking meaning different things in various contexts. (1973: 6-10).

3. For the CI25 celebration at Oberlin College in 1997, Julie Carr and I set up a resource room. Our call for resources among participants unearthed several books, publications, notebooks, photos and videos along with four master theses, four doctoral dissertations and three academic papers about Contact Improvisation that were completed between 1985 and 1996. And now in 2022, a precursory search on ResearchGate unearths...

4. This herstory of Catpoto was reconstructed largely through a small trove of personal notes from our group meetings and conversations that I had tucked into an envelope and recently rediscovered.

5. To note: this first Contact-based choreography led to another, arising from my fascination with the rising phenomenon of female body builders in my next feminist choreographic study *Pièce de resistance*.

4

5