

Hochschule für Musik und Darstellende Kunst

Master Thesis

# Noticing Power Relations when Teaching Touch in Contact Improvisation

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## Part I THESIS

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## **PART II APPENDIX**

(when requested)

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Research question and background

In this work I will look into teaching touch and the power relations connected to it. I have decided to concentrate on teachers and dancers who use Contact Improvisation (later CI) as a practice in their work, but the same principle could be important for any practice where touch is used.

In this research, the question I am asking is: how do CI teachers notice their own power in the moment of teaching touch and how do they respond to it? My hypothesis is that awareness of power relations and stating them in teaching environments can help the situation of consenting and through that create more togetherness, clarity in collaboration and learning.

I write mainly in the first person as for this topic it is important to make the writer, me, visible, responsible. The power relations are entangled with my history, background and heritage, so I will not fade out my identity. I am aware of the privileged life I am living in Germany and Finland.<sup>1</sup>

There are different topics that came up in the interviews. Those are: trauma-informed teaching and dancing, improvisation, being aware of one's own privileges, the

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<sup>1</sup> I'm white cis-gendered, queer female. live alone without children or a partner. I'm born and raised in the countryside of Finland and since I moved from my home when I was 15 to be able to dance more and study in a music high school, I have lived in seven cities, in three countries, in two continents. I speak four languages. I get student money for studying, I get housing money and unemployment money when I live in Finland and don't have a job or I earn less than 2000€ a month. I am able-bodied. My mothers family is academic and fathers family are farmers and artists. Both families have backgrounds in arts and culture, especially music.

I started to practice CI when I was 18, in 2005 and I have been part of the CI community mostly in Germany and Finland. I consider myself part of the international CI community, people traveling and teaching at festivals, many of my friends I know from that context. I have never had a break longer than a month from CI before the pandemic started in March 2020. Now I have been dancing only 5-10 times during the past year. I am very comfortable and I experience myself to have power in the CI scene, as it has been one of the spaces where I feel the most at home.

importance of listening and asking, self-responsibility, and trusting your own somatic experience to name a few.

One of the important things I learned was that choice is power. The one who has the most possibilities for making choices, has the most power. And the task as a teacher would be to help students to find the possibilities for those choices, with taking into consideration the cultural, the political, the social, the traumatic, the emotional, the historical, the human and the non-human, all of it. This work won't cover all of those aspects and their connections, but I hope it gives a glimpse.

I'm deeply grateful to the colleagues who openly shared their knowledge, their questions, their wisdom, their doubts and their experiences so I could cook something together with those words and ideas. I learned so much.

## 1.2 Methodology

My aim for the thesis is to uncover the ways of how power relations are experienced in the CI scene and how the teachers are working with it. To do that I interviewed 13 practitioners and looked into recent literature of CI. I chose theory about touch from social science and philosophy to support my findings as touch is a phenomena that can magnify and reveal challenges of power relations.

My thesis is based on qualitative research using Oral History interviews and more specifically partly structured in-depth interviews. I chose the methodology of Oral History because the thesis is about personal experience, attitudes, values, beliefs and opinions as well as perspectives.<sup>2</sup> The choice to do partly structured in-depth interviews came about because I wanted to be able to get opinions about specific topics and to be able to create discussion. These types of interviews are based on a topic and done to a bigger group of people, each interviewed once, and the duration is 45-75 minutes.<sup>3</sup> I

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<sup>2</sup> Patricia Leavy, *Oral History: Understanding Qualitative Research* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2011). p. 9

<sup>3</sup> Leavy. p. 13

created an interview guide, with themes and open-ended questions under the themes. My themes were: Teaching touch, Power relations and Consent (Appendix 1, Interview Guide). I came to these topics through the process of literature review because I was interested in how these topics affect each other. How does awareness of power relations affect the ability to consent, how does the situation of teaching touch affect the power relations for example. Under the themes, I had open-ended questions. Some of the interviewees spoke without me asking questions, only with the topics, and some really needed my support and gave shorter answers. This made comparing the differently formulated answers challenging, and could have been avoided by me sticking to the structure more rigorously. I feel this is not a big problem for the research because the flexibility allows the interviewees to follow their own thought processes and arrive at some new ideas.

The interviews began with a question about biography and experiences of touch in the interviewees' own history of learning dance. These questions were aimed at getting the participants into the mood of talking about touch and power and while there was a great deal of interesting information I could not include all of it in this thesis.

For my research I used the outline of the structure from Patricia Leavy's *Oral History: Understanding Qualitative Research* (2011): Research Design, Data Collection, Partly structured In-depth Interviews with Interview guide, with themes and open-ended questions under the themes, Data Analysis including Immersion to data, checking the transcripts, reading them, listening to them.<sup>4</sup> I printed the transcripts out, read through and highlighted sections with different colours, made notes and transferred those onto the computer. The coded transcripts became themes, categories and finally chapters. The theory that research results in is based on experience and includes different opinions and views.

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<sup>4</sup> Leavy. p. 68

## 1.3 The interview process

People I interviewed, in alphabetical order:

Alejandra Garavito Aguilar, (she/her, Guatemala)

Contact Improvisation teacher, mover. Practitioner of CI since 2014.

Edo Ceder (he/him, Israel)

Somatic practitioner, contemporary dancer, CI and dance teacher since 2006, computer programmer and therapist of Grinberg method.

Anya Cloud (she/her, U.S.)

Dance artist, educator, activist. Practicing CI since 2002.

Gesine Daniels (she/her, Germany)

Dancer, Somatic practitioner, Mediation Teacher, queer, an elder of the European dance and Contact Improvisation dance community. Teaching CI since 1989.

Defne Erdur, PhD (It/its, Turkey/France)

Dance artist, sociologist working in the fields of performing arts, therapy and education. Practitioner and teacher of CI since 2006.

Keith Hennessy, PhD (he/him, U.S.)

Dancer, Choreographer, Teacher, Improviser, Activist and Organiser. He works in contemporary dance performance field with the influence of queer and anarchist tendencies within the art worlds. Practicing CI since 1979.

Rythea Lee (she/her, they/them, U.S.)

Therapist, performing artist, dancer, teacher, Facilitator of peer counseling, CI practitioner since 1989, an elder of the community, trauma-survivor.

Nita Little (she/her, U.S.)

A dancer, teacher, choreographer, and dance theorist, an activist for relational intelligence through improvisational dance practices that began with the emergence and development of Contact Improvisation (CI). Her work with Steve Paxton was generative of CI in 1972.

Katja Mustonen (she/her, Finland)

Dancer, dance artist, dance teacher. Practitioner of CI since 2002.

Magisik Akin (they/them, Philippines/U.S./Germany)

Dancer, Choreographer, Improviser, CI practitioner and teacher, Collaborator.

Paul Singh (hi/him, U.S.)

Dance artist, dancer, dance teacher, choreographer. CI practitioner since he was 20 years old.

Aurora Westfelt (she/her, Sweden)

Dance artist, dance teacher, Radical Contact organiser. CI practitioner since 2005.

Taja Will (they/them, U.S.)

Choreographer, Performer, Healing Justice Practitioner. CI teacher.

(Appendix 4, Interviews)

I view the interviews as a collection of expert information from the field. The people interviewed all have teaching experience in CI for at least five years, all of them have practiced CI for much of their adult life, are well known in their scene and are also active in organising festivals, classes and workshops. (Appendix 2, Introductions)

Some of the people I interviewed I knew already. Paul Singh, Magisik Akin, Rythea Lee, Keith Hennessy and Alejandra Garavito Aguilar I have not met before, but all of them except Akin I saw talking at the Future of CI (FCI) conference held on Zoom in April 2021<sup>5</sup>. With Magisik Akin I had a connection through a performance project I took part in in 2019.

The process of finding practitioners was initially quite fast and intuitive. I made a list of people I would like to talk to, asked some colleagues for hints and soon had the core group ready. When I was looking for participants with a different background of experience than I have, I posted a question on a Facebook page *Contact Improvisation*

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<sup>5</sup> See: <https://www.earthdance.net/futureofci>



*Facilitators Worldwide Networking & Discussion Group*<sup>6</sup> to find people, but didn't get many responses. I asked publicly if there was something that needed correcting in my post and a colleague, Ronja Ver, answered pointing out that there may be an issue with me as a white, cis-gendered, able-bodied, academic and european person looking for marginalised participants to work without monetary compensation which could be viewed as insulting. For the future I would aim to gather a budget if asking for help from more marginalised people or be more active in finding the funds from the institution that I am operating in. This incident brought up a fear of making mistakes and I noticed that my initial resistance towards the feedback was strong. As I hoped to bring forth stories of marginalised people, I ended up emphasising the existing power imbalances. There are many power relations connected to the context as Ronja Ver writes: "There is an entire history of white supremacy and money to account for - poor European and US white folks are still some of the richest people on the planet, and benefit from the exploitation of others; Germany was a colonizer power and everyone there, including your school, benefits from the plunder and devastation of their colonial exploits - how do we position ourselves and take all this into account when we look into our research projects?" (Appendix 3, FB thread, Ronja Ver) Now after some time has passed, I am very grateful for the supportive feedback I got from Ver.

Who are the people who can and want to give an interview, who can take that time out of their lives? Who can afford to do this? Who can speak english well enough or indeed at all? How can I ask people, without payment, to join my work?

I found POC, queer, gay, non-male participants for the interviews. I noticed it was important to include people with different identities so that they could reflect on how they see themselves, how they think others see them and how they are affected by them in their work in CI. I am happy that in the end my selection of experts has a variety of identities, such as people identifying as queer or gay, non-male, or having a racialized identity, and dealing with those identities in connection with power hierarchies in CI. I asked people who I know have a practice of working with consent, dialogue or a very

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/groups/CIWWF>

strong background in working with touch verbally or physically. I tried to encourage diversity also geographically, but because my own circles were not diverse enough, there were no participants from Asia and Africa. I found people from Europe, South America, the United States and Israel. Only after I had already interviewed the participants, I got an answer from a teacher from Hong Kong, but in the end I decided to decline the offer because of lack of time. I am content with that decision feeling that 13 interviews is already more than enough.

I did all the interviews between 14.-23.5.2021. One of them was conducted live in Berlin, others were on Zoom. There was some trouble with finding fitting times because of the different time zones. I transcribed the interviews with an artificial intelligence program<sup>7</sup> and I edited them to be more readable. I concentrated the research on the content of the words and left out the non-verbal cues and edited the transcripts for readability. I had some challenges with one person wanting to correct their text a lot and with some interviewees not sending the Consent Agreements back, having to ask them many times.

After doing the interviews, it became clearer that I wanted to highlight the work of people with different identities, and leave out the ones who are from the demography of white cis-male. This decision wasn't informed by a bias against white cis-males but rather came from a need to balance out the fact that their perspective has already received quite a lot of attention even in the history of CI.

## 2 The Concept Of Touch<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> "Otter Voice Meeting Notes - Otter.Ai," accessed January 10, 2022, [https://otter.ai/?utm\\_content=brand&utm\\_source=google\\_ads&utm\\_medium=search&utm\\_campaign=search-core-prospecting-consumer-non\\_edu-web-brand&utm\\_term=otter%20ai&gclid=CjwKCAiAz--OBhBIEiwAG1rIOoQP\\_xJA7hJ2J-Bd7kDNw68vyDOsMkcmObPh4sSTqvPHJiuqIZqt1RoCb2lQAvD\\_BwE](https://otter.ai/?utm_content=brand&utm_source=google_ads&utm_medium=search&utm_campaign=search-core-prospecting-consumer-non_edu-web-brand&utm_term=otter%20ai&gclid=CjwKCAiAz--OBhBIEiwAG1rIOoQP_xJA7hJ2J-Bd7kDNw68vyDOsMkcmObPh4sSTqvPHJiuqIZqt1RoCb2lQAvD_BwE).

<sup>8</sup> This chapter refers to an essay Touch Becoming Words – Touch in Academic Writing, that I wrote in spring 2021.

In this chapter I will introduce how the concept of touch is discussed in social science and philosophy. I decided to concentrate on Kared Barad and Erin Manning as their thoughts support the main topic of this thesis.

The other sources I could have included in this work would have been Maurice Merleau-Pontys<sup>9</sup> writings of phenomenology, who is referred to a lot especially in dance theory, Jean Luc-Nancy<sup>10</sup> and Jacques Derrida<sup>11</sup>. However, for this work I decided to not to include these authors because their work is also present in thinking of Erin Manning.

## 2.1 Intra-action and Response-ability

*Agential realism* is a theory by Karen Barad, who is a feminist theorist writing on the background of physics and social science, about agency emerging when objects or phenomena meet.

Deriving from agential realism I will use a term *intra-action* by Barad. Intra-action means, as Barad puts it: “The mutual constitution of entangled agencies”, meaning that the meeting is the place where agency is emerging. Compared to interaction which is a meeting between two individual subjects, intra-action happens inside both of the agents.<sup>12</sup> In Barad’s writing, agency is the relationship between two subjects rather than something that someone possesses.<sup>13</sup> In interaction, bodies remain individual, in contrast to intra-action where the individuality emerges through the meeting and the relationship and is? inside the subjects.<sup>14</sup>

Another concept from Barad is *response-ability*. It derives from responsibility with the different spelling highlighting one’s ability to respond .

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<sup>9</sup> See more: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (Routledge, 2013).

<sup>10</sup> Jacques Derrida, *On Touching, Jean-Luc Nancy* (Stanford University Press, 2005).

<sup>11</sup> Derrida.

<sup>12</sup> Karen Barad, “On Touching - The Inhuman That Therefore I Am (v1.1),” *Power of Material/Politics of Materiality (English/German)*, Edited by Susanne Witzgall and Kirsten Stakemeier, accessed March 26, 2021, [https://www.academia.edu/7375696/On\\_Touching\\_The\\_Inhuman\\_That\\_Therefore\\_I\\_Am\\_v1\\_1\\_](https://www.academia.edu/7375696/On_Touching_The_Inhuman_That_Therefore_I_Am_v1_1_).

<sup>13</sup> “Agential Realism,” in *Wikipedia*, January 5, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Agential\\_realism&oldid=998363381](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Agential_realism&oldid=998363381).

<sup>14</sup> Three Minute Theory, *Three Minute Theory: What Is Intra-Action?*, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v0SnstJoEec>.

Barad uses poetic language when explaining the concepts of response-ability and intra-action:

- in decentering and deconstructing the “us” in the very act of touching (touching as intra-action), we might put the question this way: When electrons meet each other “halfway,” when they intra-act with one another, when they touch one another, whom or what do they touch? -- In an important sense, in a breathtakingly intimate sense, touching, sensing, is what matter does, or rather, what matter is: matter is condensations of response-ability. Touching is a matter of response. Each of “us” is constituted in response-ability. Each of “us” is constituted as responsible for the other, as being in touch with the other.<sup>15</sup>

As I understand these words by Barad, we emerge only by touching and it is through this meeting that we come into existence. The terms *other* and *we* can mean many things: concepts, nature, humans, non-humans, animals, objects - but none exist without some other, being simultaneously response-able for the others’ existence.

The binaries of leader-follower, active-passive and subject-object are made to disappear with the wording of meeting halfway, intra-action and response-ability and something more queer, chaotic, mutual and messier is created. This allows agency for all parties in meetings where touch happens between things, matter, discourse and bodies.<sup>16</sup>

In the words of Erin Manning the binary-system is a *commonsense model* in which time and space are stable locations for the body to enter. Manning proposes another relational model with a new concept of space and time. In this model, a moving body creates space and time and touch, being part of the senses, is in relation with and an expression of moving bodies.<sup>17</sup>

Manning writes that making a decision is an event that holds the reaching-out towards the unknown and the response-ability arises from that mutual engagement. Reaching

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<sup>15</sup> Barad, “On Touching - The Inhuman That Therefore I Am (v1.1).”

<sup>16</sup> Barad.

<sup>17</sup> Erin Manning, *Politics of Touch: Sense, Movement, Sovereignty* (U of Minnesota Press, 2007).

towards the other is a seduction to respond and to experience. There is no choice other than to respond immediately. “This multidimensional movement of desire is violent, for it presupposes a certain demand, a decision, an instance of response-ability. This response charges your body with the potential seduction of wanting to re-embody itself with and alongside mine.” Losing one’s balance and center is possible since it is always unknown and a new, shared body is born.<sup>18</sup>

Manning takes up the topic of impact in a passage by saying that the response-ability toward an other is a demand for the other to respond. There is always a consequence for touch: There needs to be repetition, and the response to that repetition that is changing all the time to something unknown.<sup>19</sup>

## 2.2 Body and Touch as a Process

Manning suggests *process philosophy* that connects with intra-action. The ability to respond and *being the process* is an important part of the writing of Manning.<sup>20</sup> *Process philosophy* is about becoming rather than being. It's a worldview concentrating on the positive potentiality of every moment with the core idea being that everything has the potential for getting better, growing and developing.<sup>21</sup>

Touch, according to Manning, generates a third space, a reciprocal and mutual body-space in which the borders of self, other, and self as other are questioned. Touch, as Manning puts it, is a process, not a distillation of the encounter between you and me.<sup>22</sup> Manning argues that touch is first and foremost a sensation by which we perceive the universe and embody the other, and me as the other. Touch is difficult to understand or define since it is impossible to anticipate the effects or futures that the act of touching will have.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Erin Manning, *Politics of Touch: Sense, Movement, Sovereignty* (U of Minnesota Press, 2007). p. 49

<sup>19</sup> Manning. p. 51

<sup>20</sup> Manning.

<sup>21</sup> Loyola Productions Munich - Visualizing Minds, *Joseph A. Bracken - How Would You Define Process Philosophy?*, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fztG0pelywg>.

<sup>22</sup> Manning. p. 52-53

<sup>23</sup> Manning. p. 57

--there are no sign-systems that can completely guarantee that the space I cross to touch you will remain the same after that crossing. Touch is the embodiment of a sense that acquiesces (consent) to the unchartable qualities of a body in motion.<sup>24</sup>

With process philosophy Erin Manning aims to “expose how the senses—touch in particular, but always in implicit interaction with other senses—foreground a processual body”.<sup>25</sup>

Manning refers to the body as touch rather than as distinct bodily motions that contact. She continues:

If my body is touch, and both touch and movement signal a displacement toward an other, I can begin to conceive of my body as that which produces the spaces for its movements of desire. My body spatializes space insofar as my body remains alive to touch. The space inhabited by my body becomes the space of my body. When I touch you, I not only incite you to a reciprocity, I create space with you.<sup>26</sup>

### 3 Defining and teaching touch

In this chapter I introduce different ways of defining and teaching touch in the context of CI based on the recent writings on the practice as well as interviews I conducted. In addition to the interviews, the main sources are teachers and scholars Maria Brozas Polo and Mirva Mäkinen with whom I discuss, *why touch is used in CI* and, *what are the different qualities and uses of touch in CI*. I left out any mentions regarding consent having reserved a full chapter (5) for this topic.

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<sup>24</sup> Manning. p. 57

<sup>25</sup> Manning. p. xiii

<sup>26</sup> Manning, *Politics of Touch*. p. 58

In the interviews I asked about the language and vocabulary participants use for teaching touch. Here follows a collection of different ways and wordings coming from various backgrounds and reasons. In the chapter *Thinking Touch - Touch and Other Senses in Teaching and Learning Contact Improvisation* in the book edited by Malaika Sarco-Thomas<sup>27</sup> Maria Paz Brozas Polo analyzes ways of wording of touch and the collection of language for touch comes from seventeen different CI teachers and the resource is the *Contact Quarterly - Dance and Improvisation Journal's series of CI Essentials*<sup>28</sup>. Paz Brozas Polo then compares those words through a lens of writing by José Gil and James Gibson who think that: "Synesthetic totality and the whole body as a touch-moving sense" and this is important for CI as well.<sup>29</sup>

Paz Brozas Polo makes a difference between types of touch in CI. The most important ones are: active touch; mutual touch; deep touch with weight and movement; multi-touch meaning touching the floor and the air as well as different parts of the own and other body; extended and travelling touch from hands and centre; touch from skin to internal organs to space and to structures; travelling touch to the other body and movements<sup>30</sup>.

According to Paz Brozas Polo, the distinct functions of touch are: "to listen and to read the shape, dynamics, and direction of one's own body, others' bodies and of the whole space around; to test movement possibilities, or to escort a partner's movement as well as taking care of the other body during the dance --."<sup>31</sup> Touch as a tool for communication is something that rises also from the interview material.

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<sup>27</sup> Malaika Sarco-Thomas, *Thinking Touch in Partnering and Contact Improvisation: Philosophy, Pedagogy, Practice* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020).

<sup>28</sup>"Contact Quarterly: Dance and Improvisation Journal, Books, Dvds," accessed March 25, 2021, <https://contactquarterly.com/>.

<sup>29</sup>Sarco-Thomas, *Thinking Touch in Partnering and Contact Improvisation*.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*

## 3.1 Mutuality

According to Paz, one of the first realisations that many contact dancers have in the beginning of their practicing is that touch is mutual, it happens between the subjects and it's often impossible to say who is touching who, who is active and who is passive. When I touch you, you touch me, and vice versa “during the process of touch, when the body which is touching reaches the other body or object (e.g., floor), it is giving information from in to out, but at the same time it is receiving information about what it is touching and about the body touching it.”<sup>32</sup>

Mutuality or two-directionality of touch is something which comes up in many of the interviews: the fact that both sides are needed in order for touch to happen. This explores the idea that there are no roles, that there is not a person who is touching and a person being touched: “When you touch, you're being touched” (Appendix 4, Erdur, p. 64, line 30). There are many exercises about transforming the experience of touch, for example, touching the ground with your palm to perceive that the ground is touching you.

## 3.2 Cultural layers of touch

Mirva Mäkinen's Doctoral Thesis, *Artistic Research on the Values of Contact Improvisation in a Somaesthetic Performance Context*<sup>33</sup>, explores the concept of touch through interviews with Keith Hennessy, Ray Chung, and Joerg Hassmann. In her words, individuals and communities have an opportunity, through practicing CI, to

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<sup>32</sup> LEARNING CONTACT IMPROVISATION, “CHAPTER EIGHT TOUCH AND OTHER SENSES IN TEACHING AND LEARNING CONTACT IMPROVISATION MARÍA PAZ BROZAS POLO,” *Thinking Touch in Partnering and Contact Improvisation: Philosophy, Pedagogy, Practice*, 2020, 150.

<sup>33</sup> Mirva Mäkinen, *Taiteellinen tutkimus kontakti-improvisaation arvoista somaesteettisen esityksen kehyyksessä*, 2018, <https://helda.helsinki.fi/handle/10138/234550>.



change the culture of touch. Since CI practice is based on touch while at the same time encouraging inquiry, it can open the culture of touch to the unfamiliar.<sup>34</sup>

Gesine Daniels gives space in her interview to addressing the cultural aspects of touch, which she does in her teaching as well. She says that in CI there is often an ambitious aim or an illusion to “forget” the cultural implications of touch. She discusses this, saying that it is not possible to avoid the cultural aspects of touch, still, she aims to teach her students the skills to notice this and be able to put these aspects aside for some moments of the interaction. She suggests doing this by concentrating on something other such as anatomical images and layers of the body, rather than the cultural ideas and images. In her opinion it's important that dancers can access reflexes of the body and other survival and exploration skills when exploring touch. The cultural aspects that Daniels talks about are related to the possible implications of gender as well as to value judgements about being proficient, being stiff, weak or regarding body image. (Appendix 4, Daniels, p. 75, l. 18-42) These cultural aspects can easily take the dancer out of the moment of dance.

When noticing students are not being in the moment of dance, which could appear as stiffness, she might say something like:

Usually we are used to having this kind of touch only... Often this kind of touch means this and this to us. And that might feel weird. Notice how it feels weird. And pause and then decide if you want to have less or more, or do something different with it. [...] If it does trouble you too much, you can now go to your anatomy, and now you can really focus on your skin and then also notice how, by doing this, the cultural aspect changes. (Appendix 4, Daniels, p. 75, l.30-34)

For Daniels touch is a tool to deconstruct our cultural habits around touch, relationship and communication. This is possible because touch is loaded with meanings and much of “how we are interacting in our society is represented in the way how we touch or don't touch.” (Appendix 4, Daniels, p. 75, l. 38-39)

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<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*

One of the important things is to be aware of it, and to unlearn it, not deny it, so we can really play with it. And we have more freedom of playing with it but not being ignorant. And that is part of the teaching of really practical. Touching teaching. (Daniels, p 6-8)

Defne Erdur and Anya Cloud both use the term “humanness” and wish this to be taken into consideration when dancing and teaching CI. To bring the full human experience into the language practice all layers and not separating these from the dance. It does not mean necessarily to bring stories from our everyday life, but rather the identities and fullness that comes through that. (Appendix 4, Cloud, p. 4, l. 16-19, Erdur, p. 65, l. 38)

Because even if I am now, a female in her late 50’s who is not anymore in this area of being potential prey for heterosexual cis-men, [...] I’m not invisible in the dance, I meet that other body. And because I’m skillful, I can meet bodies and communicate with those bodies, and then also with this person with all their physical, artistic human and whatever potential and co-create a dance that I would usually not do it with. And that is really because I feel confident and I am skilled enough to make a connection through another layer, and that other layer is really the touch layer, and body to body layer, where somehow I can and I know that a lot of people cannot. I can decide to take those cultural layers off. (Appendix 4, Daniels, p. 77, l. 1-8)

### 3.3 Before touch

Touch begins with attention. It’s a physical phenomenon. It’s a perception that begins the second I orient toward the thing I’m touching. [...] that means I bring physicality to my attention. (Appendix 4, Little, p. 81, l.1-3)

In the words of Nita Little and many others I interviewed, touch is already the thought of it, the attention going towards another. Attention is an important part of Nita Little’s work and in her words “The potentials of communication through attention are massive. It’s like a language we have not yet worked on.” This topic has been part of her life’s work since the 1970’s. (Appendix 4, Little, p. 81)

Attention is a word that many people interviewed mention as the first step towards touch. This could be taken to mean that touch exists already in the intention of it and in the thought that there will be touch. It’s already the turning towards that begins the

process. The attention then creates the space in-between. To magnify the importance and texture of this space, Taja Will uses the the adjective *magnetic*:

Magnetic feels like a really descriptive word of my felt sense of it. And I think some of this as the human energy field, that bio magnetic field that is measured in science and in spirit, as a way that you feel a palpable connection, and also the way that the eyes and the limbs can draw through space [...] and create connection that is not physically touch based. (Appendix 4, Will, p. 38, l. 2-5)

Anya Cloud uses the term *coming into convergence*, to describe coming closer towards a touch, playing with the distance in-between. She mentions that the ability to go toward, away or turn away brings more choice to be able to make changes in the proximity and relations to others. (Appendix 4, Cloud, p. 4-5) These are skills of modulation and variation — in the relations and proximity — through one's own actions and body, before making contact with the skin of another person.

I [...] gradually build towards things and I take time, but I try not to highlight the touch in a way that then it becomes even more touchy. I try to treat touch as natural and normal as I can, but with the respect that we're living people with different needs, history and we each have our unique ways to relate and deal with things. (Appendix 4, Katja Mustonen, p. 11, l. 20-23)

Another strategy used is dancing with the floor or walls as a partner. Floor is commonly referred to as the first partner for CI, which involves working with gravity, dancing with the floor, learning to slide, roll and push using the floor. Working with the surroundings for a solo dance and one's own movement was mentioned many times in the interviews.

Taja Will asks the students to locate their own edges by moving on their own, using self-touch and the touch of walls and the floor. This is intended to warm-up the desire for touching. They talk about teasing the desire, the will to touch. (Appendix 4, Will, p. 39, l. 8-11)

Anya Cloud refers to the impact of sharing space and breathing the same air, being connected and there being no way out of that condition.

We're all breathing the same air. And the moment that I feel the air is touching the inside of me, [...] it's touching the outside, it's also inside that somebody else and I need it in order to survive, but it's also not without nothing, everything has an impact. Everything has an impact. (Appendix 4, Cloud, p. 6, l. 2-4)

### 3.4 Touch as movement and function

Touch is the other side of movement. Movement is the other side of touch. They are the shadow of each other – Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen<sup>35</sup>

Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, the pioneer of Body-Mind Centering<sup>®</sup> (later BMC<sup>™</sup>), discusses the relationship between touch and movement in her book *Sensing, Feeling, and Action - The Experimental Anatomy of Body-Mind Centering*.<sup>36</sup> I refer to BMC<sup>™</sup> here, as it often serves as a basis for the understanding of anatomy and movement used in CI.

In the BMC<sup>™</sup> approach to movement, touch is seen as the first sense, alongside movement, and they work together to support each other. Sensing and perceiving, according to BMC<sup>™</sup>, is not only passively being stimulated from the outside, but also an activity, and vice versa, an action is not only a reaction to the stimulation, but also an active moment of perceiving. Touch is an important aspect of learning BMC<sup>™</sup> as a dance and therapy practice since it is frequently used as a tool for becoming aware of body patterns and for learning to repattern them if necessary. Touch is thought to occur in the cells within the skin's borders, as well as on the surface and through space.<sup>37</sup>

Touch can be described as movement and through the functions of it. This rationality and functionality can help to veer away from some of the cultural connotations of touch

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<sup>35</sup> Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, *Sensing, Feeling, and Action: The Experiential Anatomy of Body-Mind Centering*, First Paperback Edition (Northampton, MA: Contact Editions, 1994).

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*

if those would inhibit movement and communication. Following is a list of words used by the practitioners I interviewed.

**Verbs alone or in relation:** Sensing, feeling, sensitizing, softening, rolling, sliding, yielding through, following without wanting to change, contact, connection, feeling, texture, orienting

**Verbs in relation:** Relating, leaning in, supporting, reaching into, listening, perceiving, giving weight

**Verbs with other images added:** Radiating, sinking in, landing, melting, landing, anchoring, floating, moulding, inviting, guiding,

**Adjectives:** Softer and bigger, precious, subtle, simple, connected, anchored.

**Nouns:** Texture

(Appendix 4, Interviews, Cloud, Daniels, Mustonen, Garavito)

I categorized the verbs into three parts: the first consists of actions that are possible to do alone or in connection with another body; the second consists of ones that are possible only in relation; the third brings some other context into the action. This last group contains more poetic imagery and brings up images such as ice melting, aeroplane landing, floating on water and moulding clay while the previous ones describe functions of the touch on a surface like rolling, sliding, supporting.

The adjectives and nouns are also connected to the quality of touch, what kind of feeling it creates and what kind of effect it has.

Gesine Daniels explains in her interview that she is using the words for dancing with another human body, but also for solo, or dancing in connection with the air, the floor,

the gravity. The words are there to describe how touch moves on the body of another person, or on a surface, like rolling and sliding. In connection with the words, she demonstrates movement. (Appendix 4, Daniels, p. 75)

### 3.5 Going deeper: Touch is always relational

All that you touch you change. All that you change changes you. (Octavia Butler)<sup>38</sup>

In two of the interviews this quote by Octavia Butler came up. Both Anya Cloud and Keith Hennessy brought it up as something they often share with their students (Appendix 4, Cloud, p. 3, Hennessy, p. 22). It is important to understand the impact that touch can have regardless of one's intention. Cloud talks about CI as a high-risk practice, to underline that you cannot assume to know how another person is receiving the touch and the dance (Appendix 4, Cloud, p. 3, l. 16).

This means that touch is relational, it takes place between two or more subjects and always has an effect on all involved. Relationality is described with coming together, meeting, getting closer, moving towards and away — elements that many interviewees use in their teachings. Magisik Akin talks about collaboration as being a third thing that is created between two subjects: creating something together versus interacting, taking over, submission or dominance. (Appendix 4, Akin, p. 29, l. 1-4) This could be compared with Karen Barad's intra-action. In CI this is often thought of as the listening and the being in the moment that create the experience of the relationship as a third subject. Here it also becomes relevant that touch affects both the one who is touching as well as the one being touched.

There's no moment where I get to step away from a relational way of being and I think that's not a dominant experience of contemporary culture, at least not in most places in the Western world. That just being is relational. (Appendix 4, Cloud, p. 6, l. 5-7)

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<sup>38</sup> See: Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, Updated edition (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2000).

Nita Little talks about touch as a communicative superpower that travels through the volume of another body, object and through space. This too involves a risk, letting someone else inside your body.

When I'm touching you as a contact dancer, I'm inside your body. Touch is a superpower and by that I mean that I'm practising all of that geometry inside you. And when I am clearly doing that inside you, as a contact dancer, you know what my potentials are, you know what I'm doing. (Appendix 4, Little, p. 81, l. 33-35)

If the dance stays on the surface and the weight is not passing through the other body; it is more difficult to communicate with another moving body. One basic principle of CI is the communication via the weight of the partner, which makes it possible to perceive how a body is moving, where it is going and this makes it possible to move fast and acrobatic<sup>39</sup>

Gesine Daniels notes that the first thought is that touch is about the surface, but actually touch begins before with attention and goes through the surface, goes deeper. And as above, the touch travels within all involved, not just the one who is being touched. Daniels stresses the point that it is possible to learn to modulate how much we want the touch to go in and to gain more space for those decisions. (Appendix 4, Daniels, p. 75)

Nita Little puts importance in the prepositions when she is teaching. She is using, for example, *dancing as* instead of *dancing with*. (Appendix 4, Little, p. 84, l. 17-18). This states the permeability of touch and the body, the porousness of togetherness. Little is clear about her choice of words while teaching and that even the smallest differences in prepositions can make a difference in the experience of movement.

I'm dancing as that person, I'm no longer dancing with that person. I'm not functioning with them as a separate body. Because when you're working on that skill level of touch, and attention of mind-body. If you're working on that level, you now are in communion. They know as soon as you know what's happening. And as soon as they know, you

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<sup>39</sup>See: "Contact Quarterly: Dance and Improvisation Journal, Books, Dvds."

know, it's shared. I'm an open book, if they know how to read me, the second I've moved in within them. I'm totally available to them. (Appendix 4, Little, p. 84, l. 17-18)

### 3.6 Images

Images and imagination can change the experience of the body, they can affect the tone and affect the moment and the experience of it.

In the interviews appear anatomical and other images, derived primarily from BMC™, other somatic practices and imagination of the teacher. First I will focus on the anatomical images and the way in which they are used and then move on to the other forms of images. I have chosen to address both anatomical images and imagination in a single section, because both require a very similar approach. While it's possible to show a picture of a bone in a human body, the picture can never fully resemble how the bone appears in one's own body. This requires the use of imagination in order to embody the image.

Another way I've come into touch is to talk about the textures of touch, to invite the kind of cellular respiration that is practiced in Body-Mind Centering® as a first layer of touch. (Appendix 4, Taja Will, p. 38, l. 12-13)

Nita Little uses the image of fascia and fascial touch. In her words the fascia is communication, like a web that connects bodies through space and within each other's bodies.

When I'm dancing inside somebody else's body, [...] I'm touching, and I send my fascia into them. So there is a sending that is happening in order to create that connectedness that is communicative. [...] I'm always aware of the depth, the dimensions of my touch. And so I start to talk about touch as bringing the capacity of shared being, we co-create the moment. So if I'm inside somebody else's body, dancing with them in a contact dance, for instance. And I'm at that level of fascial communication. (Appendix 4, Little, p. 84, l. 12-17)



Little extends the fascia to the movement and space in-between people, which translates to attention as well with fascia being a form of attention, or at least having similar tendencies. When speaking of fascia Little refers to Kevin O'Connor and Joe Dumit<sup>40</sup>. (Appendix 4, Little, p. 83, l. 25-43)

Many of the practitioners interviewed talk about qualities of touch that one gets by focusing on specific layers, tissues or systems of the body. The layers are: skin; under skin; muscle and bone. The systems could be the fluids, the muscles, the skeletal structure, the fascia. Touch can also extend into an explicit part of the body like the organs for example.

I guess I talk a lot about the qualities of the body. [...]. Skin touch and flesh and bone touch and light and weight and leaning and pushing, [...] touch without an intention. [...] I would use words like: feel the bones give weight. More the physical experience. (Appendix 4, Westfelt, p. 56, l. 19-31)

Aurora Westfelt as well as Gesine Daniels refer to the anatomical aspects as a more functional and rational way of approaching touch, which she sometimes encourages. Daniels, like many others, uses anatomical pictures to help imagine the shapes and forms of tissues as well as the diverse sensations of how they might feel. Daniels uses combinations of anatomical images with images of inanimate objects or something from nature: "I compare the bones to the floor or to the walls, or to to branches or to trees to address the qualities of the different tissues." (Appendix 4, Daniels, p. 74, l. 39-40)

Nita Little uses clear images for touch, which are: point; path; volume and surface. She describes the different types of attention one can touch with, to clarify the way in which touch is taking place. Point is a place on the surface. Path goes through the body or an object and has a clear direction. Surface, or a contour is a plane, a bigger area than just a point. And volume is the wholeness of something, the wholeness of an arm, or of a

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<sup>40</sup>"Dumit 2016 OConnor Sciences and Senses of Fascia.Pdf," Dropbox, accessed July 2, 2021, <https://www.dropbox.com/s/ibhxvni343bp1l6/Dumit%202016%20OConnor%20Sciences%20and%20Senses%20of%20Fascia.pdf?dl=0>.

person. These words can also be used to describe the one who touches, as in “touching with the volume of myself”. (Appendix 4, Little, p. 81, l. 16-19)

Another image Nita Little uses is that of the open hand. It refers to letting go of control, to touching lightly rather than holding onto something, onto the touch, onto an idea or a dance partner. In CI this is also understood to be a safety measure: avoiding grabbing onto a partner or holding onto them, so as not to restrict their options. (Appendix 4, Little, p. 85, l. 26-33)

Gesine Daniels uses a number of images mostly to change the tone of the surface of the body. She mentions "blanket" as one that she is currently using because it affects the tone of the skin right away:

You are like a blanket that is hanging or spreading out or hanging over or protecting the other body or surface. (Appendix 4, Daniels, p. 75, l.18-20)

When the tone of the surface changes, this also affects the whole body. It helps the person to modulate the tone so information can move freely in and out. (Appendix 4, Daniels, p. 75, l. 24-25) This type of images can offer a direct connection to the body as they are something that is generally familiar. It is also possible that someone may have a very different idea of a certain image, which can disturb the concentration.

Daniels says she is using more poetic language in connection with movement, such as images connected to anchoring and the sea. Another image she uses is that of Velcro between a surface and your body, which implies that the surfaces stick to each other but there is movement. (Appendix 4, Daniels, p. 4, l. 28-29)

Magisik Akin uses the wording "body as a landscape". In my experience this is quite commonly used, even though in the other interviews it did not come up much. (Appendix 4, Akin, p. 30, l. 28-31)

Defne Erdur mixes different senses and sensations and makes up new ways to experience, like reading, seeing or listening feelings and translating touch into other senses as well as to other parts of the body (Appendix 4, Erdur, p. 64, l. 31-39). Listening is a term that is used a lot in CI teaching and it refers to sensing in your own or other person's body, following the impulses or reactions and not suppressing them.

### 3.7 Improvisation and Touch

To me, one attractive reason for discussing touch in CI is the improvisation of it. Keith Hennessy mentions that CI scene of teachers has been partly forgetting improvisation and concentrating on the contact aspect of CI while the focus has been on the #metoo movement<sup>41</sup> and the discussion regarding consent in CI. (Appendix 4, Hennessy, p 26, l. 5-7).

Taja Will uses terms like adapting the skill set of investigation and exploration of one's body in connection with the floor, objects, walls, other humans or places as a way of moving away from the "Contact Improvisation choreography" (Appendix 4, Will, p. 37, l. 35). This was also referred to by others as a script, an agenda, an intention or a plan and many of the interviewees expressed a desire to move away from this.

Anya Cloud raises the topic of the unknowability of others' experience, which is linked to consent (discussed in chapter 5) but also relates to improvisation and the unknowability of the whole situation of meeting.

### 3.8 After touch

Taja Will was the only person I interviewed who spoke specifically about what takes place after touch, using the term aftercare<sup>42</sup>, as it is used in the kink and bdsm scenes. They mention that this is a term they feel comfortable using only in certain situations. (Appendix 4, Will, p. 39, l. 13-16) I understand aftercare to mean acknowledging what happened in the interaction, communicating or making sure in some other way that

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<sup>41</sup>See: "Me Too. Movement," me too. Movement, accessed July 20, 2021, <https://metoomvmt.org/>.

<sup>42</sup>See: "Ceci Ferox, Aftercare". accessed July 20, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/COHf62ch7IB/>

each person involved is getting what they need at this moment. This could mean time alone, offering bodywork, talking, reflecting and so forth.

Reflection is something that has cropped up in the interviews many times. In classes this is used as a way of checking in and acknowledging what was happening and what were the experiences of the dancers. This often takes place in couples as a talk following an exercise, or with the whole group, which can support the dissemination of learning.

### 3.9 Summary

The interviews focused a great deal on what happens before the actual physical touch. I propose this to be a more important aspect of touching than is generally acknowledged and the COVID-19 pandemic may have been instrumental in bringing these thoughts to the forefront. Also in my experience as a practitioner one's individual dance prior to physical contact with another dancer possesses its own value, which in this chapter became very apparent.

I find it fascinating how anatomical images are thought of as more neutral than objects, relationships or cultural codes. The focus in teaching, on function, anatomical layers, images, imagination are intended as methods of creating distance from the cultural meanings and social connotations of touch. Improvisation too is used as a method for such distancing, introducing a quality of play, and encouraging an exploration of the unfamiliar. Sometimes distancing can help with this process and when it's aware and about choosing what to concentrate on, it can be a great tool. Distancing as a coping method or a trauma response (see: chapter 5.4) on the other hand, can be harmful.

Many of the interviewees mentioned that as there had been almost no CI practice or teaching over the past year, as a result of the COVID 19 pandemic, and it was difficult to access the words and recall the experiences. Also some found answering the questions about teaching touch difficult, not only as a result of the long break, but due to some fear concerning how I would use their answers. This could be connected to the power

that words, especially when printed, have and to acknowledging that they make a difference, that they are important.

The impact that touch can have, as cultural and relational, takes on an importance with the notion of aftercare and the act of reflection following the interaction. This is about taking touch with others seriously. Connecting to the impact and unknowability of another's experience, the next chapters take a dive into power relations (chapter 4) and bringing consent (chapter 5) to the CI classes.

## 4 Power Dynamics And Contact Improvisation

### 4.1 Observations

In this chapter I collect information about experiences of power relations in CI practice from the interviews, in order to show how the experience of hierarchy can affect one's ability to make choices. In the subheadings I process the primary topics that came up. I touch on the topic of power relations only gently and generally as it is very broad. Also, with my research rooted in the interviewees' personal experiences as well as in my own process of decision making, it can only represent a fragment of the reality.

It appears obvious and agreed upon by all who I interviewed that CI spaces share the same hierarchies and power relations prevalent in society in general. Below, I present a list of the forms of power relations that were mentioned in the interviews, while being aware that there are more.

#### **The "isms" that were mentioned:**

Race, racism, gender assumptions, sexism, class and classism, ableism, ageism and looksism, money and wealth

#### **The power relations that were mentioned:**

Ability–disability, teacher–student, organiser–participant, beginner–someone with more experience, straight–queer, light body–heavy body, who can promote themselves–who can't, young body–old body (Appendix 4, Interviews)

Aurora Westfelt mentions that while the door to the CI space is open, what matters is who we hang-out with and who we talk to outside the CI context, and I would add, who we invite in. (Appendix 4, Westfelt, p. 57-58 ,l. 40-1) Anya Cloud says that the complexities of the identities we possess in the world play out in the same way in CI spaces, with the power imbalances and roles being similar (Appendix 4, Cloud, p. 6, l. 19-22).

What matters most is how power relations are noticed, discussed and what is the quality of care we bring to the topic (Appendix 4, Cloud, p. 6, l. 19-22). If CI practice can reveal to us the power relations and work as a magnifying glass for social issues, can it also serve as a space for condensing and magnifying the quality of care?

Gesine Daniels says that power relations exist already when entering the community. It is easier, for example, to join if you already know someone from the CI scene. Daniels continues that to feel comfortable and welcomed one needs money, to be able to travel, to get visas, it helps if one is white, Western and middle class, these being just a few things mirrored directly from society to CI. She adds that some dynamics present in society are not as visible in the CI scene, because one already needs to make an effort to enter this exclusive "club". (Appendix 4, Daniels, p. 76, l. 2-4 )

Anya Cloud reflects that there are more dysfunctional power relations playing out in CI spaces than is generally talked about and that to be aware of them is a good first step. There are subtle abuses of power that are also harmful: the visibility that a teacher or a facilitator has, being in a position of knowing something, and the fact that in the festival structure some, organisers for example, are paid while others are paying to join the context. Cloud continues that the power relations are being unacknowledged in most CI spaces. (Appendix 4, Cloud, p. 7, l. 1-6)

I don't think that there's any possibility of a utopian thing where everything's equal, I think it's more about developing skill to be more conscious of what we're carrying with us. That relates to: we are the material of the work. The more I know about what identities I hold, in a certain context, the more capacity I have about how I might be with them. (Appendix 4, Cloud, p. 7, l. 7-11)

## 4.2 Experience and skills

One dynamic that is strong in CI is the experience and years one might have of practicing the form. There is an ideal that CI is accessible to all, but in reality experience offers a great deal of power and agency, in the room and inside the dance. The knowledge of technique, ability to listen and to communicate through one's body, the ability to modulate how close or deep you want to touch or be touched, as well as the ability to rescue yourself when necessary, are some of the skills that allow one to experience a sense of power.

Choice is power. With the most choice has the most power. (Appendix 4, Little, p. 84, l. 22)

All the people I interviewed have a long history with CI. Most of them began practicing before or shortly after their 20's, so in spite of their various ages, they have been practicing CI throughout their adult life, and all are very experienced and skillful. (Appendix 2, Biographies)

I see myself in the room and I carry my full identity there. [...] When you enter a room, you are seen with a body that you have. And the body I have is very small. [...] Female presenting, queer, easy to lift. I think this is what people think about. It has a potential to be not so harmful, like this person is definitely not going to hurt me, [...] this is what I think people see. And this is also how I feel until I move. And then when I'm moving, I think it's a different story because then people are also adding information about your physicality and the level of comfortability in this space and how you relate to your body and how you relate to the floor? And what kind of risk taking do you do and in the dances. (Appendix 4, Akin, p. 31, l. 27-30)

Skills offer more space for choice, which can be experienced as personal power and agency in dancing. Here I define agency as the ability to act. The majority of interviewed people mentioned experience and skills as a power they know they possess. Interestingly those same people were also ones who identify as being outside the general norm of the society, for example identifying as queer, female, non-white or elder in the community. When they enter into the space, they might not be perceived to be in a position of power or as having systemic privilege, but in the dance they know they possess a great deal of skill and space for choice which allows them to dive into their power. I suspect that their experiences of not having power and agency made them more aware of their own privileges and power.

I feel like my experience with the form gives me a lot of power. And that's not necessarily power over other people, but power to have agency in the space. Much easier for me to not be in something that's not serving me. And that in and of itself is a huge currency in a CI space. (Appendix 4, Cloud, p. 6, 40-44)

Anya Cloud says that the power she experiences that is associated with skill is the power within, not the power over: the power to have agency in the space, to make decisions about one's own body with the knowledge that this has an effect on the space.

That's what I also love about contact improvisation because through being skillful in this technique, I can somehow twist the roles, or I can find creative ways to refuse my role in how I behave in the dance. (Appendix 4, Daniels, p. 76, l. 40-44)

### 4.3 Getting comfortable

Comfort is about the community, knowing people, knowing how to behave, knowing the spaces, the norms and the habits that other dancers have. The CI jam can be an unknown place for many while personally for me, it is a familiar space.

The space of CI can be very comfortable for some people, usually the ones who have more privilege and more agency in the space compared to others. Taja Will: "The more



comfort folks have in that space, the more they perhaps, I hypothesize, aren't listening to those systemic power and privilege in space." Will mentions that the ability to fully express oneself is the sign of comfort and safety in a space and the experience of comfort can create the illusion of equity in the space. This could indicate that the people who are not comfortable might be missing from the space or their experiences are not acknowledged. (Appendix 4, Will, p. 40, l. 1-3)

#### 4.4 Struggle with unity and whiteness

In their article *A phenomenology of whiteness*<sup>43</sup> Sarah Ahmed explains the orientation and familiarity being something that one inherits as they are born, taking the shape that is already existing and effortless. It includes experiencing proximities to certain objects, styles, capacities, aspirations, techniques and habits as familial and inherited. According to Ahmed, whiteness is an effect of racialization and that sculpts the actions white bodies can do.

According to Keith Hennessy, one of the visible reflections of the surrounding society is the whiteness of CI spaces. Keith Hennessy writes in a Zine *Questioning Contact Improvisation* this being something many practitioners notice as a problem of outreach or inclusivity, even though it could make sense for us to start working with the whiteness in the space rather than the lack of color in the space.<sup>44</sup>

What is the impact and what are the practices towards more accountability relative to whiteness, the legacies of whiteness and legacies of harm connected to white supremacy. (Appendix 4, Cloud, p. 6, l. 16-18)

Anya Cloud talks about the impact over intention and calls for more accountability in relation to whiteness. According to Hennessy, a big assumption is the unity of the room

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<sup>43</sup>"A Phenomenology of Whiteness - Sara Ahmed, 2007," accessed July 20, 2021, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1464700107078139>.

<sup>44</sup>Keith Hennessy, *Questioning Contact Improvisation* (San Francisco: Circo Zero, 2018).

and the assumed sameness of people's background, abilities and sexualities. In the interview Hennessy discusses how the idea of unity in the room is still being embodied and is internalised in the CI scene, which is a leftover from the hippie culture of the 60's. This, in conjunction with the small and voluntary-based CI organisations without real resources, creates the situation which we are in right now, of mostly white, heteronormative spaces with a baggage of assumptions. (Appendix 4, Hennessy, p. 25, l. 8-13)

Magisik Akin tells about their personal learning about how much does the racial background affect the dance:

I started to understand racial identities. And that also adds another layer into my identity. Just understanding racial politics and how that affects my experience, and how that affects other people's experiences, and how people relate to touch differently, given your racial background, and ancestry and history. (Appendix 4, Akin, p. 28, l. 35-38)

Anya Cloud does not want to pretend that we have neutrality, that the dance space would be a neutral zone where the power relations of the world do not exist. She then responds by thinking about accelerating the practices of care and of harm reduction<sup>45</sup>. (Appendix 4, Cloud, p. 6, l. 27-29)

Hennessy continues about disrupting the whiteness by offering an example of the social dynamic shifting once there are more non-white or racialized than white people in the room. He states that at that moment no one can say "Oh, I don't see color, I'm just dancing with bodies" (Appendix 4, Hennessy, p. 24, l. 28). This is a moment when everyone could notice that there is no unity in the room, but negotiated consent, meaning we really need to put effort into facilitating consent. (Appendix 4, Hennessy, p. 24, l. 28-32)

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<sup>45</sup>adrienne maree brown, ed., *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good*, Later Printing edition (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2019).

## 4.5 Gender dynamics

CI is often referred to as a dance practice where gender roles are softer, as there are no prescribed roles for different genders such as in couple dances like tango and salsa. In CI, women lift and men are being lifted, and in its beginnings the bodies were thought to be neutral and roles not fixed<sup>46</sup>. Nowadays many people are aware that gender roles do exist in CI. The situation might vary in different countries and cultures, but also in my experience gender dynamics are very visible in CI. In the interviews of Taja Will and Magisik Akin they say that many queer people have found it difficult to join the jam demonstrates that sexism is prevalent in CI. (Appendix 4, Interviews)

In the opinion of Gesine Daniels gender dynamics become obvious when looking at women and men in teacher positions and leader roles and comparing their years of experience and the level to which they are listened to and quoted. It is clear that men have more power than women within the CI community. Gesine Daniels's own experience is that many men have an easier time getting jobs in CI with significantly less experience and skills. She mentions that in the contemporary dance field it is a bit more understandable, because there are many more female dancers than male but still many choreographers wish to have an equal proportion of either gender. (Appendix 4, Daniels, p. 76, l. 35-39)

Even for me, I'm pretty good with words, I can express myself, I'm not shy. Even though I have children I still was able to travel a lot and all of this, and still I always fear that, for example, when I am able to really have an opinion or say what I think, and I do it in a confident, and sometimes dominant way. The way how this is seen and judged is very different from a male teacher who is doing the same. That is just the mirror of society. (Appendix 4, Daniels, p. 76, l. 35-39)

Defne Erdur states that the objectification of beautiful and small women and beautiful men is very obvious in CI spaces.

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<sup>46</sup>Horrigan, Kristin. "Queering Contact Improvisation: Addressing Gender in CI Practice and Community." *Contact Quarterly*, 2017.  
<https://contactquarterly.com/cq/article-gallery/view/queering-contact-improvisation>.

I think there's still the gender inequality thing there although the technique allows you to go against that, I think it's still there. Or at least I witness more and it's not only in Turkey, I would see it in many spaces (Appendix 4, Defne, p. 68, l. 11-14)

The narrative of a small person being lifted by a bigger person against their will is something that comes up in the interviews, with many having witnessed it, or having experienced it themselves. This takes place mostly with smaller women and bigger men, with women being generally smaller, but it can also take place between large and small individuals regardless of their specific gender. The main point is the exerting of one's power over someone who has a smaller body or is easily lifted. In CI lifting is something that many people want to do since it can be perceived as a form of success, with someone with a smaller body being used as a tool for showing off.

Alejandra Garavito tells about her experiences of teaching CI in Guatemala as a woman. She noticed a difference between what was allowed to her in comparison to male-bodied others. Male-bodied students also read her dancing through the lens of her gender and as an invitation for an intimate dance, whenever she in fact wanted to be playful. She says that she has used this for her own advantage, because as a female she is not easily accused of being a predator. She mentions this being something that then requires her to have an even clearer role as a teacher. (Appendix 4, Garavito, p. 48, l. 4-9)

## 4.6 Reflecting one's power as a teacher

The role of the teacher carries a strong power dynamic in itself. Some teachers want to break the teacher-student power dynamic during their classes by working with the power relations. They will for example name the power relations or the fact that students probably agree to do what they say, simply because most people are used to doing what the teacher tells them. (Appendix 4, Cloud, Hennessy). The class situation raises questions such as: How to keep listening to what one wants to do while the teacher-student relationship is commonly hierarchical?

Some of the interviewees choose to call their classes "labs" or "research" and deliberately avoid calling themselves teachers. This was thought to still be problematic as students might still consider someone with more experience and many years of practice as somebody to look up to, therefore perpetuating the dynamic. (Appendix 4, Erdur, Garavito Aguilar)

In some communities, for example in the festival in Turkey<sup>47</sup> and in classes in Guatemala, they use a system of always having two persons teaching (Appendix 4, Erdur, Garavito). At the festival in Turkey, Defne Erdur says, the classes are based on two teachers figuring something out together. The classes are not planned in the common way<sup>48</sup>, but rather deal with questions, labbing and open research within the group. The participants know this and come to this festival for this reason, to participate in a different kind of learning environment (Appendix 4, Erdur, p. 69, l. 9-15).

Defne Erdur has gone deep into reflecting on the issue of the dynamic between teacher and student. It is looking into transforming the power relations between the learner and the teacher because it likes to propose questions and inquiries to be resolved together. Erdur does not offer solutions to its students but "rises up" with questions, together. (Appendix 4, Erdur, p. 67, l. 25-29)

According to Erdur's experience, it has felt uncomfortable in the teacher position. Erdur remembers a conversation with Martin Keogh, a CI practitioner, regarding this:

He said to me that definitely, you're a senior, let alone you're a senior mover, you're a senior dancer in contact. And you can share what you already know, it's a kind of a status, but not every status is going to create hierarchy and power relations. And the more you don't claim your seniority is going to cause frustration in the juniors. (Appendix 4, Erdur, p. 67, l. 33-36)

Erdur was challenged to deal with the teacher-student power dynamic and goes on to explain its own need to be taught through curiosity rather than dictation:

I cannot also learn from more dictating, [...] I follow my own need, I need more empowerment and exploration and curiosity pumping, but that the teacher is along with

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<sup>47</sup> Festival in turkey, website: <https://ci-turkey.org>

<sup>48</sup> What's the traditional way

us. And whenever in case of emergency, you can always ask help. And she's available, you know, he's available. And that was my model. (Appendix 4, Erdur, p. 67, l. 41-44)

In the interviews, stating the existing power relations during teaching came up as a helpful way to address them. The teachers would let students know that they are aware of the dynamic and often name the dynamics that are present in their identities. This requires vulnerability, in order to be open about the privileges one holds in the space, which I believe is helpful in creating a more equal situation. Here I would also add that there is responsibility that comes with power, so that power in and of itself is not necessarily a bad thing, but once power is acknowledged this can support awareness of different responsibilities, increase possibility for feedback and bring clarity to the situation, creating safety. Katja Mustonen reflects on the responsibility of the teacher to relate to the status they are having. This would mean that it is not about the status as it is, but rather how one works with it. "Do I access other ways of being? How open I am to all the others in space? How much do I strengthen the already given status quo in a way that the space provides?" (Appendix 4, Mustonen, p. 14, l. 8-10)

Anya Cloud often names the situation by saying: "I'm the teacher, and I'm making suggestions, which means that you probably feel like you need to take them." (Appendix 4, Cloud p. 7, l. 16-17)

Keith Hennessy often teaches in mostly female surrounding, teaching mainly in the scene of contemporary dance that has fewer cis-gendered male-bodied students. He states clearly his position and why it is he who is teaching in this environment even though the main student body is non-male.

I'm a cis-gendered man [...] and I'm aware that I teach in a predominantly female field, that that is true because of the larger sexism of our society. That's not an organic, natural thing that was produced. You know, so we are dancing in the world, produced by heterosexism. (Appendix 4, Hennessy, p. 23, l. 40-47)

Cloud also makes a point about asking people to demonstrate. She aims to make it explicitly clear that they don't have to and that they can say no. (Appendix 4, Cloud, p. 7, l. 21-24). My question would be here, how to make sure people are saying no to a

teacher? This can be very difficult for students to do, and teachers can only acknowledge this and make sure they state it often enough.

Alejandra Garavito analyzes her experiences of being born and raised in Guatemala where the education in general and dance education specifically have been very “military-based”. She wonders about having been the one on the lower level of hierarchy and then entering the role of a teacher. This requires that one have a good deal of awareness in order to not reproduce those very same power relations, when becoming the one who has more power.

I'm always wondering, am I just switching? Am I down? And now I'm going up and someone is down? Or am I able to keep the circle rolling? Because I do feel like even though I wish for a horizontal circle, it's actually more of a rolling like this? (shows with hands vertical circle that is moving, in a cycle). (Appendix 4, Garavito, p. 46, l.10-13)

The cycle of power relations is difficult to break from one position because it requires both sides (Appendix 4, Akin, p. 29, l. 12-14). This raises an interesting question of whether, while the teacher works to make the power relations more equal, if the students wish to hold them on a pedestal, the efforts of the teacher may not necessarily result in less hierarchy. In this work I did not focus on the students' responsibility, but that is something to research further.

## 4.7 Summary

Noticing power relations can help to make the space safer to the participants. It takes effort to keep noticing the power relations and not fall into comfort. In this chapter, I got interested in the concept of comfort and realised that my wish is to find more comfort for more people, not just for a single group. As comfort to fully express oneself is a power in the CI space. I want to be comfortable so that I have the resources to help others have that comfort as well. Maybe one answer is to find spaces where you are not comfortable, just to keep yourself on the edge and remembering the experience of not belonging to the in-group.

If comfort becomes a fluffy pillow that fills up the space and suffocates, but keeps protected, then no, I don't want that. But if comfort is groundedness, stability,

self-confidence and trust, then I would imagine it more like moving roots through the ground, or mycelium sending out information from my body and bringing information to me.

I would think noticing power is about naming clearly what happens in the space and teaching the participants to take that into consideration in their own dancing. Naming can feel vulnerable, it can be risky and the braveness is to take that risk.

## 5 What About Consent?

### 5.1. State of discussion of consent in CI

As in many other scenes, consent been a topic of discussion in the CI community after the #metoo -movement and has everything to do with power relations. This comes up in the interviews and also from my own experience. There are many different opinions of what it means to work on consent in CI practice, classes and other events. An article *How the First Rule Brought #MeToo to Contact Improvisation*<sup>49</sup> by Michele Boulieux shows one side of the discussion being the protection of victims by creating safe spaces and not letting possible abusers in the same spaces and Heike Purian answering in the comments about trying to find dialog between the two sides.

There is a concept that is sometimes called The First Rule of CI: “Everyone is responsible for themselves” or “Everyone takes care of themselves”.<sup>50</sup> This “rule” is sometimes used as an excuse to not to take responsibility when boundary-violation has happened. It is an on-going debate in the scene if this “rule” is helpful or not. Nancy Stark Smith has stated that it is something that has been understood wrong, or the

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<sup>49</sup>See: Michele Beaulieux, “How the First Rule Brought #MeToo to Contact Improvisation:,” accessed July 20, 2021, <https://contactquarterly.com/cq/article-gallery/view/how-the-first-rule-brought-metoo-to-contact-improvisation>.

<sup>50</sup>See: Richard Kim, “Rules,” *Contact Improvisation Blog* (blog), September 29, 2013, <http://contactimprovblog.com/rules/>.



meaning has changed during the years, and it actually means that everyone is also responsible for others, not only for themselves.<sup>51</sup>

Consent often deals only with the Contact side of CI leaving out the Improvisation. When we think of touch, the question is generally if we are willing to do it or not, but how about if we look into the Improvisation? What does consent mean as a practice of improvisation?

In this chapter I explain the ways interviewed practitioners are dealing with the changing situation of working with consent as well as how they understand the concept in the context of CI. Interviewees had in the end similar opinions about consent, but different ways to work on it.

## 5.2 The meaning of consent

In the Lexico Dictionary of Oxford English<sup>52</sup> consent as a noun means: “Permission for something to happen or agreement to do something” and as a verb: “Give permission for something to happen” or: “Agree to do something”. Etymology of the word is con- ‘together’ + sentire ‘feel’.<sup>53</sup> Feeling together sounds to me more mutual compared to the dictionary definition.

In Finnish language consent, *suostumus*, means agreeing to something that is asked from outside, it also subtly suggests some resistance. This is, in my opinion, the way consent is mostly talked about in mainstream media, where it is considered unidirectional, one is asking and the other one is agreeing creating a binary of active-passive, attack-resistance, eager-shy and these binaries are often gendered in

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<sup>51</sup>Nancy Stark Smith, “What First Rule of CI?,” accessed July 20, 2021, <https://contactquarterly.com/contact-improvisation/newsletter/view/what-first-rule-of-ci>.

<sup>52</sup>“CONSENT | Synonyms of CONSENT by Oxford Dictionary on Lexico.Com Also Antonyms of CONSENT,” Lexico Dictionaries | English, accessed July 10, 2021, <https://www.lexico.com/synonyms/consent>.

<sup>53</sup>“Consent | Origin and Meaning of Consent by Online Etymology Dictionary,” accessed July 10, 2021, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/consent>.

men are active, attacking and eager while women are passive, resistant and shy. Is there a way to tweak the meaning into mutual feeling together, shared and active excitement to do something?

In my understanding of ongoing consent, a decision is never fixed, one can always change their mind and go from yes to no and vice versa. When one makes decisions with all the information needed and can change their mind any time, it is called on-going informed consent. All people involved need to be aware and listening all the time, like in improvisation. Understanding the concept of informed and on-going consent, that it has to be something where a person has all the information to make their decision, it can change all the time and it moves between all parties, it can be taken back at any moment.

### 5.3 How do I know what I want?

I think we receive so many touches that are not welcome. We receive it because we're shy, or because someone tells us to do it. When were children you say, to kids, to hug your uncle, grandma and hug your friend, and all of these things get stuck inside. (Appendix 4, Garavito, p. 47, l. 38-40)

The importance of one's own experience was revealed in the interviews. One's own experience includes the feeling of the body-mind or each person's own experience of their own body, and that it can be and should be trusted.

Emphasising that the somatic experience, and the touch, and your own body, and your experience of your own body in movement relating to your environment and to touch, is something that nobody can take away from you. (Appendix 4, Daniels, p. 77, l. 32-34)

Noticing and responding to the experience could be called intuition or gut feeling and is about trusting when one feels uncomfortable in a situation, or when something does not feel right and on the other hand, when something feels very good and comfortable, enjoyable. It is also something that in this time we humans are learning not to do when

growing up, we are taught to sit and not listen to the body. Could now be the moment to start unlearning?

Gesine Daniels talks about decision making and consent through noticing how one is feeling and the ability to start looking at it from different perspectives.

For me it's the space [...] where the decision is being made, [...] under the skin but [...] also between us and the space. Where does it happen? How can I notice it? I encourage people to write about it. [...] And I encourage them to work with this idea that how you notice what you are doing, what else could you do and how would that feel, what thoughts are, you notice what you're doing, what are you thinking, what are you feeling. And what if you think something different, or what if you change your perspective. (Appendix 4, Daniels, p. 79, l. 16-21)

Daniels encourages the students to notice their thoughts, actions, perspectives and feelings and possibilities for changes. In her opinion, this would help them to stay responsive. She continues that her own ability to give consent comes from an empowered somatic experience that combines the knowledge of the body and the experience of trusting that knowledge. "I'm able to stand for myself, and at the same time, be more able to modify myself and what is possible for me." (Appendix 4, Daniels, p. 79, l. 24-27)

And then going back to [...] sensing tension, sensing my breath, sensing space, re-orienting, noticing what are my possibilities on a physical level, that I can just turn my head, and the world changes, my body changes, the weight changes, everything changes. And then I make the bridge to the, to the other field, what would turning your head mean here in this situation. (Appendix 4, Daniels, p. 79, l. 34-38)

Katja Mustonen says in the interview that for her it is important to teach each person to learn to follow their bodily cues, to get to know their limits and to understand how they feel yes and no in their body. She continues, that it is also important to learn to listen to others, especially for some people who break the boundaries of others. (Appendix 4, Mustonen, p. 12, l. 22-25) The self-responsibility that comes through listening to one's own body and the boundaries is part of the practice of CI to Mustonen.

The other side of comfort and pleasure, feeling that in your body, is to feel pain or discomfort. Aurora Westfelt ponders about so-called "easier" exercises like starting to

dance back to back, where before COVID-19 she would have not encouraged participants to ask for consent. She goes on thinking that she used to have expectations that some exercises are easy and do not need to be negotiated, but collectively living through COVID-19 pandemic, she has realised that any touch can be uncomfortable for someone and it is always good to negotiate the boundaries. Westfelt also mentions how she sometimes can see students feeling uncomfortable and even in pain but they might not know how to change their way of dancing to feel better or not to feel pain (Appendix 4, Westfelt, p. 55, l 30-33). This is an alarming observation that shows how used many of us are to feel uncomfortable.

Rythea Lee wishes that a practice of cutting off a situation would be more practiced, also when the experience of a situation changes suddenly. She wishes that there would be no need to go through politeness and niceness, but it would be ok to be “very rude, ugly, not polite and not sensitive” (Appendix 4, Lee, p. 90, l. 3-6). The discrepancy is often present in the moment of feeling discomfort and at the same time fearing the consequences of impoliteness or rudeness. In my experience in CI it is possible to practice this approach.

## 5.4 Teaching Consent

Teaching consent could also be called teaching negotiation, dialogue, listening, giving permission, mutuality, sharing, for example.

For Alejandra Garavito learning consent means learning about self-respect and that each person has the ability to decide for their own body, to respect their own body. She teaches with words of invitation: “I'm giving you an invitation, and you can always decide how to use that, to change it, to not use it”. (Appendix 4, Garavito, p. 47, l. 34-37)

How to deal when someone says: “I don't want to touch today at all”. [...] And in that I have had several classes, where people say “I'm here, you've said, it's contact improvisation, but I do not wish to receive physical touch today.” And

then the practice for me is to have a pedagogy that includes that. And happily spacious, is not confused by that. (Appendix 4, Will, p. 37, l. 26-30)

#### 5.4.1 The Talk

Consent is often connected to talking and considered as something verbal. Most of the people I interviewed said they talk about consent in the beginning of a class and some said they do not do that. In CI, it is a common practice to have a beginning circle, where the teacher tells something about the class, maybe gives some general information and names are asked. This would be the moment to talk about consent. However, it depends on the teacher if this happens or not. Some of the interviewees did not even mention the consent talk before I asked about it, because it was so obvious for them.

Taja Will talks about consent in the beginning of each of their classes to call attention to it. Will does that because they believe everyone is not the same in their practice or saying yes and no. (Appendix 4, Will, p. 37, l. 21-25) Talking and verbalising is a way to check where the practitioners are in their practice of consent. Magisik Akin uses relational pedagogy and asks the group to tell what they already know about the topic to make it possible for them to bring that in. Consent talk is the first thing they introduce in their classes. (Appendix 4, p. 33, l. 17-20)

Aurora Westfelt mentioned that during some phases of the pandemic when it was possible to teach classes with people in space in Sweden, everyone told in the beginning circle how much of touch they wanted and how close or far they wished to be in a detailed way. (Appendix 4, Westfelt, p. 53, l. 16-19)

Words are powerful in good and bad. I get the feeling that some of the people believe it is still better to name the things than not, while others wish to not talk but rather work with consent and boundaries through movement.

Attraction, enjoyment and sexuality can be part of CI as it is a human activity although following it through always requires consent. One way of approaching sexuality and

attraction in a class situation is to joke about them. Defne Erdur uses joking, flirting and humour to bring up the discussion of boundaries and consent. It could say “Oh, we're not going to bed, we're not falling in love, it's just a flirt". Erdurs' strategy of humour is also to go to the boundary of triggering someone and help them to state that something was disturbing, and then to acknowledge that. For Erdur, it is about failing and being able to repair the failures, to model the failing and accountability. ( Appendix 4, Erdur, p. 64-65, l. 46-9)

Also other people than Erdur talked about naming the possible problems in space. Keith Hennessy mentioned a way that I have not heard before. He had started a CI jam in Berkeley with a talk about consent with saying that when there is about 50 people in the space, at least one person has experienced rape or some other serious boundary violation to make it clear that we all have to stay aware and not to assume consent or anything else eventhough we are in a space for CI. (Appendix 4, Hennessy, p. 21, l. 28-34)

Gesine Daniels also talks about mentioning trouble when she sees it. She refers to assumptions for example about physical contact without asking if it is ok to touch, but people make the assumption just because it is a contact class. She suggests that the teacher can name the assumptions. (Appendix 4, Daniels, p. 79, l. 28-31)

#### 5.4.2 More complexity

Wheel of Consent is a concept and a tool by Betty Martin<sup>54</sup>. It is about reciprocity dealing with different aspects of touching, changing perspectives and bringing more complexity to what is happening in the moment of receiving and giving touch. The parts of it are: Taking, Allowing, Giving (serving), Receiving (Accepting) and they all work on connection to each other.

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<sup>54</sup> See: “The Wheel of Consent – Betty Martin,” accessed July 7, 2021, <https://bettymartin.org/videos/>.

Defne Erdur, Gesine Daniels and Aurora Westfelt said they use the Wheel of Consent in their teaching. Erdur mentions the questions that it uses: “How would you like me to touch you? How would you like you to be touched?” and connects exercises of talking with simple touch, slow motion and leading, following the touch. (Appendix 4, Erdur, p. 66, l. 11-22)

Gesine Daniels enjoys working with making the questions and roles in CI dancing explicit, working with: “doing to, asking to be done to, and being done to or offering myself to be done to, and offering myself to do to these things”. In her opinion this gives a clearer sense and options to what to concentrate on. (Appendix 4, Daniels, p. 78, l. 26-31)

### 5.4.3 Learning to Listen

Listening in CI means, in my words, noticing what happens in my body, in my partner's body and in the surroundings. Listening can be thought of giving time before acting, to be able to respond rather than to react. It is often connected to slowing down as slower speed can give more time to notice things. With more practice it is possible to learn to understand the cues of one's own body and the other person's body better.

Gesine Daniels talks about listening in connection to the Wheel of Consent mentioned in 5.3.3. Especially when one person is doing something to another person, it is very important to listen to the reactions of the receiver's body so the active impulses that are imposed on the other person do not become abusive. The active person has more power in that situation. “I also create settings, and talk about addressing how listening is happening in the touch and how listening is happening before the touch” says Daniels. (Appendix 4, Daniels, p. 79, l. 3-7)

Keith Hennessy starts his classes often by addressing listening and sensitivity to other peoples and own boundaries by saying: “[...] imagine that your work is not to go until someone says no.” (Appendix 4, Hennessy, p. 24, l. 15)

Hennessey continues that In CI and consent we aim to work in recognising when it gets uncomfortable and how to understand that one is reaching the outskirts of no in one's own body or in the body of the partner. (Appendix 4, Hennessey, p. 24, l. 11-15) The aim is to stop before someone has to say no, or leave as it might be difficult because of power relations, personal and collective histories. Hennessey talks about sensitivity in the body, in the social and relational realm and this means listening to the cues and practicing sensitivity on the whole spectrum, not only inside the body. He poses a question: "How do we take our somatic awareness and apply it to the relational and the social?" (Appendix 4, Hennessey, p. 21, l. 41-42)

#### 5.4.4 No and boundaries

A boundary is something you set for yourself. A rule is something you set for someone else.<sup>55</sup>

Since about ten years consent exercises have been circulated in the CI scene<sup>56</sup>, some people doing them, some people deciding not to. Many of these exercises are about verbally or physically saying no. They often work with one person suggesting something and the other person saying yes or no already creating a binary of the one asking and other answering, one being active, the other receptive.

There are also ways to physically say no, like leaving the dance, turning away or suggesting something else, for example to not to be lifted, you can bring your weight away from the other person's body and make yourself heavy. The problem is that these exercises start from the assumptions that people are able to say no, and the teacher's attitude is often "if people are told that they can say no, that they've (the teacher) done their job."(Appendix 4, Hennessey, p. 24, l. 4). Alejandra Garavito contemplates that it's easy for students to follow instructions and this she has noticed when she sees her students in a jam struggling with saying no. (Appendix 4, Garavito, p. 51, l. 1-7) This

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<sup>55</sup> *Autumn Seave*, "Boundaries vs Rules: What's the Difference?," Medium, April 9, 2021, <https://medium.com/polyamory-today/boundaries-vs-rules-whats-the-difference-91be4bb89156>.

<sup>56</sup> Before that, there have been teachers like Keith Hennessey, Gesine Daniels and Martin Keogh among others teaching about consent, but that has been more like an exception rather than the norm.



would mean that in the real moment keeping one's own boundaries is very difficult even though they had been practicing it in class.

Keith Hennessy continues:

Your job is to not provoke the no. How can you tune in your sensitivity so that you are stopping before the border is reached? What if saying no, actually is really not only difficult for some people, but they're afraid of hurting your feelings? So what if your goal is to not force your partner to say no? Then what would you do? (Appendix 4, Hennessy, p. 24, l. 19-22)

This connects back to listening in 5.3.4. before there is no and comes back to respecting the power of touch, understanding how big of an influence it can be for other people and understanding that the ability to say no or enforcing a boundary needs strength, trust and power. Hennessy's thoughts also connect to the following chapter about trauma-informed teaching in 5.4.

Gesine Daniels, Aurora Westfelt and Defne Erdur were all saying that they are critical of the exercises where you pretend a no, where you practice saying no, because it feels fake, boring or dry. Erdur and Westfelt were then in another moment of the interview both saying that it's good to practice the no, to warm-up the ability to open your mouth and verbalise your boundaries. All these three practitioners also teach the Wheel of Consent from Betty Martin that brings more layers in the just yes and no game. (Appendix 4, Daniels, Erdur, Westfelt)

I strongly encourage them to practice no. And it's always a beautiful moment. Always a joking moment that people force and it's so important. [...] I think it's so delicate, to bring this consciously saying no practice in. (Appendix 4, Erdur, p. 66, l. 29-33)

Erdur says that it would use more talking while dancing, keeping the tongue active, using pause, stop, repeat and rewind and these kinds of exercises work better than only the ones where you say yes or no. Also she adds the *maybe* in the game (Appendix 4, Erdur, p. 66, l. 7). I personally have also been practicing with *wait* to have some more time to say yes or no. "And how that maybe sometimes can serve a learning edge and trying to find the yes and sometimes it's a clear no." (Appendix 4, Erdur, p. 66, l. 8)

Magisik Akin brings up that she has got many of the consent exercises from Nonviolent Communication (later NVC) (Appendix 4, Akin, p. 34, l. 23). The practice of NVC is mainly verbal, but can also be translated into movement. The main idea of NVC is that no is a need, it might be a need for individuality, need for space, need for connection to oneself or need for safety for example<sup>57</sup>.

Keith Hennessy has a habit of asking the students to say no to at least one exercise in the workshop he is teaching just for the sake of trying it. This also brings up the power dynamic of how students are so used to doing everything the teacher says. (Appendix 4, Hennessy, p. 20, l. 21-26)

I would teach (CI) so differently now than I ever taught it before. I would just work a lot on the no, I feel like that's the important thing, people starting to understand their no. And to either express it through touch that's safe, like being able to really push into weight and connection and spine and feel your no, and then the no is also the disconnection. It's both it's staying in connection, expressing your no it's using your words, and it's also leaving. (Appendix 4, Lee, p. 93, l. 13-17)

Magisik Akin mentions that in her teaching experience it is the most difficult to verbalise a hard no, and that can be then the thing to practice with the students. (Appendix 4, Akin, p. 34, l. 29-34)

Sometimes, to avoid saying the hard no, dancers lie, and it's generally thought ok to give white lies, like saying you go to the toilet or need to drink water. Erdur adds that you don't need to say anything, you can just leave a dance. (Appendix 4, Erdur, p. 66, l. 44)

Magisik Akin finds it important that everyone in space knows how to get out from situations they don't want to be in.

I've realised that's really important skill to be able to do is how to get my body out of the situation. How can I continue to relate to the things that are constant in the space, which are the floor and gravity, it's constant the whole time, it's there, so that you can trust it, nothing else. ((Appendix 4, Akin, p. 31, l. 1-3)

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<sup>57</sup>Marshall Rosenberg, "An Introduction to Nonviolent Communication (NVC)," 2007, 14.

The tools for getting oneself out of a situation comes through verbal communication but also learning how to end a dance, how to move in and out of physical contact, detaching, coming together, claiming and protecting your space. (Appendix 4, Erdur, Lee, Hennessy, Cloud). Rythea Lee talks about motoring out, pushing physically towards the other and keeping them out of your own space, disconnecting from touch on purpose, using pressure and getting and rejecting invitations. (Appendix 4, Lee, p. 89, l. 40-43)

I work a lot with beginnings and endings in dance like how do we come together? And how do we end? How do we find the end? How does the end find us? [...] There's a lot of tending to the physical and mental emotional sensations. [...] When do I want to end? Or when do I know? When it's (the dance) kind of not working, but I can still be there, you know, or these little exercises that I propose. (Appendix 4, Erdur, p. 67, l. 3-8)

Paul Singh has a special way of teaching touch, I would add it in the movement section, because his style is to do it fast. He says that speed is his trick to not to let there be time for boundary violations. In his opinion slowness is problematic as it might give time to feel more and for the touch to linger in places that are uncomfortable to some dancers. He also stresses doing many exercises, keeping the pace fast and bringing the intention to work, not enjoyment. (Appendix 4, Singh, p. 100, l. 37-39) This I think is a very different way compared to the other people I interviewed, who would rather slow down in order to feel and to know that something feels good or not, than speed up. I can also see Singh's way as an efficient one, because if someone has an intention to linger in touch and enjoy the touch of another person in his class, there won't probably be the moment to do that and this person will most probably leave the class rather than stay. As a strategy this might push the people that might want to cross boundaries of others, to another class but not really teaching how to deal with it, other than speed.

## 5.5 Trauma-informed teaching<sup>58</sup>

The topic of trauma came to be part of my research during the process through Rythea Lee, who presented at the Future of CI -conference on Zoom hosted by Earthdance in 23.-25.4.2021. I had not realised the importance of this topic and as I listened to Lee, it became clear I want to add this point of view to my thesis. I am aware that the topic of trauma is more complex than I can hold in this work, and to be able to fully explain and be thorough, I would need theoretical knowledge from psychology. I still want to mention this as it is part of teaching CI because even though we teachers are not therapists, it is useful to be aware of this topic. In my understanding, touch and movement can trigger as well as heal traumas and I hope that learning about it can help to teach in a more trauma-informed way.

Rythea Lee wishes that trauma education would become a bigger part of teaching of consent. For her that is the missing piece and in her words: "[...] people don't know how transgression is or what it feels like in their own body". She would start looking at it by posing questions like: "How do you know if something that's happening to you truly feels good? Or doesn't feel good? Or you're unsure? And how do you read those signs in your body?" (Appendix 4, Lee, p. 89, l. 26-27)

For her it's especially important for people raised as female as they are often taught to be polite, kind and pleasing. And that in CI the skills to survive the jam situations go beyond pleasing other people. (Appendix 4, Lee, p. 89, l. 28-31)

Lee connects it to looking at the systems rather than the individual survivor.

[...] it's like part of a whole system that makes it possible for people to be abused. So I think it needs to be looked at in a systemic way. And not just like, oh, what does survivors need in our contact community. And in terms of sexual abuse survivors, just like with racism, we often don't look at the systems that create it, we always look at this

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<sup>58</sup> "Trauma-informed teaching starts with an understanding of how trauma can impact learning and behavior. With this approach, educators think about what student behavior may be telling them. And they reflect on their teaching practices to find ways to better support students who may be experiencing trauma." "What Is Trauma-Informed Teaching?," accessed July 20, 2021, <https://www.understood.org/articles/en/what-is-trauma-informed-teaching>

person lived through this thing. And like, that's their story. (Appendix 4, Lee, p. 95, l. 11-14)

The trauma-responses<sup>59</sup> Rythea Lee mentions especially in the interview are fawning and dissociation. Fawning means to please, for example to smile and try to keep the threat happy. Dissociation, according to Lee, is that one disconnects from their body and sensations. She continues that people do it all the time and it is not needed to be a serious trauma-survivor to do it. The key would be to start exploring how the disconnect happens and how to stay in the body, how breathing, relaxation and listening can help. (See: Appendix 4, Lee, p. 89-91)

One part that Lee is working herself is anger, aggression, rage and through that, boundaries. She connects anger to the ability to say no. (Appendix 4, Lee, p. 90, l. 19-22) My personal experience and knowledge is that aggression comes when boundaries are being crossed and if one is not connected to these emotions, keeping one's own boundaries can be very difficult.

[...] how you have to be able to express a backlog of anger in order to eventually just be able to say "no thank you" to something. If you've been conditioned to stuff and stuff your no, then it's very hard to even have a starting place. If you haven't exploded and let it all move. (Appendix 4, Lee, p. 94, l. 10-12)

Lee adds that if they would now teach CI, they would work a lot with no, to start understanding it and expressing it in different ways. That would be to stay in connection through pushing into weight, motoring out, feeling the connection to the spine and earth, express it verbally and also just leave and disconnect. (Appendix 4, Lee, p. 94, l. 13-17)

## 5.6 Dialogue, reflection, checking in

Most of the people I interviewed mentioned they encourage students to talk if something is unpleasant. This could be happening before the exercise, mentioning that you don't

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<sup>59</sup> See: "Trauma and the Fawning Response," accessed July 20, 2021, <https://thedawnrehab.com/blog/trauma-and-the-fawning-response/>.

wish to be touched in a certain place, during the exercise or after. During exercise it can be the most difficult to talk, as the CI practice is not generally encouraging talking and some might feel it interrupts the experienced flow of the movement.

Before any touch there I always say, Please, at any moment, our tongue is our body part of our body, using our body, you can always say if something is not working. And I say that at the beginning of any exercise, if you're doing some little pause, exercise moment, please tell your partner where you don't want to be touched. And it's also like a Whoa, do I really know that? (Appendix 4, Erdur, p. 65, l. 16-19)

Katja Mustonen mentions reflection and dialogue as an important part especially when she knows the exercise at hand is challenging and could trigger discomfort or insecurity. In those situations she sometimes asks students to talk in between before changing roles and facilitates the situation with clear roles and a question to talk about. (Appendix 4, Mustonen, p. 12, l. 1-3)

I also try to sense space and use talking not as the only way but as one way to communicate and to give that space for communication. Then of course every now and then either in between the class or and together with everyone, there can be also common reflections where the information of others also feeds everyone's experience. (Appendix 4, Mustonen, p. 12, 4-7)

Some tools that I could gather from the interviews would be using techniques from Nonviolent Communication. This connects to an important aspect of naming the worries one is having. It could be from all the sides, meaning that if I am feeling that the other person might think I am too fast, I could ask them if that is their experience. Or like Gesine Daniels puts it:

Do you want to stay in contact, but you don't want to be overwhelmed, you want to dance with that person, but you are not sure if you're maybe too much. What else could you do, how can you find out? [...] I encourage people to really say to speak in the dance, and ask. [...] If you have the slightest doubt that what you do is okay, rest, check where you are, and ask: "I have the idea that I might be too heavy or I'm not sure if that is too intimate?". Is that so, to really name, what is your worry, and then you learn. It's such a gift to say, to talk about all the stories that are going on in your mind, and also about the other. "I have the impression that you feel this is completely okay. And I want

to tell you, it's not. [...] I want something different, or I need you to..". (Appendix 4, Daniels, p. 79, l. 39-47)

Checking in comes up in many interviews and it means to ask from the partner to pause and check what is happening and this would be a moment to name the worries, tell how you are doing and ask how the other person is. "Like to actually use your words, even though you've already established a deep dance together. But you still need to figure out when to start using your words, if you can't communicate it through your body." (Appendix 4, Lee, p. 89, l. 7-12)

## 5.7 Consent Improvisation

Defne Erdur mentioned a name for a workshop it was going to teach at the Impulstanz 2020 with the name Consent Improvisation and there are other people as well playing with these words. For me this could show the direction towards more play and humanness in the work with consent, touch and improvisation.

In the teaching practice of Anya Cloud she takes humanness as part of the work. This means to be aware and take into consideration the complexities of the experience of a human being in connection with other humans. And by this she doesn't mean stories and narratives. (Appendix 4, Cloud, p. 4, l. 16-19)

For Keith Hennessy improvisation means that skills of somatic tuning that is learned in CI and somatic practices is applied for the relational and social, the human. This could change the goal of seeking pleasure to starting to see the potential of any constellation at any moment. "And that's only gonna happen through the improvisation not through the choreographed scripting." ( Appendix 4, Hennessy, p. 25, l. 22-23)

Maybe I'm that way a little bit old fashioned that I feel that the whole gift of contact is the [...] moment of touch and that the touch can be instantly improvised. [...] And once we start to protect that, or create too many rules around that moment, we lose something of what this form is, and what where the form is rooted in. So maybe my aim is to keep

bringing the focus on the improvisation part of the CI dancing. (Appendix 4, Mustonen, p. 11, l. 8-9)

## 5.8 Summary

It's kind of cliché, but the whole issue of how to say yes and no in your body. And I think the power structure sets you up for being able to do that, depending on where you're in and where you're at in the power structure. (Appendix 4, Lee, p. 92, l. 38-40)

In the comment Rythea Lee makes it is very clear that power relations “Where you are at in the power structure” (Appendix 4, Lee, p. 92, l. 38-40) affects the ability to say yes or no, to protect boundaries and to make decisions. This is evident in how comfortable one is feeling in one's body, whether one is relaxed and able to sense and express one's own wishes, in comparison to how much energy is being spent on protecting oneself.

For me it became clear that it is important to learn to say no, but it is as important to not wait for the no or to push until the no. Sometimes it is crucial to stop before the other person needs to say no.

While contemplating reasons for the resistance to talk about consent and boundaries, I am realising that there is probably fear of being judged to be the perpetrator in the black-and-white way. At the same time, there are not many examples of how processes of accountability can go well or how the connection is restored and becomes better. Sharing vulnerabilities can manifest a more empathetic connection, but lack of imagination and the experience that this can improve the dance, connection and freedom, is missing.

So how about listening to enthusiastic yes instead? In Nonviolent Communication there is the idea of the enthusiastic yes, and accepting only favors from someone who does it with excitement and this would be something I would like to bring to the conversation. To listen to this in others and in one's own body. Looking at the joy of things and not the



endurance of being able to deal with something as long as possible. Looking for comfort, not trying to stay in the pain or discomfort, even though those can be sometimes hard to distinguish from the challenge of learning something new. Especially when there is some ambition and nervousness involved.

Where is the space for the fun, the risk, the joy of movement and dancing together? This is what some people are afraid of losing when talking about consent and boundaries takes more space. I believe that talking about boundaries, who is able to give consent and why not, how power relations affect consent, affect someone to be able to feel themselves and make decisions can bring more trust, more joy, more risk and more experimentation to the dance. This means accountability, that's when something happens, it can be dealt with and taken responsibility of. There is support and mutuality, collaboration. This is my utopian dream. Have the joy, risk and the response-ability in the same, have crazy dances and when there is hurt, there is also the support to deal with it together. This can get difficult in situations when there are a lot of people, like at festivals where there could be hundreds of dancers. Then it can be really challenging to keep on the accountability and support.

What also came up in the chapter is that there is a discrepancy in the scene around consent. It is seen sometimes as the responsibility of the victimized individual, sometimes as responsibility of the community, sometimes as the responsibility of the person who violates the boundary, to take care of it. In my opinion and knowledge the responsibility is to be shared in a more collective way than it is now. I see it more like a collection of responsibilities, as the sum of all involved taking a part of the responsibility and sharing it. There are many things affecting the ability to make choices that I went through in the chapters before.

# 6 Conclusions

## 6.1 Power and response-ability

The understanding that grew during this research process is that the ability and space to be in one's center, be grounded and through that to make body based decisions creates more freedom, less fear and more experienced agency and power. In this research I concentrated on the power relations in the teaching situation that can affect the ability to feel one's body though there are many other hindrances that can disrupt the groundedness.

I hope that the teachers learn about trauma responses in the body and the effects to the process of consenting. In my opinion the responsibility, the opportunity for CI teachers is to create safer spaces for learning and practicing boundaries. This is already happening, sometimes it is said aloud and sometimes it is between the lines. The power of a teacher is also in choosing what they teach, how they teach and that they can use their position to bring more agency, more power and more awareness to the dynamics existing in the space.

I know from my own experience that it can be difficult to talk about privileges when you have not done the work yourself much with it. Also there might be guilt, shame, fear and other feelings connected to the topic. My personal fear is to make mistakes when I am in a privileged position and there is an idea that I should know more. I would wish more transparency from the teachers and organisers of their own mistakes and actions and their own experiences of boundary violations. This comes with the hope of honesty in giving feedback to each other with empathy and connection rather than ego and fear.

Karen Barad's concept of intra-action that I discussed in chapter 2, gives a beautiful tool for thinking about the unbalanced power relations. In my thinking, it helps to understand that abuse happens in both ways, inside both of the bodies, it is not only about the so-called victim but it affects the perpetrator as well. It is possible that they do not understand what is happening and it affects them either way. This play of thought works in the other direction as well, in the moments of healing it goes both ways, the moment of connection happens in the both, or all, parties involved.

Interesting was to notice that some people interviewed did not see them as doing the work with consent, but then in their interview it shows that they work with dialogue, mutuality, and listening to oneself and the other. I think this is the difference between teachers who are activists and use tools and language from social justice movements in their teaching compared to others not identifying as activists.

In my experience Contact Improvisation can be a lot of fun, risky, joyful, sweaty and fast but also sensual, sexual, slow as well as difficult and uncomfortable. It can be life-changing and impactful, or boring. How do we as teachers create the space for all that while taking care of safety, talk about consent, boundaries and listening? I have seen some practitioners are afraid of losing the experience of freedom and creativity when there is more transparency of the cultural codes, power relations and the relational. In my understanding they are afraid of losing the improvisational part of CI. I believe that it's the opposite: that talking about boundaries and the effect of power relations on the ability to consent and make decisions can bring more trust, more joy, more risk and more experimentation to the dance because it helps everyone to feel safer in space. The fear of losing improvisation comes usually from people who are experiencing comfort through their privileges and they are afraid of losing their position.

This means accountability. And when something happens, it is dealt with. The how accountability is lived is still partly a question for me and I want to research and experience it further. It does mean support and mutuality, collaboration, and help. This is my utopian dream, to have joy, risk and the response-ability all in the same, have crazy

dances and when there is hurt, there is also the support to deal with it together. This can get difficult in situations when there are a lot of people, like at festivals where there could be hundreds of dancers. It can be really challenging to keep on the accountability and support, but it is possible. This came up in some of the interviews, all the ways communities are supporting processes of accountability and there are tools available especially from the work of social justice.

Through the understanding of response-ability, accountability, the risk that touch implies and the potential of change that each moment of touch can have could help to understand the effect and power of touch without having to set rules.

## 6.2 Consent as a Process

Consent could be thought of as a process of improvisation, constant negotiation, discussion, asking and answering, changing, making choices, deciding, suggesting, inviting, having space to answer to those questions, to change your mind, to go away and to come back. To involve emotions, to involve thoughts, to involve culture, codes, history, not to push those things away. The thoughts can be disturbing, but they can also add to the pleasure of wit, intelligence, jokes, humour and fun.

The trauma trigger can push you away from the moment of experiencing the moment. What inhibits you from being in this moment, feeling your body, feeling the body of another?

The understanding of the body concept of mutuality, permeability, porousness, that everything is shared all the time. The air is moving through all of our bodies, the hormones are floating, through us, our bodies are making decisions based on those smells and hormones. That is also present in space. We are together, we are not separate. Everything affects each other, there is no separation, when we are in space together.

Imagine a gym hall with 350 dancers, there are solos, there are duets, trios, quartets, there is slowness, speed, people dancing on the floor, in the air, there is smell of sweat, lots of sound, maybe a musician playing, there are many colors, soft clothes, laughter. This is a jam. All of the 350 people are connected. Imagine all the connections they have, and how that web spreads outside of the gym hall, to their families, friends, homes, countries, circles of people. Imagine their histories, their traumas, their love relationships, friendships, enemies, their mothers and fathers, histories of those, problems, fights, jokes, tears, their grandmothers, their national histories, social injustices and justices, weddings, parties, music, thoughts, poems ... Connections between all that, with all the people they are involved with, their histories, their stories, hormones and heart beats. In my opinion the problems come with the black and white -thinking when not seeing every human as a complex being, but going to binaries of victim and perpetrator, abuser and abused and the cancelling culture.

The concept of process philosophy is connected to risk and impact and that touch makes on you and others. Process is always unknown.

### 6.3 Touch and Unknowability

The unknown is an important part of CI and I am looking for more queer, chaotic, wild, jungle-like and anarchic space for unknown things to happen. I see it as a core of CI practice and I am interested in creating those spaces while keeping it safe enough for as many people as it is possible.

The unknown does not need to mean blind or careless, it can mean a space that is aware and takes care. It means response-ability with whatever comes out.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought talk about choosing touch more on the surface and I enjoy that. I am wondering how it is possible to keep the improvisation also present with the choosing, that it would be possible to make up your mind of what is good for oneself at each moment.

Magisik Akin was talking about the third as the relation between two dancers, the third is the contact, the connection that has its own mind and the individuals can not decide where it goes.

Words change our reality through changing the experience and if we are using words that create more response-ability and intra-action, then maybe our reality can start changing towards more complexity..

During this thesis some fear connected to the CI community came up. I am afraid that part of the community might not like what I research and what my conclusions are. I believe we all are multidimensional and complex beings with many sides, shadows, good parts and bad parts, reactions and traumas. I see that it is easier to go to the binary systems and create more boundaries between people, but I wish to understand what is going on and go towards connection and acceptance. I see this in the way that as I am coming into contact with the community with my text, I do not know how they will respond to it. I am curious and hopeful and I acknowledge that I might end up having more conversations after more people read my research.

The next step for me is to learn more about trauma-informed teaching and how to integrate it into teaching dance. Also I am excited to invite space for talking about my own experiences on boundary violations on both sides, to bring more transparency in that. I hope to do this work in the future.

I want to end this work for now with a quote from Taja Will:

How to deal when someone says [...] "I'm here, you've said, it's contact improvisation, but I do not wish to receive physical touch today." And then the practice for me is to have a pedagogy that includes that. And happily spaciously, is not confused by that. (Appendix 4, Will, p. 37, l. 25-30)

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