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Talking Politics of Contact Improvisation with Steve Paxton

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Introduction

In the autumn of 2015, on the back of the publication of my monograph *Akram Khan: Dancing New Interculturalism*, I was settling into my Brunel University London sponsored sabbatical to kickstart my postdoctoral research project, then titled “Historicizing and Mapping British Physical Theatre.” At that stage this new field of study, methodology and tone of enquiry felt significantly different from the decolonial spirit of my book, which examines the works of the British-Bangladeshi dance artist Akram Khan at the intersections of postcoloniality, race, gender, sexuality, mobility, interculturalism and globalization, arguing for his choreographic choices as discerning political acts that decenter the whiteness of contemporary western dance, from his position within this center. With this new project I was keen instead to investigate the development of “British physical theatre”¹ as an interdisciplinary genre that emerged interstitially between and through its “double legacy in both avant-garde theatre and dance” (Sánchez-Colberg 2007, 21), with a particular emphasis on what the import of the choreographic vocabulary of partnering would have brought to these experiments. Very conscious that the now ubiquitous aesthetic of partnering in contemporary Euro-American theater dance derived its roots from the somatic explorations of contact

improvisation, I was intrigued to examine how the genre of British physical theatre would have engaged with choreographic touch from its somatic beginnings in contact improvisation to its politicized and aestheticized manifestation in partnering. I was also conscious, of course, of the role that Steve Paxton, the artist whose name has become synonymous with contact improvisation's inception and development in

1970s United States of America (USA), had to play in teaching contact improvisation on the dance program at Dartington College of the Arts in the United Kingdom (UK) in the 1970s and 1980s.² Driven by a need to examine the potential relationship between Dartington's 1970s movement experiments with Paxton and contact improvisation, and the emergence of partnering as a key aesthetic within British contemporary dance, specifically its manifestation in physical theatre, I wanted to interview Paxton himself. Needless to say, I was of course fully aware of the difficulty in making such an important research opportunity materialize. However, within months, the remarkable generosity of our dance studies network, in this instance embodied by Professors Susan Foster and Ann Cooper Albright, and the dance artist Lisa Nelson, led me to the inbox of Steve Paxton himself in November 2015. Paxton was instantly responsive to my email communications, and deeply invested and committed to sharing his experiences and insights with me. We arranged our Skype interview for early 2016, agreeing that this would give me enough time to research existing interviews with Paxton, in print and on video, to ensure that I could delineate my own questions for him in productive ways. The more I researched, the more a feature of the extensive archive of interviews with Paxton revealed itself: the predominant absence of bodies and perspectives of color from the early days of

contact improvisation's experiments. This absence, in turn, became more and more present in my thinking.

It is not a surprise then that the decolonial verve of my first book, that I naively thought I had left behind, started to shape my new project in significant ways. As a result, the focus of the project started to shift from historicizing and mapping of British physical theatre, to examining the role of contact improvisation and partnering within British contemporary dance, enabling the latter to turn from landscapes of spectacles to vehicles of socio-political commentaries on human interactions. Following on, I began to notice that while such politicizations commented on gender and sexuality in efficacious ways, dance-works and scholarly insights on them, remained predominantly white in these articulations. Very few black and brown bodies informed these representations and, when they did, they still operated within the parameters and experiences of whiteness. I became very conscious of the politics of partnering and deployment of choreographic touch, and the need to theorize them through intercultural and racialized discourses started to shape my thinking significantly. Wanting to make my developing research lenses and investments clear to Paxton, I sent him my questions in advance of our interview, along with this contextualizing paragraph:

I am currently in the early stages of my second book project with a working title *Choreographing Touch: Politicising Contact at the Intersections of Race, Nation, Gender and Sexuality*. The book examines the use of touch / contact (indeed what distinguishes these) between bodies, and bodies and scenography within global experiments in contemporary dance. It examines touch as a choreographic tool and argues that is the use of touch that has the potential to shift dance from being a visual spectacle to a language of political

intervention. I am keen to analyze how choreographers use touch as a politicizing strategy in their works. A part of the book will historicize the use of touch and physical contact in contemporary dance through looking at the role of contact improvisation, tracing its somatic roots into a more stylized choreographic vocabulary within the contemporary dance landscape. It is for reevaluating contact improvisation's starting points in relation to the larger context of touch that I feel my interview with you is vital. (Mitra 2016 February, 10).

And then, perhaps realizing that this still did not make my own positionality to the study of contact improvisation and partnering clear enough, I emailed Paxton the abstract of a talk I was due to deliver at Brunel, scheduled to be held *after* my interview with him:

This presentation offers a reflexive glimpse into my complex relationship with performing and reading choreographies of touch, framed through my own middleclass South Asian upbringing and its inherent body politics vis-à-vis sexuality, gender and class. Trained in the north Indian classical solo dance form of kathak in Calcutta, and then moving onto encounter the somatic practice and choreographic vocabulary of contact improvisation in United Kingdom, this paper starts by examining the moments of rupture that defined my own disorientating, terrifying yet liberating experiences of making physical contact with other dancing bodies. I have subsequently come to note that these initial phenomenological responses I had to touch and being touched as a performer, has gone on to intrinsically shape the way I read other

choreographies of touch. In this paper I examine three different choreographies of touch in Chandralekha's *Sharira* (2001), Vincent Dance Theatre's *Broken Chords* (2005) and Akram Khan Company's *Until the Lions* (2016) through my own embodied and schismatic relationship to touch, while recognizing its prominent place within the contemporary dance landscape. (Mitra 2016 February, 16)

I was hopeful that between these two expositions, my position vis-à-vis contact improvisation and partnering, and thus my interest in interviewing Paxton, would be laid bare.

Paxton and I met virtually via Skype on the first of March 2016. It was an exhilarating and mutually enriching conversation where we both learnt from each other's perspectives and experiences with contact improvisation. I initially felt I would keep hold of the interview material to inform my second book. However, over the last two years, and with Paxton's agreement, I have decided that there is in fact great value in sharing our conversation as a published piece that stands alone. This is because, over the years where important physiological insights have been offered on contact improvisation in relation to body reflexes, phenomenology and somatics, or even sociological insights into contact improvisation's relationship to society, democracy and gender,³ my conversation with Paxton reveals generous and vital reflections from him on contact improvisation's relationship to choreographic vocabulary of partnering, its inherent whiteness and its need to consider intercultural politics and discourses on race as the form evolves. What follows here is a transcript of our exchange, set against the backdrop of a cold sunny winter's day in Paxton's home in Vermont, US and mine in Buckinghamshire, UK.

Interview

RM: Thank you so much Steve for making time for this Skype interview. I know I am a complete stranger and have contacted you out of the blue with a request for this interview, so I really appreciate your generosity.

SP: You know what? If academics didn't achieve contact with the subjects of their study, it would be impossible for them to do what they do. And it is important and fun for me to talk about contact improvisation through the lens of your questions, which I like very much. So, I am sure we are going to have an interesting conversation.

RM: Oh, I am so glad to hear it. I wanted to make sure that my questions provided you with enough context and understanding of where I am coming, from vis-à-vis my own history with contact. And how revisiting and intellectualizing my own encounters with the form, is leading me to a very different space of investigation.

SP: Yes, I see that, and I see also where you are coming from and how much of a culture shock it must have been for you to experience contact in the studio for the first time. And I think it sort of *is* a culture shock. Some of your questions allude to the politicization of contact... I don't know if that is the most direct way to view and understand the form. Although I can see how it has many ramifications, it seems to me like its impact has more sociological dimensions, which is perhaps a slight side-skip from politics. But much less overt. So that is why I think it comes as a shock, because touch is regulated by cultures, and I guess that is an important consideration in the discussion, as cultures provide guidelines for interpersonal behavior. Do you know Daniel N. Stern's work?

RM: I don't....

SP: He's a psychologist and a psychiatrist who has held posts at Cornell University in the United States and also at the University of Geneva in Switzerland, where all his records are now kept. I am dying to get hold of some of his work because, when I first started working on contact improvisation, I came across his work on intercommunication between mothers and babies. He was filming the physical interactions between infants and their mothers. He found that if he observed their interactions under high speed filming, then he was able to pick up their physical interactions much faster than our naked eyes can register; which is an important factor, that our eyes have limits of perception. When he viewed the footage through extreme slow-motion playback, he found that they, mother and the baby, were never not dancing ... they were always dancing together in a similar way to contact. The twist in the baby's body responded to the inclination in the head and neck of the mother, the communication between their faces – it was a constant stream of connection. Which makes sense, because essentially all of this was already happening before the baby was born, because they were totally integrated movement-wise. But the most fascinating thing is of course that this connection has to be broken for the child to achieve independence. And there we go, the Pandora's Box is opened, and the process of acculturation starts for the child.

RM: This is a really interesting way into our discussion, because what I value in what you have just shared is the idea that contact between a mother and an infant is a basic human condition the world over, even if the range and nature of that contact varies from culture to culture, before the process of acculturation occurs. This ties in helpfully into the research I have done on your work so far, which as I understand started out as a somatic exploration into the communication between bodies that occurred through sharing physical contact at different points.

SP: Yes, that's right. If you feel like you are being supported say under your rib, you can then use that as a fulcrum to test out the possibilities of movement that would not be possible if that point of contact or touch was removed. So suddenly your whole body-surface becomes a possible connection to the earth. So, the potential is raised from working with body parts horizontally on the floor, to a vertical plane. Your partner is connected to the floor, you are connected to the floor and you are mutually supporting and using the supports to discover and provide new movement possibilities.

RM: Can you identify the moment when these early explorations suddenly felt like they were more than just experiments, and that something new was starting to emerge, perhaps as a choreographic vocabulary?

SP: I was performing with Grand Union, a group of choreographers in New York in the early seventies, and we used to improvise. That was part of the rules. That's what we were about. So, we found over the course of about six years, an amazing number of forms and ways to interact and one of them was 'touch duets'. Which struck me as being a situation in which we didn't have to use our eyes to maintain connection and continuity between each other. I felt liberated by this. And then I began to examine dance performances, which as a dance student I would experience as a physical event. But then as a performer I had to reconsider its transformation into a visual event with the experience of empathy for the audience etc. The effect of empathy, as we have all felt it in a great dance performance, relies on the visual and impacts your body-chemistry. So, I became interested in exploring through contact, how empathy can be generated beyond the visual and through touch. So how empathy was experienced through a performance where what the mind had to focus on was touch rather than vision.

RM: So, with such a clear investigative spirit at the heart of your work with contact, how would you summarize the key stages in your journey with and through contact as a form?

SP: It began with noticing a touch/follow event in Grand Union, then went on to exploring this phenomenon with seventeen students and dancers and showing it in NYC about a year later. It was then followed up by refining and practicing and accepting invitations to show and teach it, continuing this for quite a while across the USA and Europe. Then deciding that it was becoming very popular and threatened to occupy all of my time. And deciding that if, as I proposed it was a gateway between movement disciplines, I would have to find a way to fulfill that proposal myself. And so, I derived *Material for the Spine* in 1986, a study of contact improvisation movement that was published as a DVD-rom in 2008. And I have been studying this material for the spine until the present time.

RM: So, would it be fair to say then that what started off as a movement experiment transformed into a concrete area of movement research, in relation to the physiology of the body?

SP: Yes

RM: In this shift that has occurred in your own relationship to the study of contact, do you think you have discovered anything new about the human body's potential in movement, that you were perhaps starting to scratch the surface of at the start, but are much more aware of and knowledgeable about now?

SP: Yes, certainly. The role of reflexes in the body and the inhibitions with which we regulate ourselves. So, for instance, where we look is very much determined by what we are thinking about and where we want to go. So, the eyes kind of have a leadership role in the body's posture and direction. Eyes are so handy...

RM: They are. But are you also saying that they can equally inhibit movement choices?

SP: The potential that eyes offer is that in contact improvisation they are not leading. So, they are riding in the head. And the world then seems at times to whirl around you and the eyes are a very important stabilizing force. Stabilization is the kind of inhibition I meant. So, it prevents you from flailing around, enables you to sense where the horizon is, how the floor looks, whether it's level or cluttered. All these things affect how you move and are so vital for your survival. But in contact improvisation, you are focused on another sense, and discovering a new way of using that sense, such that both you and your partner are affecting and responding to situations, in which the information available through the eyes has to be processed in a different way. I suggested students use peripheral vision while dancing.

RM: I find this discussion really interesting with regards to the role of the visual in the form. Have you ever worked with visually impaired performers? And if so, what has been your observation on their relationship to working with contact?

SP: I helped form an organization, which still exists, called Touchdown Dance. It was an organization that brought together visually impaired and sighted people to work together. The group got a lot out of the work and learnt much from each other's experiences. We carried on the work in Dartington in the UK also. It is now run by Katie Dymoke and she may be someone to contact for more on this particular question.

RM: Okay, thank you. Moving on with our original line of questions, although I think you have already started to address this: how would you comment on the role of touch within contact improvisation?

SP: This is potentially a long answer, rather it could be a long answer, but I am going

to try to make it a short and succinct one. Touch can communicate between both people in both directions. Much as if you touch one finger to another, both fingers are touching and are being touched. Note that your internal focus has to shift to achieve this effect. It is difficult to feel and focus on both fingers at once. And I think that's the interesting thing that contact and its rule of touch challenges. The brain is usually so influenced by vision that it is able to mostly focus on one thing at a time. In other words, it turns sensing into a series of perceptual events. So, the rule of touch challenges this, because in this your brain isn't able to select what part of touch you are going to focus on. Very often, for instance, you have to very quickly understand that while you are being supported under your ribs, at the same time, your leg is being swept out from underneath you, and that as a result you might want to grasp your partner or prepare for a fall. Unpredictable events claim your attention. And this is where the body's reflex comes in.

RM: Would you distinguish between the way the brain works and the way the body works in contact, or would you say they are working as one?

SP: I would say that they are working as one. I don't see the brain as functioning separately to the body and by that I don't mean that the body is somehow subservient to the brain in any way. The mind is sensate, the brain has no senses. So, it's all coming from the body.

RM: That's what I thought, it's very helpful to hear you clarify the relationship in this way. So, when and in whose works did you first start noticing the use of contact as a choreographic vocabulary?

SP: Well, there was one specific instance. It was a dance work performed by Douglas Dunn and David Woodbury in the 1970s.

RM: Oh I see, so that was quite early on then...

SP: Yes, David Woodbury was one of original seventeen dancers with whom we set up our contact group. Doug was in Grand Union and one of the dancers with whom I first noticed the contact improvisation effect. So yes, they were early on. And they performed what appeared to be a normal contact improvisation together. And then they switched roles and performed it again. And so, it became clear that it was choreographed from the onset but appeared completed unchoreographed and improvisational at the start.

RM: So, they switched roles and performed it again, exactly the same as the first time but in switched roles?

SP: Yes, that's right.

RM: Wow. What did that do to you in terms of your own perception of contact?

SP: (laughs) I felt tricked! It was quite a comment that they could achieve the 'look'.... it was quite a good contact improvisation as I remember it, very full bodied and reckless and they seemed fully intent on improvising it. And then I found out that it wasn't improvised through its repetition. I felt it was quite a profound statement that they had made about the whole situation.

RM: Did this incident change your relationship to your own practice, having witnessed and experienced this?

SP: Not really... I was never drawn to that. I could see how contact improvisation uncovered things, such as best practices in lifting and so forth, that would be useful to choreography. I recognized contact was a tool that could be used in many ways for dance. But I was interested in other things. I was not interested in choreography. Instead I was very interested in improvisation. Especially in this exploration of reflexes. So, I started doing research and was completely backfooted by what brain research is now saying in terms of the human body's capability and determination to

move and how we fulfil a movement desire or need. Because they are saying that before you do something, as much as a full second ahead of time, you are in your brain preparing to do it. A full second is an enormous amount of time, considering usually we are aware of things in terms of milliseconds. So, we operate on far more complex levels in terms of initiating and carrying out movement. Anyway, that's the kind of thing I was interested in, not in setting movement.

RM: So, you recognized the potential for contact to become a choreographic tool, but that wasn't your own area of interest with your work in and through the form...

SP: That's right.

RM: What for you changes in contact as it shifts from being a language of experimentation around physiological research, to becoming a choreographic vocabulary?

SP: Okay, so it becomes contact choreography.

RM: So, the improvisation component goes out of the window...?

SP: Well yes, I mean it's part of the name. And so, when improvisation is lost from the equation, it creates a profound shift. And then the movement conversation becomes more a ritual in which both people have roles to play. Or a practice, or a game. Game is of course a funny territory because of course in a game, players are able to improvise within a strict framework, but they rehearse in a strictly ritualized way.

RM: Do you think there is a difference between how touch or contact is choreographed in say ballet and how touch operates as a somatic tool in contact improvisation?

SP: I would have to say yes there is, but it is still touch. So, all the physical parameters remain the same, but I think in touch in ballet, especially when you are first learning lifting, is more mechanical. A somatic approach as explored in contact

provides a deeper understanding of best practices of such lifting techniques. So even if the ballet dancers are not taught somatic practices, they still have to somehow achieve that in order to make the lift look at all comfortable and safe. I've seen ballet lifts that are incredibly elaborate and very high, almost like circus acts, and those people carrying out these lifts have to have the same information. It's there in their bodies, so they feel it and use it. But it needs to be drawn out for them to benefit from in sustained ways.

RM: It seems as though contact enables us to understand our bodies better in physiological terms. I am interested in what it can teach us about our bodies sociologically. So much has been written about how contact became a democratizing movement practice in 1970s USA. Can you comment on its ability to create dialogue between and across people from diverse races, cultures, genders, sexualities, disabled people? Are some bodies/people more comfortable in the form than others? Have you encountered anything in your experience that sheds light on these issues?

SP: Yes, I have. This is a complex question. The groups of people that you list in your question, people of diverse races, cultures, genders, sexualities, disabled people, I would say that contact dialogue is possibly easier across and between some of these groups more than others. There has been not a lot of success, for instance in America, with black or brown people engaging with contact improvisation. It is a predominantly white movement practice. Cross gender practice is however more prevalent within the form's history and contemporary practice with many women practitioners working with the form. I am of course not privy to people's sexualities, but I assume there are many present within a contact jam session. With regards to disabled people, Dance Ability, an organization in Oregon led by Alito Alessi, has used contact to provide movement exploration opportunities between disabled and

able-bodied people. The organization leads this work across the world and provides performance opportunities out of these explorations as an integrated company. Alessi champions the sharing of contact between disabled and able-bodied performers, as a basis of important and enriching social dialogue, which otherwise is often difficult to establish.

RM: You mention that contact has been less successful in integrating black and brown people into its practice, and that it does remain a predominantly white movement practice. Would you have an answer as to why this is the case?

SP: I've been thinking about this question for a very long time and yet I am not sure that I do have an answer. There have been a few of course. As the recent Black Lives Matter movement signals to us, what we once considered was institutionalized racism as practiced by the police is in fact systemic in our society, our culture. So, it might well be that rubbing skins with your oppressors is not an appealing prospect within contact. It seems to be a bit of a canary in a coal mine situation this. It warns us that something might be up, and has been, for the whole time that contact has been around.

RM: Obviously my personal interest in these questions around the practice of contact and its relationship to racially diverse bodies is embedded in my first encounter with the form at university in the UK, having arrived from India as a classically trained dancer. It was profound as both a terrifying and an exhilarating experience and one that has stayed with me since. Over the years I have come to trace a pattern of this experience amongst other dancers of color, who express a similar relationship of simultaneous discomfort and intrigue with regards to contact. My instinct tells me this has something to do with the roots of the practice being embedded in a whiteness which us bodies of color have to negotiate in our training. Would I be right then to assume that in your experience, the practice has been predominantly white?

SP: Yes, I think so, within my own field of experience at least.

RM: Do you think then that the touch-driven nature of contact has the potential to make it an exclusionary practice for some people because of the ways in which touch is regulated in different cultural contexts. And is it possible to counter this?

SP: Yes, possibly so. And is it possible to counter such experiences? Well I am not sure that one can voluntarily control how cultures regulate us and systems create our realities. The complex relationships between racially and culturally diverse people are big tides that are difficult to negotiate in society. And maybe contact as a deemed democratic practice idea has not been equipped to deal with its complexities.

RM: And yet, this is what I am grappling with in my own understanding and research, that while a jamming session remains predominantly white, in a multiracial dance company, people of color are engaging in partnering work with each other and their white colleagues. So, there is clearly an ideological shift that is experienced by these bodies between engaging with contact as a somatic expression and partnering as a choreographic vocabulary.

SP: Yes, and perhaps that is the power of the creative arts which can temporarily override, or shift focus to another realm, where things become possible that aren't otherwise.

RM: Do you think touch within choreography can be used as a political tool?

SP: What specific kind of choreography are you talking about?

RM: I am thinking particularly of the works of choreographers like say Lloyd Newson and Wim Vandekaybus who use touch not as mechanical and clinical means to get people from A to B, but to use it as a way to provide commentaries on human relationships and social interactions.

SP: And what do you mean by political?

RM: I suppose in the context of choreographic touch as political I mean, can it become a tool for social commentary.

SP: Yes, absolutely. I do think that at the very beginning of contact in its earliest years, what was considered extraordinary about it, was that women supported men. And in all dance prior to that that I had experienced, ballet, modern dance, folk etc. – there was always this relationship of men supporting women, and women being in need of support by men. So yes, if that's not political, I am not sure what is. So yes, it is a political tool within choreography.

RM: That's a really clear and helpful example you provide of how touch within choreography and contact challenged and destabilized social gender norms. Can you think of other examples where touch has challenged other social norms?

SP: Well there are several points of view on this possibly. If you are dancing a contact duet, your physical self is trusting your partner for support and vice versa. And this happens in terms of milliseconds. The smallest and the most destabilizing events are carried out with great sensitivity and is relatively accident-free. I don't know why that's possible, except that touch is much closer to our instinctual reflex speed. And in normal life the role of the visual layer of information is significant in negotiating relationships between people. Vision introduces a whole layer of information that needs to be processed, and often introduces suspicion into the mix. In contact this level of suspicion would be a barrier to the task at hand, slowing down reflexes and responses of the duet.

RM: At different stages of our conversation, we have both used the terms touch and contact interchangeably. Do you think that they are the same? Are they interconnected? What are your thoughts on the relationship between the two?

SP: Touch is a particular kind of contact and form of physiological communication

between bodies that is integral to the movement form that we have been talking about. That is perhaps why they appear to be so interchangeable. And the contact part of that has something to do with being aware that you are touching someone, so the kind of touching that happens on crowded public transport which makes you withdraw from noticing the intimacy of the situation, is not the kind of contact we are talking about. Instead we are talking about contact as a fully engaged, mutual and willing experience of a certain level of another person's body and mind, with or without touch.

RM: This is interesting as I have been reading the works of the Indian philosopher Sundar Sarukkai who distinguishes between touch and contact by saying that while touch leads to physical contact, not all contact need to necessarily implicate touch. He says, for example, we can make contact with someone by smelling their proximity and seeing them in a space. And in a way you are saying the same thing – that contact refers to a more holistic and conscious awareness of another person.

SP: Yes, contact for me involves a willingness to be in contact through a sense-relationship with another person. Whereas touch is an incredibly speedy physical communication device. I think I should also mention that within contact improvisation, touch must also give and bear weight. Touch augmented in this way is what starts the danced dialogue. Where your weight is located and carried is an incredibly important and personal factor in your life. So, when you have an opportunity to give weight to somebody else, it really makes you feel like you are donating an important aspect of yourself and trusting someone else to manage it for you.

RM: This seems like such a rich place we have reached in our conversation, and yet I know we are running out of time. Is there anything you'd like to add that my questions haven't covered?

SP: What can you tell me about contact work in India?

RM: I come to answering this from the outside and with a UK lens. I am aware of the Attakkalari training institute and dance company based in Bangalore whose founder and artistic director, Jaychandran Palazhy, trained in India and the UK and was heavily influenced by contact improvisation and partnering work. The dance artists and choreographers coming out of Attakkalari are thus similarly training in the form. One of them, Diya Naidu examines in her work *Rorschach Touch*, how touch between people is read in prescriptive ways as per norms and expectations of social interactions. Another choreographer Padmini Chettur, explores in *Wall Dancing* a series of dancers using a wall as their choreographic partner, shifting between formalist weight-bearing and images of social interactions. I am interested in exploring the range that exists within contemporary Indian choreographic practices between touch as a clinical language and touch as socially coded interaction across transnational lines. So, the insights I have gained from our conversation today will be hugely important as my project develops. Thank you so much Steve for your time today.

SP: Thank you for your really insightful questions. I have enjoyed this very much – we should do it again, as it has been very pleasant.

Conclusions

As my interview with Paxton drew to a close, I had a strong feeling that we had both tapped into areas that needed careful consideration, and issues that were of vital importance for reimagining the form's futures in ways that had perhaps not yet been achieved. Paxton's openness in engaging with my questions, which ranged from eliciting descriptive and technical responses to more reflective and critical responses

from him, was encouraging in this regard. There was a mutual understanding and respect present during our conversation of the different positionalities we brought to our discussions about contact improvisation, and this made reimagining its futures an exciting prospect.

I was struck by two parts of our exchange in particular: the first was the moment when Paxton witnessed the evolution of contact improvisation into contact choreography in the 1970s piece by Woodbury and Dunn, as he felt tricked into believing in its improvisational nature, only to realize it had been entirely choreographed from the start. This observation on Paxton's part clearly made him more aware of the choreographic possibilities of contact improvisation for the dance industry, while reaffirming for himself his own delineated interest in its somatic research potentials. It seemed to me that in this moment, there was an echo in Paxton to an earlier part in our interview where he talked about the separation of a child from a mother as a process of acculturation commences. Perhaps, for Paxton, witnessing the moment when contact improvisation was stripped of its fundamental improvisational verve to become a tool of choreography, was a similarly experienced severance of the form from himself. But, as all mothers learn, their children must be let loose into the world to develop as their very own beings, distinct from where they arrived and derived. Paxton's recognition that contact improvisation's offerings to choreographic possibilities existed in parallel to his own somatic and physiological experiments through the form, to unpack human movement, is an important juncture that notes the multiple pathways that contact improvisation has enabled for artistic dance practices, somatic studies and sociology.

My second point of observation that needs much more consideration is the point in the discussion where we both acknowledged that while contact improvisation

remains a predominantly white movement practice, its choreographic manifestation of partnering within artistic works requires bodies of color and non-color to engage with touching and being touched in fairly established ways. Paxton and I thus both recognize that there is clearly a gap between the predominant whiteness of the somatic form of contact improvisation and the seeming multiraciality of its choreographic manifestation of partnering in the contemporary dance industry. At this stage let me clarify that this interview is by no means the first to offer a critique of the whiteness of contact improvisation, a position that has been acknowledged and eloquently unpacked by Danielle Goldman (2010). Goldman's line of thinking has also been more recently echoed by Ann Cooper Albright (2017) and Hannah Yohalem (2018) respectively. Where this interview offers a valuable new perspective on this discourse is Paxton's observation that the form's whiteness points to a 'canary in the coal mine situation,' which is clearly trying to signal that something is, and always has been, not right within the practice with regards to its relationship to race. Paxton reflects on this in two ways, first by acknowledging that claiming democracy between bodies that are historically in opposition with each other with regards to continuing unequal power structures, may well make contact improvisation a form difficult for black and brown bodies to feel welcomed into, alongside white colleagues. And second, Paxton suggests further that perhaps racial and cultural divides in our societies are too deeply engrained in a way that contact improvisation's democratic principles are not equipped to acknowledge or address.

When I consider these two seemingly disparate moments of our conversation, on the shift from somatics to choreography and the form's inherent whiteness, alongside each other, what emerges for me is this question: if contact improvisation is a predominantly white somatic practice and its choreographic manifestation of

partnering in the dance industry is relatively multiracial, then what politics of touch are being ignored or repressed for dance artists of color who are having to put their intercultural and interracial considerations aside, in order to thrive and survive in the dance industry? Following on from this are these related questions: what would choreographic touch look like if these considerations were instead at the heart of choreographic endeavors? And, as a brown British-Indian dance scholar who is committed to decolonizing dance studies by focusing on practices, narratives, perspectives and embodied realities of diasporic artists of color, particularly of South Asian descent, I am driven to ask: how is touch choreographed in contemporary South Asian dance experiments in India and the diaspora, taking into consideration the politics that surround touch and touching within South Asian cultures? Such a line of enquiry necessitates a decentering of established discourses on choreographic touch beyond contact improvisation and partnering, through engagement with intercultural politics of touch and critical race theory.

My interview with Paxton was thus key in bringing me to this juncture in my thinking and has significantly shaped the way that my second book project is developing, and I am deeply thankful for it. The project is now titled *Choreographing Touch, Decolonising Contact*. It interrogates contact improvisation and its now ubiquitous choreographic manifestation of partnering within contemporary Euro-American dance, as a colonizing aesthetic on bodies of color who train in primarily solo classical dance forms, when examined through the intersectional lenses of race and gender. Thus, by starting from a place where focus is placed on the colonial force of contact between bodies who are moving through unequal power structures, the following shift in the discourse on contact improvisation is made possible, if not necessary, to critique the longstanding mythologizing of contact improvisation as a

liberating and democratic language of movement exploration, by placing race politics at the center of these considerations. Furthermore, such critique when carried out through a focus on choreographic touch within contemporary South Asian dance experiments, necessitates a consideration of the politics of touch as embodied in Indian classical dance training and in South Asian cultures. This has the potential to expand the discourse on choreographic touch by centralizing race, class and gender politics, thus forcing us to consider choreographic touch in fundamentally intercultural terms.

When I look back on the journey I have undertaken since my sabbatical two years ago to the point I am at now with my book, I know that my interview with Paxton was absolutely key in enabling me to reconsider what mattered most in my enquiries on choreographic touch: and that is to centralize bodies of color and their experiences in the discourse that has mostly rendered them absent.

I am indebted to Professors Susan Foster and Ann Cooper Albright, and dance artist Lisa Nelson for leading me to Steve Paxton. This interview and the pathways it opens up for reimagining the futures of contact improvisation, would not be possible without their generosity. I am also grateful to Arabella Stanger for her insightful and vital comments during the drafting of this piece. Most importantly, I am thankful to Steve Paxton for his openness and warmth in all our interactions, and of course his reflections on contact improvisation through the lens of my very particular set of questions and positionality.

Notes

¹ In the UK, the term ‘physical theatre’ uses UK English spelling, while in the USA the term usually follows US English spelling “theater.” Where relevant I have retained the UK English spelling.

² Paxton was invited to Dartington College of the Arts to teach contact improvisation by Mary Fulkerson, one of the seventeen students who worked with him on his earliest two-week contact improvisation experiments in New York in 1972, during her time as the Head of Dance at the college between 1973 and 1987.

³ For existent scholarly insights on the links between contact improvisation, human physiology, and somatics see the edited collection by Sondra Fraleigh (2015), Martin Keog (2018), and Paxton (2008). For commentaries on the relationship between contact improvisation, phenomenology, society, communities and gender norms, please see Hannah Yohalem (2018), Cynthia J. Novack (1990), Cheryl Pallant (2006), Danielle Goldman (2010) and Carol A. Horwitz (1995).

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