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Disability Justice in Motion: Exploring DJ Principles through Contact Improvisation

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Exploring DJ Principles Through Contact Improvisation

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Contents

"You know, I could do workshops until I was blue in the face, trying to convince white disabled people or able-bodied people of color to care about us. And I've done that. Or I could make a three-minute piece of performance art that shows them the inside of their dreams and nightmares and fucks their shit up. I chose that route."
– Patty Berne, Disability Justice activist

"I don't think one has to be strong or fast or fully-limbed or sighted or hearing or young or of a certain size to do CI. Your partner can meet you as you are."
– Steve Paxton, founder of contact improvisation

Introduction

This is not a paper about dance therapy. Dance therapy is an important field that brings attention to the connection between mind, body, and spirit and helps patients on their healing journeys. The field of dance therapy does a lot of good, and I deeply respect artists who choose to pursue that route. However, I fear that often when "dance" and "disability" are used in the same sentence, the assumption is that dance is a tool to help people with disabilities, that the only way disabled people can be involved in dance is as a therapy. This does not make space for the reality that disabled people can be dancers, that many disabled people *are* dancers and make art for the sake of art-making, not therapy.

This is also not a paper calling for the inclusion of disabled people within the field of dance. It is absolutely essential that dance artists open our arms to the many disabled dancers in the field, expand our pedagogical repertoires to cater towards disabled dance students, and create welcoming spaces so that disabled dancers feel comfortable asserting their worth in the dance world. But that is not what this paper is about.

This thesis analyzes how principles of Disability Justice overlap with practices dancers engage with in contact improvisation. By putting these two frameworks in conversation with each other, I hope to demonstrate how Disability Justice principles can be incorporated into mainstream society in an effort to destabilize ableism.

The genesis of this project emerged while I was taking a course on Disability Justice. While learning about DJ principles, I started to notice that some of the concepts we were discussing applied to contact improvisation. Specifically, the notion of interdependence stood out to me as a central practice in contact improvisation. Drawing these connections was really intellectually engaging to me, and pursuing this project allowed me to flesh out this research.

Another factor that inspired this project was the fact that I was introduced to contact improvisation my first year of college, but the remainder of my college education has taken place during the covid pandemic. Since physical contact with others was strictly forbidden, I did not have a chance to learn more about this form that fascinated me. Embarking on this project gave me the opportunity to jump back in and study contact improvisation.

History of Disability Justice

Disability Justice was founded in the early 2000s by a group of queer femmes of color. It derived from conversations between Patty Berne and Mia Mingus who were frustrated by previous progressive movements that did not recognize ableism and began imagining a new era of disability rights (Sins Invalid). The Disability Justice framework that sprang from these initial conversations is largely influenced by the work of BIPOC feminist theory and activism, and it departs from the Disability Rights movement in several important ways. While Disability Rights focused on securing political rights for disabled people and advocated for the Americans with Disabilities Act, Disability Justice focuses more on collective care and liberation, methods of change outside of the structures of the government. Disability Justice work is largely done by individuals who have educated themselves about the movement and adopted its principles, but on a larger scale, two major DJ organizations are Sins Invalid, a Disability Justice performing arts organization that I will draw upon heavily in this paper, and the Disability Justice Collectives in New York City, Seattle, and Vancouver. According to Sins Invalid, there are ten main principles of disability justice:

1. Intersectionality.

2. Leadership of those most impacted.

3. Anti-capitalist politics.

4. Cross-movement solidarity.

5. Recognizing wholeness.

6. Sustainability.

7. Commitment to cross-disability solidarity.

8. Interdependence.

9. Collective access.

10. Collective liberation. (Sins Invalid 23-26)

The above principles outline individual and community actions that embody an ideology of anti-ableism and equity for disabled people.

Because the meaning of the term 'disability' itself can be interpreted in different ways, I adopt the Sins Invalid definition of disability which states:

> We define disability broadly to include people with physical impairments, people who belong to a sensory minority, people with emotional disabilities, people with cognitive challenges, and those with chronic/severe illness. We understand the experience of disability to occur within any and all walks of life, with deeply felt connections to all communities impacted by the medicalization of their bodies, including trans, gender variant and intersex people, and others whose bodies do not conform to our culture(s)' notions of 'normal' or 'functional.' (Sins Invalid Website)

This definition makes room for many conditions of the mind and body that might fall under the realm of disability.

History of Contact Improvisation

In 1972 while in residency at Oberlin College, Steve Paxton facilitated a series of workshops with dance students. In an exclusively male class, Paxton and eleven students laid

down wrestling mats to experiment with falling, jumping, colliding, and succumbing to gravity in wild and athletic ways (Hennessy). They performed this project, entitled *Magnesium,* in a gymnasium at the conclusion of the residency. From there, Paxton and a group of dancers, namely Nancy Stark Smith (an eager Oberlin student during Paxton's stay), worked together in New York City to practice this newly-emerging technique of highly athletic, physically connected improvisation. After a week of intensive practice, Paxton, Smith, and the other collaborators (including Curt Siddall, Daniel Lepkoff, and Laura Chapman) performed at the Weber Gallery in Manhattan (Smith). When this original group of about a dozen improvisers dispersed to dance and teach across the country, CI spread where they went and beyond, thanks to the video footage that Steve Christiansen captured of these early CI experiments (Hennessy). Smith attributes the diffusion of CI to its collaborative nature; contact improvisation requires at least two people. If one could do it alone, perhaps it would not have spread beyond its early practitioners (Smith).

Contact improvisation introduced a radical new way of dancing in partnership with others, but it did not arise out of nowhere. In the 1960s, an avant-garde dance group formed at Judson Memorial Church in Greenwich Village. Its attendees include many well-known improvisers and dance-makers such as Steve Paxton, Twyla Tharp, Simone Forti, Trisha Brown, and Yvonne Rainer (among others). These artists rejected the hierarchy and elitism of ballet and modern dance and sought a more democratic dance form (Banes). They experimented with pedestrian movements such as walking, running, and falling, and questioned the very definition of dance. The Judson Dance Theater is credited with the founding of postmodern dance, but their experiments with gravity, touch, and weight-sharing informed the development of CI the following decade (Hennessy).

As described above, contact improvisation involves "highly athletic, physically connected" movement. For someone who has never witnessed this type of dance, it can be hard to visualize what it might look like. Part of the excitement of CI is that the movement is spontaneously generated on the spot, so every contact jam will look different. However, it often involves lifts, rolling over one another, weaving through each other, tangling and untangling limbs, and finding pathways in and out of the ground. (For a visual example of CI, see Appendix A.)

Research Process

My research for this project has involved a union of theory and practice. I have examined texts that explore Disability Justice, memoirs written by disabled people, and literature about contact improvisation. Sitting with these texts, I have drawn connections between DJ concepts and the practices and philosophies of CI. While there is limited scholarship about the connection between DJ and CI specifically, disabled dance artists and mixed-ability companies such as Alice Sheppard, DV8 Physical Theater, and AXIS Dance Company have reflected on their experiences navigating the professional dance world through the lens of disability. Additionally, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the work of Alito Alessi, founder of DanceAbility, an international organization that facilitates movement workshops for mixed-ability participants. The type of movement DanceAbility engages with is largely touch-based, and although Alessi does not define it as contact improvisation, there are certainly overlaps between the forms. Furthermore, artists in other creative fields such as theater and creative writing who have used their medium as a platform for thinking through disability have informed my research.

Despite the amount of scholarship out there, I believe it is impossible to write about dance without engaging in the practice of dance. As an embodied form, there is so much

information that comes from the body in motion that you have to experience in order to understand. Even then, so much of dance is about momentary experiences and physical sensations that written language does not have the vocabulary to capture. As a result, my research process includes a creative component that involves meeting with a group of four of my fellow college dance colleagues—Kelsey, Claire, Dominique, and Arisa—regularly and exploring contact improvisation.

I selected these dancers to work with me on this project for a few different reasons. I knew I wanted our group to remain small so that we could build deep relationships with one another and maintain an intimate community. In the case of two of the dancers, I had taken an improvisation class with them and admired their CI proficiency and general dance artistry. Another classmate had talked openly about her experience of having a learning difference (a term that she prefers over learning disability), so I wanted to invite her to be a part of this project. The fourth dancer I chose because I really appreciated their openness to experiment and trying new things, and I suspected they might have interesting insights into DJ concepts. While I share a little bit about my own background and position in relation to this project below, I do not feel comfortable disclosing that type of information about my cast. However, I will admit that one of my insecurities about creating this piece was that onlookers would perceive us as exclusively able-bodied and therefore question our intentions. While all of us pass as able-bodied, some of us have experiences that fall under the realm of disability (whether we claim disability as a central part of our identities or not), and others have a close connection to the topic on account of having disabled loved ones. Beyond that, it is not my place to share personal information about my cast members. Throughout this paper, I will refer to these four dancers by their first names (used with their permission), but when necessary to protect their

privacy and the sanctity of our rehearsal space, I will use vague language such as "one person" or "another dancer."

Throughout the year, we had regular rehearsals during which I developed and facilitated different improvisation scores—structures that involve a set of rules or possibilities for the dancers to consider—based on the readings I have done and the DJ concepts I have explored. We also responded to free-writing prompts to think through DJ ideas and reflect on personal experiences. After engaging with both mediums, we had discussions to share what came up for us, how group dynamics unfolded during the course of the improvisation, and any other observations. This served as the source material that guided my research investigations and provided material to build off of to construct our culminating performance.

Community Guidelines

To establish shared understandings and create a safe environment to share, explore, and be vulnerable, we developed the following list of community guidelines.

1. What happens here stays here.

2. Listen to your body.

3. No one's ever forced to be in contact with other bodies.

4. Stay present when in contact with others.

5. Vocalize your boundaries.

This list remained open to change throughout the process, and all participants had the option to edit or add to it.

Positionality Statement

I am a white, queer cis-woman raised by a middle class Catholic family in New Rochelle, New York. I had the privilege of growing up in a strong public school system, and I have had the

opportunity to pursue a high-quality college education. I grew up visiting my grandparents most weekends, spending Christmas Eve at my aunt's and uncle's house, taking road trips to D.C. with my family, hiking the White Mountains of New Hampshire, playing in the backyard with my siblings, having sleepovers with Nicki, reading Harry Potter with my mom and brother, picking out first-day-of-school outfits with my sister, learning to drive with my dad in the passenger's seat, going to dance class, laughing, crying, feeling deeply, and thinking always.

My relationship with disability is complicated. Upon my appearance, I seem able-bodied. However, I have struggled with severe depression, grappled with ADHD, and in recent years, have experienced a chronic postural low blood pressure that has evaded an official medical label. One doctor referred to my condition as orthostatic hypotension, another one associated it with symptoms of Postural Orthostatic Tachycardia Syndrome, but most call it "are you getting your period soon?" or "you just need to drink more water, honey," or my personal favorite, "it's just your anxiety." My blood pressure issue does not conform to a formal medical diagnosis, but it impacts my day to day life, especially as a dance artist.

Disability is an interesting category of identity, because there is often a dissonance between how others see you and how you see yourself. One might be called disabled by a medical professional but not claim disability as a part of their identity. Some of my conditions and experiences might fall under the category of disability, but I do not know if I consider myself disabled. Somedays, I confidently and proudly call myself disabled, but other days I question it. Despite knowing that there's no such thing as "not disabled enough," I have internalized a doubt

about whether my experiences qualify me to claim that label. However, I do know that I feel a strong affinity with the disability community.

I say all of this for a few reasons; for one, I think transparency is really important. Because this project deals with a marginalized identity group and involves personal stories, I think it is important to lay out my position in relation to the subject and share a little bit about why this project means so much to me. The last thing I want to do is capitalize off of other people's lived experiences. One of Sins Invalid's Disability Justice principles is leadership of those most impacted. With my relationship to disability laid out, I defer to those who have been doing this work for far longer than myself, and I honor their identities and lived experiences. I take on this project with humility. I do not claim to be an expert; I am still learning. I seek information, I forge connections, I propose ideas. And I surrender to the trailblazers who have done this work for decades.

Organization

Chapter One explores the concept of interdependence, its role in Disability Justice, and how it manifests in contact improvisation and other performing arts.

Chapter Two investigates how vulnerability and intimacy function in CI, how disabled people experience vulnerability and intimacy, and how consent comes into play in both contexts.

Chapter Three reflects on my rehearsal process and performance.

Additional Notes

*The framework of Disability Justice was founded by disabled, queer women of color. As a white student who has benefited greatly from their scholarship and activism, I want to acknowledge, honor, and lift up this history.

*I use contact improvisation as a space for examining principles of Disability Justice. However, I do not mean to claim that contact improvisation is some sort of utopia. Throughout its history, there have been issues with contact improvisation spaces being predominantly white and BIPOC dancers not feeling comfortable in these settings. Although I am using contact improvisation as a research zone for imagining a world in which accessibility isn't an afterthought and DJ principles become commonplace, I do not mean to suggest that CI is immune from issues of its own. When working on this project and occupying CI settings, I acknowledge its history and work to create more inclusive spaces.

***A note on language:** Throughout this paper, I will use the abbreviation "DJ" to refer to Disability Justice and "CI" in reference to contact improvisation. Additionally, I will use the terms "disabled people" and "people with disabilities" interchangeably. I will also sometimes use words such as "we" and "us" that signify collectivity and include myself, whereas other times I will use "them" which removes myself. I chose to flip-flop between pronoun usage due to my undefined relationship with disability that I lay out in my positionality statement.

Chapter 1

Lean On Me: The Role of Interdependence in CI

I am a chronic over-sleeper. Saved on the "Clock" app on my phone, I have over 100 different alarms that account for the early morning days of high school, afternoon naps, and my reminder to take the bread out of the oven one Easter 6 years ago. After I set an alarm, I never delete it. As a result, each night before I go to bed, I choose from the plethora of wake-up times listed on my phone—6:53 AM, 7:19 AM, 8:07 AM, and 8:30 AM, to name a few. Despite diligently turning on approximately 10 of my alarms every morning, I still sometimes struggle to get out of bed. In anticipation of those times, I have to call in reinforcements. Sometimes, I enlist a friend to bang on the door of my dorm room to ensure that I make it up in time for an important exam. Other times, I persuade my older sister to call me at a designated time and yell at me until I pry myself from my bed and prepare for the busy day ahead. More often than I'd like to admit, extracting myself from my slumber becomes a multiple-person affair.

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According to the Oxford English Dictionary, interdependence refers to "the fact or condition of depending each upon the other; mutual dependence." Dictionary.com—hip younger sibling of the OED—corroborates this meaning, defining interdependence as "the quality or condition of being interdependent, or mutually reliant on each other." Quite simply, interdependence names the idea that humans rely on one another. In the above anecdote, my reliance on loved ones to help me wake up in the morning demonstrates the concept of interdependence.

Interdependence is everywhere and takes on different forms depending on the context. On a college campus, it might manifest as driving a peer to the train station so that they can get

home for a break, grabbing food from the dining hall to deliver to a friend who cannot make it to dinner that evening, or asking a classmate to look over your essay. In the post-college landscape of adulthood, it might look like picking up your coworker's kids from school when they have to work overtime or asking a neighbor to take in your mail while you are out of town.

Within the framework of Disability Justice, relying on one another plays a major role. While the same examples of interdependence described above still apply, some disabled people require additional support. For example, some disabilities render individuals unable to independently use the bathroom, take care of personal hygiene, or prepare meals for themselves—basic needs to which every human being should be entitled. Some disabled people who require such assistance lean on loved ones to fulfill these needs, but others feel more comfortable hiring aides to help with these more intimate tasks (though that requires the financial means to do so).

According to Sins Invalid, interdependence is one of ten primary principles of Disability Justice. The following excerpt from *Skin, Tooth, & Bone*, Sins Invalid's DJ primer, articulates the importance of interdependence to the movement:

Before the massive colonial project of Western European expansion, we understood the nature of interdependence within our communities. We see the liberation of all living systems and the land as integral to the liberation of our own communities, as we all share one planet. We work to meet each other's needs as we build toward liberation, without always reaching for state solutions which inevitably extend state control further into our lives. (Sins Invalid 25)

This understanding expands on the dictionary definition of interdependence in several ways. For one, the last sentence of this excerpt emphasizes a key difference between Disability

Rights and Disability Justice. Whereas the former prioritizes advocating for governmental policy that protects disabled people, the latter recognizes that the government is an institution that upholds white supremacist and heteropatriarchal structures. As a result, people who practice DJ prefer to enact change outside of the confines of the government. By "work[ing] to meet each other's needs" in the push for liberation, disability communities exercise interdependence to ensure that one another's access needs are met. Federal disability policy is essential—without the Americans with Disabilities Act, disabled people would not be protected in the workforce and there would be no standards for accessible buildings and transportation, and without the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act, students would not be entitled to the accommodations that allow them to excel academically. However, factors such as red tape and partisan conflict make the process of lawmaking extremely slow, and people with disabilities do not have the luxury of patiently waiting for the government to care about us. Taking matters into our own hands and exercising interdependence allows disabled people to meet one another's needs consistently, not just when lawmakers decide it is time.

In addition, this explanation puts interdependence in conversation with two of Sins Invalid's other principles: intersectionality and cross-movement solidarity. The statement, "the liberation of all living systems and the land [is] integral to the liberation of our own communities," connects Disability Justice with the other justice movements. Looking at disability justice in isolation from other forms of oppression leaves out people whose identities fall at the intersections of different oppressions—disabled people who are also women, and/or queer, and/or BIPOC, for example. However, while intersectionality addresses overlapping identities on an individual level, the idea of cross-movement solidarity takes it to a systemic level. We cannot fight against ableism without also fighting against racism, sexism, homophobia,

17

and environmental injustice. This demonstrates that entire liberation movements are dependent on one another.

Finally, by stating that we understood the importance of interdependence before the "massive colonial project of Western European expansion," Sins Invalid situates ableism as a product of settler colonialism. According to Nicole Ineese-Nash, an Oji-Cree activist and assistant professor of early childhood studies, many Indigenous languages throughout North America lack the terminology for disability. She further explains that in Anishinaabe culture—an Indigenous group native to the Great Lakes region of Canada—people name their kids based on their role in the community. As a result, "there is not often a discussion about what the child is lacking, or what they cannot do, because of the understanding that all children are gifts to the community" (Ineese-Nash 30). This glimpse into Indigenous language indicates that the social construction of disability is a white, colonial concept. It also represents an asset-based conceptualization of human ability that values people's strengths as opposed to fixating on where they fall short. However, once settler colonialism took root, new principles formed the basis of United States society including a deficit perspective on ability that paved the way for ableism to become a dominant ideology. According to Victoria Peer, who draws on the scholarship of Patrick Wolfe, the "logic, tenets, and identities produced by settler colonialism persist and continue to shape other social and cultural formations into the present" (Peer 12). In addition to ableism, heteropatriarchy, and white supremacy, three interconnected structures that produce systemic oppression today, settler colonialism also yielded a strong belief in rugged individualism.

According to Bazzi et al., "'Rugged individualism'—the combination of individualism and anti-statism—is a prominent feature of American culture with deep roots in the country's

history of frontier settlement" (Bazzi et al. 1). This type of hyper-individualism rests on the

belief that everyone should be able to succeed on their own and looks down on receiving help

from other people, organizations, or the government. This "every man for himself" attitude

leaves no room for interdependence, eliminating the possibility of collective action. Whereas

Indigenous communities once believed in the "interconnected nature of the universe"

(Ineese-Nash 31) and approached problems as a community, white westward expansion produced

an ideology that views depending on one another as a sign of individual weakness. As a result of

the predominance of rugged individualism, utilizing social welfare programs such as SNAP

(Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) which provides food stamps for low-income

people and TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) which provides monthly payments

to help cover childcare costs for families in need, is often viewed as an individual fault or

something shameful. This sentiment is exacerbated when it comes to welfare programs

specifically targeted towards people with disabilities such as SSI (Supplemental Security

Income) which provides financial assistance to people with disabilities. Many people classify

such programs as "special treatment" instead of seeing them for what they really are: an attempt

to provide disabled people with equitable living conditions in a society that is only built to

accommodate able-bodied people.

Even though many people reject the idea of rugged individualism and dedicate their lives

to working towards equity, as a dominant societal ideology, it still pervades our lives. Think

about how often people avoid asking for help until they absolutely have to; even if it is on a

subconscious level, rugged individualism still impacts us. In a social and political landscape that

praises individualism and shames people for seeking help, there is little room for

interdependence to thrive.

As an art form that rests on physical contact between movers, contact improvisation is a rich site for exploring interdependence. When multiple people share weight with each other, they must strike a balance between surrendering to others and supporting others. Through this act, participants establish a mutual trust to attend to one another's physical safety. In response to engaging in CI, British dancer and choreographer Robert Anderson remarks, "The feeling of someone taking responsibility for your weight is quite profound. As you give your weight, it feels very much that you put your safety in someone else's hands" (Anderson 2). Anderson's testimony demonstrates that interdependence is a necessary component of contact improvisation. In order to move together, maintain touch, and execute lifts, CI participants must let go of individual control in service of the collective and become attuned to group rhythms and needs.

However, Anderson's commentary does more than simply attest to the existence of interdependence in CI settings. He describes the feeling of touch and weight-sharing as "quite profound," indicating that it lends itself to a meaningful experience for participants. In one of my thesis rehearsals, we engaged in a simple exercise that took place in pairs. While one partner closed their eyes (Person A), the other guided them around the studio with one hand gripping one of their partner's hands and the other gently resting on their back (Person B). As the guide led them through the space, they experimented with speed (walking in slow motion versus running), proximity to other people (will Person B allow Person A to gently graze the shoulder of another participant?), and distance from the perimeters of the room (will Person A sense that they are near a wall and trust their partner to lead them away from danger?). The person with their eyes closed had to let their partner take the lead and trust that they would keep them safe. After about five minutes, each pair switched roles so that everyone experienced leading and being led. During our discussion of the exercise afterwards, one participant reflected that "it's just nice to

feel taken care of sometimes." Perhaps the act of feeling taken care of is one manifestation of the "profound" feeling that Anderson cites. This is significant because it shows that not only does interdependence exist in CI, it elicits positive reactions in participants.

Developing interdependent art-making relationships produces fruitful results not only in contact improvisation but in other art forms, as well. Niall McNeil, a Canadian actor and playwright with Down Syndrome, collaborated with Marcus Youssef (a renowned Canadian artistic director and playwright) on two productions: *Peter Panties* (2011) and *King Arthur's Night* (2017) (Gold 216). As part of their methodology, they recorded all of their sessions together so that they remembered all of the ideas generated by their conversations. This allowed McNeil to "bring his enormous strengths in associative thinking to bear on the story" (Johnson 103). In an interview with *The Globe and Mail*, Youssef shares that McNeil is really good at finding connections that Youssef would have otherwise missed (Lederman). While McNeil was responsible for most of the creative input, Youssef took the lead on organizing those ideas and structuring the plays.

Throughout the rehearsal process for *King Arthur's Night*, McNeil and Youssef prioritized accessibility for their mixed-ability cast, allowing interdependence to remain central to the project. Their integration of access needs from the start departs from the tendency for performing arts companies to think about accessibility only after the performance is complete. This union of access and aesthetics created new avenues for characterization, emotionality, and plot development. For example, to accommodate for memorization challenges, some scenes made room for improvisation. Improvised scenes required the actors on stage to be more present during performances and created an authenticity and vulnerability that bolstered the emotional impact of the scene (Johnson 104). Additionally, to make space for actors with mobility

limitations or spatial navigation challenges, some performers physically connected with others to gently guide them on or off stage (Johnson 104-105). This closeness likely contributed to developing the characters' relationship by establishing a sense of connection between the two. Both methods of increasing accessibility—incorporating improvisation and allowing for physical touch when needed—allowed the audience to witness moments of interdependence; the performers relied on each other in real time to intuit each other's needs and build off of their artistic choices. In this artistic project, engaging with interdependence on stage not only made room for actors who might not have been able to perform in a mainstream theater company, it also merged with the aesthetic of the play to contribute to meaning-making.

It is important to note that interdependent professional collaborations *benefit both parties equally* when "*enacted with sensitivity and care*" (Gold 217, emphasis added). Because the collaboration between Youssef and McNeil demonstrates a relationship between one disabled person and one nondisabled person, it might be easy to assume that Yousef is just "helping out" McNeil—that in order for a disabled person to achieve professional success, they need an able-bodied person to provide assistance. That is not the case. Interdependent collaborations can form between a pair of nondisabled creators or a pair of able-bodied individuals. No matter the (dis)ability status of the participants, pursuing an interdependent art-making process "offer(s) new artistic terrain to explore mutually while challenging current artistic structures and breaking boundaries" (Gold 217).

In her essay, "Why My Novel is Dedicated to my Disabled Friend Maddy," author A.H. Reaume describes another kind of interdependent collaboration she developed with her friend Maddy. While in recovery from a severe concussion, Reaume struggled to look at screens long enough to make progress on her novel. Unsuccessful in her search to hire an assistant who could

type for her, Maddy, a friend who was recovering from a different brain injury and needed more work, offered to take on the role. Reaume explains that to start their sessions she would prepare food and they would share a meal while checking in with each other and talking about their days. Making space for nonwork-related chatter resists the capitalist urgency to spend every second on productivity and establishes a mutually caring atmosphere. Then they would get to work transcribing and editing. Reaume describes this as "the best collaboration of [her] life" (152); they both had their needs met and enjoyed each other's company. Maddy was able to get work that accommodated her disability and Reaume finished her book, which was made better due to Maddy's attentiveness and suggestions. Reaume writes, "This is disabled poetics. This is disabled praxis [...] It's a kind of love I didn't know existed before my disability" (153).

In the anecdote at the beginning of this chapter, I share a lighthearted example of interdependence. However, I omitted that the reason I struggle to get out of bed is that I have depression, and in the mornings, it can be paralyzing. Despite wanting to get up and enjoy the day, I sometimes experience a depressive pull that prevents me from embarking on my day and causes me to burrow deeper, away from the world. When the pull is too strong for me to overcome on my own, I gently lean on my loved ones. However, with this addendum to the story, I'm no longer a "sleepyhead" or "just not a morning person." Suddenly, from the perspective of an ableist, mainstream society, I've become lazy, childish. A 2006 study found that "53% of [a sampled community] believed that most people would think depression is a sign of personal weakness, and 38% believed others think people with depression are dangerous" (Barney et al.). The association of terms such as "weak" with depression create a culture of shame surrounding mental illness. In this landscape, my use of interdependence is unacceptable, a crime against our culture of rugged individualism.

This is why examining how interdependence is at play in art matters. It shows us that interdependence is not some radical, leftist concept that is a threat to our society; *it's something we already do.* In some contexts, interdependence is commonplace; we just don't call it that. Digging into the nuances of contact improvisation allows us to recognize that CI is a setting where interdependence fosters meaningful connections and sophisticated art-making. If we take interdependence to a larger scale, make it a tenet of everyday life, perhaps we would be one step closer to a world in which disabled people are respected and accessibility is prioritized.

Chapter 2
Radical Vulnerability, Forced Intimacy, & Consent

7th grade math class, test day. My friend receives her exam from the substitute teacher and explains that she is allowed to go sit the exam in an alternate location. In response to the perplexed look on the substitute's face, my friend continues, "I have ADHD and my IEP entitles me to take exams elsewhere." 10th grade English, day of an in-class essay. The teacher hands out paper and the essay prompts and sends a select few students off to the testing center, where they will be allotted time and a half. As they exit the room, I hear a classmate mutter, "They're so lucky they get extra time." 11th grade history, test day. As one student retrieves her exam from the teacher and prepares to make her way to the testing center, I hear a student whisper to their friend, "What does she even have, dyslexia? Autism?"

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Touch can provide benefits—creatively, somatically, psychologically. As discussed in Chapter 1, engaging in contact improvisation can allow people to feel cared for, trusted, and secure. However, in many contexts, touch comes with very different connotations. Many people have trauma associated with touch that might stem from experiences of violence, sexual assault, or medical abuse, and that trauma can easily be triggered in a CI setting. This chapter examines how radical vulnerability and forced intimacy show up for disabled people and how the concepts manifest in contact improvisation. It also considers how we can work towards an effective protocol for seeking and giving consent.

According to DJ activist Mia Mingus, forced intimacy refers to the "daily experience of disabled people being expected to share personal parts of ourselves to survive in an ableist world" (Mingus). She explains that often these instances are required to fulfill basic access needs. For example, a person in a wheelchair might enter a building through a door held open by

an able-bodied individual. The able-bodied person might want to strike up a casual conversation by asking the disabled person about their disability. Such questions might sound like "Were you born that way?" or "What's wrong with you?" (Stollznow 24, 25). Even if the person voicing those questions has the purest of intentions, that type of probing is extremely invasive. It puts the disabled person in a tricky situation of figuring out how to answer within the split second of time they have before a response is expected. Do they feel comfortable disclosing their disability? Will they grudgingly disclose their disability in order to escape the conversation quickly? Will they provide a vague response? Will they snap back with a potentially rude (albeit warranted) response? Will they simply leave without saying anything? Nobody should have to share personal information about themselves as payment for entering through a doorway.

Mingus further explains that forced intimacy can arise in caregiving relationships in which a disabled person might need help with physical tasks (Mingus). This might take the form of requiring assistance with getting out of bed, getting dressed, or using the bathroom. Even if the disabled person fully consents to receiving help with such tasks, the resulting physical contact is not always desired. Although consensual, the amount of touch people with physically limiting disabilities must put up with can be exhausting.

All too often, forced intimacy crosses the boundary from well-intentioned overstepping to deliberate instances of assault under the guise of an act of service. For example, someone might volunteer to help a physically disabled person out of their chair, and after gripping under their arms to help them up, run their hands along the other person's chest as they disconnect. Keshia Scott shares her response to having experienced such instances, stating, "I didn't like the way strangers, in the name of helping the blind girl, would cop a feel. They'd slip an arm around my

waist, or curl their hands around my neck, or pat my ass, or trail their fingertips at the skin under my shirt–Good Samaritan Gropers" (Scott 124).

It is worth noting that situations involving forced intimacy—especially instances such as getting interrogated about your disability while walking through a doorway-–happen far more frequently to people with visible disabilities. Those of us with invisible disabilities are shielded by our ability to pass as able-bodied. However, that does not mean that forced intimacy never comes up. Perhaps someone with an anxiety disorder starts having a panic attack in a public setting, and they need someone to hold their hand to help ground them. While they might not prefer to have a stranger fulfill this need for them, that might be the only option in that situation. Similarly to a person with limited mobility accepting help with physical tasks, the intimacy that ensues might be consensual but not preferred.

Furthermore, forced intimacy occurs all the time in academic settings that require students to provide proof of their disability in order to receive the accommodations to which they are legally entitled. The stories that begin this chapter document a few of the countless times I have witnessed students grudgingly disclose their disability to educators in order to receive the support they need to succeed (not to mention having people speculate about them in whispered voices or outwardly doubt the existence of their disability). Many times, the process that institutions force students to go through in order to grant them accommodations is time-consuming, stressful, and emotionally burdensome.

For example, at Connecticut College, the process of self-identifying as a disabled student to the office of Student Accessibility Services (SAS) requires numerous steps including providing documentation that proves one's disability. The SAS website provides an extensive list of qualifications the documentation must meet, such as including the "credentials and signature

of [a] licensed professional," a description of how the students' diagnoses impact their daily lives, and recommendations for appropriate accommodations (SAS Website). (For the complete list as it appears on the SAS website, see Appendix B.) These steps require students to contact a medical professional to receive the necessary documentation. If the student is no longer in contact with the clinician who originally diagnosed them, that complicates the process even further, forcing them to rekindle a past relationship or ask a new doctor to vouch for them. For students who do not have a formal diagnosis, there are financial barriers to obtaining the required documentation such as copays or fees not covered by insurance (not to mention the long wait times to get an appointment with a specialist). Even at Connecticut College, where visits to the health center are free of cost, an initial session with the psychiatric professional costs $240 and follow-up appointments cost $152 (Student Counseling Services Website). To my knowledge, SAS does not provide financial assistance for students to access this type of support and attain the documentation necessary to register as a disabled student. I have heard testimonies from multiple students who have shared that their experience with SAS was emotionally draining and the office was unresponsive to their requests for assistance with the process. While I do not mean to admonish any individuals who work in the office, I have observed that the bureaucratic nature of the office has presented undue challenges to students.

Getting registered as a disabled student is full of forced intimacy; it requires students to disclose extremely specific details of their disability to SAS staff members. Additionally, every class syllabus at Connecticut College must include a section about accessibility, and in each of the syllabi that I have received, this section requires disabled students to meet with the professor to discuss their accommodations. While the language varies slightly depending on the instructor of the course, one syllabus that I received stated, "please present your Accommodation Memo

privately during my office hours as early as possible in the semester" (Gaubinger 8). Multiple

professors that I have talked to have testified that the College does not provide any type of

training or guidelines on how to facilitate these types of conversations with students. Thus,

students might face probing (if well-meaning) questions from professors at the start of every new

semester as they work out the logistics of their accommodations in a given course. While these

conversations are necessary, it quickly becomes exhausting for students to explain their

conditions and needs repeatedly.

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In the improvisational practice I developed for my thesis process, the movement that we

produce comes from the deepest parts of ourselves. It is not meant to be performative or pretty;

we are not choosing from a word bank of skills and crafting our movements to show off our best

moves. That is not to look down on forms that do that—freestyling in hip hop or a dance battle is

a type of improvisation that is meant for displaying the most impressive parts of one's repertoire

of movements, and that makes it thrilling to watch. But in our process, we are exploring our

human embodiment, and what comes out any given moment of an improvisation represents the

mind at work in the body. When we improvise, we are putting a piece of ourselves into the space.

And letting people see the most authentic version of yourself can be really scary. I understand

this form of deep, embodied sharing as a form of radical vulnerability.

I borrow the term 'radical vulnerability' from Elsa Sjunneson who, in her essay, "How to

Make a Paper Crane from Rage," describes how, as a deafblind queer woman, she has built up a

lot of rage stemming from experiences of ableism, homophobia, and abuse. According to the

sometimes suffocating norms of our society, "[her] rage is supposed to be small. Manageable.

Pretty" (135). Women, especially women with multiple marginalized identities, are not supposed

to show their anger to the world; that would be unladylike. But Sjunneson learned how to use social media as a platform for expressing her rage in a way that is authentic to her. When people open up to friends behind closed doors, they are expressing vulnerability in a setting in which it is deemed appropriate to break down. While that is perfectly valid, Sjunneson's displays of anger are public, unapologetic, and defy the expectations society places on her. And for Sjunneson, that is radical.

In one of my thesis rehearsals, I asked everyone to participate in a score that involved us interacting with each other in more intimate ways than we normally would. Before we started, I made space for everyone to set a clear boundary. One dancer specified that she did not want anyone to touch their eyes, ears, nose, mouth, or "any face orifices." I stated that I didn't mind so much where people came in contact with my body, it was more about the intention behind the touch. There were murmurs of agreement there.

What ensued was beautifully bizarre. There were feet slipped through other people's sweatshirt pockets, someone poking the space between everyone's toe, hands grazing people's cheeks, fingers pinching elbows, bodies lying atop other bodies, prolonged eye contact, fingers walking up others' spines, and hair being used as a paintbrush on people's skin. The score was not about producing "dancey" movement; it was about exploring vulnerability and intimacy and the feelings that come up as we interact with each other in weird and unexpected ways. As we sat in a circle reflecting on this score, we noted the almost silly tone it took on. Because we grew to know each other well over the course of the year and established a playful environment in the rehearsal space, our exploration of intimacy quickly turned playful. It felt like younger siblings constantly bothering their older siblings by getting in their personal space (as the youngest sibling who always wore my sister's clothes, hung out on her bed, and routinely hid her phone

from her, I can attest to this). That being said, one person said "I never would have been able to do this 6 months ago," and someone else added on "yeah, and I wouldn't be able to do this with the first-years." We all concurred. It's a testament to the trust that we built over the course of eight months that a potentially uncomfortable movement exercise turned into a playfully explorative landscape. We all felt that we would have been too uncomfortable doing it with the first year dancers, for example, because while we all have a deep respect for them and their movement, we simply haven't spent as much time with them. In this score, and throughout our rehearsal process, we have been able to be radically vulnerable with each other through our movement, touch, words, silence, and shared space.

But without consent, radical vulnerability quickly becomes forced intimacy. According to Samira B. Stöckli, a Switzerland-based dance artist, "To give and receive touch involves the nervous system which can make it a great tool AS LONG AS there is a practice of consent around it" (Carroll 3). In the past few years, a lot of scholarship has been produced about consent in contact improvisation. As a largely nonverbal form, it can be hard to communicate consent in CI, but as a touch-based form, it is absolutely essential that all participants are able to consent. One could argue that someone who willingly enters a CI space consents to the practices of the space by nature of choosing to enter. In his essay, "The Nature of Consent," Emeritus Professor of Philosophy John Kleinig asserts that one can consent to the conventions of a given setting if they meet the following criteria:

1. Competence: This might be determined by age—a young child lacks the cognitive and emotional development to make certain decisions. Likewise, alcohol and drugs impact competence—if one is intoxicated they cannot consent.

2. Voluntariness: One must consent willingly, without being coerced.

3. Knowledge: This relates to the term "informed consent." In order to give consent, one must have a certain level of knowledge about the conventions of the setting.

4. Intention: In order to fully consent, one must know for what purpose their consent is being given. (For instance, one might lend a friend their car so that the friend can drive their grandmother to the hospital, but if they use it to rob a bank that would be a violation of their agreement.)

While Kleinig's guidelines lay out four clear conditions of consent, their application is not so clear-cut in the context of CI. In contact sports such as wrestling, hockey, or football, there is a rule book that delineates what is and is not allowed. When athletes compete, they consent to what *is* allowed, and people who violate those rules will face consequences. In theater and film, intimacy and fight coordinators are hired to safely facilitate scenes that involve close contact between actors. In CI, on the other hand, there are no codified rules. And that is the beauty and essence of the form. After their initial CI performances, Paxton and Smith only started teaching CI classes because people were getting injured trying to attempt it. General safety practices grew from these classes, but developing a codified technique would take away from the spontaneity and experimentation that is at the very core of CI. The freedom and openness of CI makes it what it is, but it also makes it difficult to develop a standard method of consent.

In her graduate thesis exploring touch and consent in contact improvisation, Brynn Marie Williams describes several methods of communicating consent during contact improvisation. Through nonverbal physical cues, for example, movers can "say" yes or no to certain types of contact. If a dancer leans into their partner and presses against their shoulders to support some of their weight, they are indicating to their partner that they are ready to be lifted (Williams). By contrast, if one person pulls away from their partner or drops their weight into the ground,

making themselves hard to carry, that suggests that they do not want to engage in contact in that moment (Keogh). Other ways movers can communicate consent include, "eyes, facial expressions, proximity, mimicry, sound, and verbal cues, including laughter or words" (Williams 64). Eye contact is a powerful way of communicating your feelings to another person. Among other emotions, people's eyes can express excitement (which points towards a yes) or hesitancy (which indicates a no). Similarly, facial expressions can convey how a person is feeling while they are moving with others. If they are smiling, they are likely enjoying the contact, but a grimace might indicate discomfort and a desire to stop what they are doing. Proximity is a powerful communicative tool as well; if one person retreats to a corner or remains on the outskirts of the group, they likely do not want to be touched. However, moving closer to people and weaving in and out of their negative space (the open space in one's kinesphere) suggests an openness to engaging in contact. Finally, even though dance is most often perceived as a nonverbal form, there are no rules that prohibit talking. Using spoken words to vocalize your boundaries is the direct and unambiguous way of establishing consent.

In addition to remaining attentive to physical cues while practicing CI, in recent years, several dance festivals and CI workshops have drawn up written lists of protocols regarding consent. For example, the Israeli Contact Improvisation Festival created a list of safety guidelines that encourages participants to warm up and communicate any preexisting injuries. It also states, in a prominent and underlined statement, that "sexually predatory behavior…will not be tolerated" (Ceder 1). The Festival also produced a list of protocols for how the leadership team should handle any complaints of sexual harassment. Similarly, the New York City Contact Improvisation Community produced a document with guidelines regarding safety and boundaries, and consent is central to the list. It clarifies that "no person consents *automatically* to

touch by being in the jam space" (NYC 1), reinforcing the claim that Kleinig's four conditions of consent are not foolproof when it comes to CI. The document also emphasizes that consent can change within the course of a contact jam and power dynamics can interfere with consent.

Having written procedures for establishing consent is certainly a significant step towards creating a safer culture in CI settings, but Sarah Gottlieb, a dance artist with a focus on CI and social justice, argues that written guidelines are not enough. She believes that "teachers and facilitators must find ways to verbally discuss ethical sexuality" (Gottlieb) (the phrase "verbally discuss ethical sexuality" is emboldened in her statement). She further stresses that holding space in classes and workshops to discuss ethical sexuality and consent culture in CI will break the silence regarding sexual violence in CI and normalize using our voices to establish boundaries. Transferring the dialogue from the page to an open conversation further underscores the importance of consent and allows more of the CI community to be engaged in these discussions.

Consent is a skill. Like any skill, in order to improve our proficiency, we need to practice it. In his article, "101 Ways to Say 'No' to Contact Improvisation: Boundaries and Trust," Martin Keogh describes an exercise he calls Two Rivers that allows CI students to practice giving and withholding consent. In this activity, one person lies on their back while two other people stand on either side of that person. The two "rivers" gently stroke the person lying down in response to predetermined arm signals. If the person's arms are crossed over their chest, it means that the two "rivers" are not allowed to touch them, if their arms are relaxed by their side, it indicates that they are open to some touch, and if their arms are above their head, it means that they are open to being touched anywhere. This activity requires the "rivers" to be present with their partner and change their actions in response to the barriers that are being set. It also demonstrates that consent is fluid and can change within the course of one interaction. Gina T'ai, professor of

dance, implemented an activity with her CI students called Hug Dig, during which pairs of dancers would lean into each other to give one another a mutual massage. This activity allowed them to practice articulating what parts of their body are sore or need the most attention and which parts of their body they did not want to be touched. Regularly incorporating these types of exercises into CI classes and workshops would allow dancers to practice actively sensing others, setting and respecting boundaries, and it would transform consent from something that is merely discussed in the abstract to something that is concrete and actionable.

Exploring the role of consent in contact improvisation can provide insight into how we can engage with disabled people in a respectful way that does not cross into the territory of forced intimacy. For one, we should never make assumptions about people and their needs. Just because someone has a physical limitation does not mean they automatically need help getting through a door or up the stairs. Although offering help can be well-intentioned, it can also be belittling. Following the other person's lead and waiting to see if they approach you first can help ensure that their boundaries are being respected. In addition, instead of saying something like, "Here! Let me help you with that!" an alternative can be "Let me know if you need anything." That way, you are making yourself available without imposing yourself on others or assuming that they are somehow lacking in some way. Finally, paying attention to some of the cues that Williams describes such as facial expressions, eye signals, body language, or verbal signals can give you a sense of whether it is an appropriate situation to initiate an interaction. While conversations about consent have been making their way into the mainstream in recent years, it is important to continue the dialogue so that consent becomes habitual.

Chapter 3
"Head to hand to heart, falling into (this) place:" Process & Performance

I am part of a whole;

a girl made out of paper and ink,

a shred of grass in the field,

I look for beauty every day,

in the breeze, in the rain,

in the scent of fresh bread.

But inside, I find nothing but the voices,

the voices that keep getting louder.

I feel distant, empty.

I wish people knew I loved them, even when I don't show it.

(See Appendix C for poem description)

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I titled the piece that my cast and I performed on April 1, 2023 in Myers Studio, "Head to hand to heart, falling into (this) place." This chapter reflects on the rehearsal period and performance and deconstructs how we thought through Disability Justice principles and engaged in DJ praxis throughout the process.

Fall 2022

In the Fall 2022 semester, my rehearsals focused largely on community building, practicing contact improvisation skills, and using writing prompts, movement exercises, and group discussions to explore the intersections between DJ principles and contact improvisation. Building a strong sense of community was really important to me. Although each of us knew one another by nature of attending a small school, we were not particularly close friends. My goal

was to develop an environment where people felt comfortable sharing their experiences, and because conversations related to disability can elicit strong emotions, I knew we needed to establish a sense of collective trust. In order to go out of our comfort zones, we needed to feel safe in our environment.

I started each rehearsal with a check-in, usually asking everyone how they feel on a 1-10 scale, and sometimes asking a fun question such as, "If you were cereal, what kind would you be and why?" (I chose Honey Bunches of Oats, and others responded with Special K, Fruit Loops, and Raisin Bran.) I felt that it was important to make space for checking in with each other, allowing everyone to share anything on their minds, and creating a playful tone. From there, we would spend about ten minutes warming up. The structure I established for warm-up was to form a circle and have each person take turns leading whatever type of warm-up they wanted. Potential exercises could include jumping jacks, push-ups, downward dogs, isolations, stretches, technical exercises, or improvised follow-the-leader style moving. If a participant did not feel up to taking the lead on a given day, they always had the option to pass. When one person had led for a few minutes, they would pass it at random to a new leader. At the end, I usually left a few minutes for everyone to do whatever else they needed while I got myself situated to jump into the activities for the day. Implementing this structure for warm-up was practical in that it allowed us to prepare our bodies to jump into more intense movement, but it also contributed to our group values in subtle but impactful ways. For example, by orienting ourselves in a circle as opposed to facing the mirror, we could see each others' faces, smile at one another, and strengthen our sense of community. (In fact, for all rehearsals, I pulled the curtains closed over the mirror so that everyone could be present with one another.) In addition, switching off who led the warm-ups at random added an improvisatory element to it, for no one knew who would be

next and there was no time to pre-plan what you wanted to do. It also made space for people to assert their voices through their bodies if they did not feel inclined to engage vocally on a given day.

After the warm-up, we generally transitioned into practicing a specific CI skill. While contact improvisation is not a codified form, there are ways of lifting one another and connecting with one another that have become standard in CI spaces. These techniques are helpful to practice in a controlled manner before jumping into them in an improvised setting. One such skill is called body-surfing, which involves two people rolling over one another on the ground, using momentum to travel through the space (for a full description of the movement, see Appendix D). Body-surfing can happen organically as partners improvise together, but starting with the basic principles of it allowed us to get used to the physicality of it and see how sensations change with different partners. There is also a definite intimacy to having your torso and pelvis in close contact with another's. In Chapter 2, I describe how our exploration of vulnerability and intimacy took on a silly tone because of the close bond we created. Body-surfing is one of the exercises that allowed us to grow comfortable with our bodies in close contact and helped set the foundation for us to progress to that place of intimacy a few months later.

Another floor-related skill that we practiced lacks an official name but involves rolling over a partner's back in a slightly different way. With one person in a tabletop position on their hands and knees, their partner rolls over them, connecting their back to the base's back and balancing their center of gravity atop their partner (see Appendix E for full description). There is a lot of room for variation with this movement; the person on top can explore what they can do with their limbs while balancing or the base can shift their position and see how their partner

reacts and adjusts. Once our group had a handle on the basics of this skill, we could play around with it, change how we maneuvered in and out of it, and insert it into improvised scores.

Taking us off of the ground, a different skill we practiced was a basic baby lift. (For a full description, see Appendix F). An important technical element to this one is for the person being lifted to lean in towards their base and use their arm strength to support some of their own weight. Having a maximum amount of the body's surface area in contact with the lifter makes the liftee feel lighter and easier to hold. Once we felt comfortable executing this lift in a stationary way, we practiced it with one person running into the other. With the momentum from the running start, there are more possibilities such as spinning in a circle, swinging the liftee to the lifter's back, segueing it to the ground, or launching the liftee up onto the lifter's shoulder. Transitioning from a baby carry to a shoulder lift appeared several times in the performance of "Head to hand to heart, falling into (this) place."

The three skills described above take place in pairs, but contact improvisation can take place between any number of moving bodies in contact. To practice group partnering, we often played with an exercise that involves standing in a circle with one person in the middle. The person in the middle would fall in any direction and whichever people are closest would catch them and gently nudge them in a new direction. As they continue to fall into different people's arms, they can start to extend a leg off the ground. When this happens, someone in the outer circle can take their leg and start to lift them off the ground. Once they are in the air, the lifters follow their lead and adjust their grip to best support them, eventually lowering them back down.

After practicing a CI skill, we usually transitioned into a writing/thinking/moving prompt. For example, in one of our first rehearsals, we explored what vulnerability means to us. After free-writing for five minutes, we transitioned into movement that lasted for around 5-7

minutes. The movement score was an individual improvisatory exploration, so it did not need to involve contact between anyone. However, when multiple people are dancing in a space together, we are often influenced consciously or unconsciously by the people around us. For example, if many people are moving slowly and fluidly, it creates a softer energy in the space that others might pick up on, causing them to inadvertently start moving in a similar way. On the other hand, one might witness a specific movement and make a deliberate decision to copy it. Despite avoiding touch, factors such as proximity to others, eye contact, and mimicry still create relationships between movers. After our improvisation, we had a discussion about our experience. During these discussions, everyone is encouraged to share, but no one is ever required. We talked about some of our written responses to vulnerability and how that appeared in our movement. A couple of notable observations were that when we were feeling more vulnerable, shy, or exposed, our movements were small, gestural, and frequently on the ground. I noted that I frequently closed my eyes when feeling uncomfortable—if I can't see them, they can't see me.

Another type of writing/movement exploration we engaged in was responding to the prompts, "I am…," "I need…," "I feel…," and "I wish…," This could be extremely literal (e.g. "I am sweating. I am a human. I am hungry.") or more abstract (e.g. "I am the tip of the wave right before it crashes. I feel like a crosswalk.") In the movement that followed this free-write, we had the option to use our voices and incorporate some of our statements into the movement or to remain silent. We returned to these statements throughout the semester and they ended up playing a role in the performance piece, which I will elaborate on in a later section.

Other concepts we worked with involved responding to the questions, "What is your relationship to disability?" and "What does disability mean to you?" Answers could take the

shape of a more personal reflection or an intellectual musing. Similarly, we thought about the question, "What is something you wish people knew about you?" This could relate to disability if applicable to the individual, but it could also relate to any aspect of our personalities or lives that feel unseen or misseen by others.

Our written and movement exploration comprised the bulk of rehearsal sessions, and our post-movement discussions usually ended our time together.

In November, I was invited to present my thesis research at the CTW Undergraduate Research Symposium in the Arts & Humanities, a conference hosted by Wesleyan University. In addition to a brief talk outlining the central concepts of my work, we prepared an improvisation score to perform. The guidelines for the score are as follows:

1. At least two people must be in contact at all times. There may be more than two but no less. When two people disconnect, others must find someone to connect with to maintain the two-in-contact rule.

2. As a collective, we must occupy all levels of the space. This can be one person on the ground and four standing up, three in one level and two in the other, or any combination thereof. When one person switches levels, the group must respond accordingly.

3. On a pre-established musical shift, everyone runs around the space in any direction and then falls to the ground. After a moment of stillness, the score continues as usual.

4. It ends when Arisa and Kelsey execute a duet and everyone else slowly exits the space.

Each component of the score is based on compositional structure and form; it does not explicitly have anything to do with disability or Disability Justice. This was an intentional decision on my part. While sometimes dancers work with thematic scores (e.g. "Think about a time you felt like your disability prevented you from doing something you needed or wanted to. How did that make you feel?"), I wanted to demonstrate how moving bodies in a space can create meaning through their interactions, levels, shapes, and tone. What does the proximity between different movers tell us about their relationships? Does the partnering take on an aggressive, push-and-pull quality, or is it gentler? Do those qualities build a narrative or point toward themes? What can a moment of eye contact elicit?

In addition to the Wesleyan conference, we performed this score at the Dance Department's end-of-semester honors showing and used a slightly adapted version of this score in our April 1st performance.

Spring 2023

In the spring semester, our rehearsals followed a similar structure of checking in, warming up, and then engaging in our main explorations of the day. However, I focused less on practicing CI skills and more on beginning to solidify scores and build movement based on our collection of improvisations from the fall semester. Throughout the fall, we videoed some of our improvisations for reference. This allowed us to watch the videos and pull movements from them to start to build choreography. At the beginning of the spring semester, we all started building solos using this method. We could borrow movements from anyone's improvisations and piece them together in any way that we wanted, with the freedom to add in transitional movements and play with compositional strategies such as repetition, stillnesses, facings, and levels. Within this solo-building choreographic process, we returned to our free-writes based on the prompts "I

am…" and "What is your relationship to disability?" and pulled ideas from one or both of those to incorporate into the solos. Using the same method of pulling movements from group improvisation videos, I choreographed a movement phrase that we inserted into group sections of the piece.

During one February rehearsal, we created a series of gestures, each dancer contributing two gestural movements to it. The gestures were created based off of the prompts, "What about your body are you insecure about?" and "What's one thing you wish people knew about you?" The gestures could be very literal (e.g. interacting with the part of your body that makes you insecure) or more abstract. Our gestures appeared in a structured group section of the piece, and we all had the freedom to incorporate them into the improvised scores.

Spring Break Residency

My four dancers and I all returned to campus early from spring break and spent an intensive four days putting the piece together. Coming into it, we had all of the chunks of movement that we had developed throughout the spring, including a group phrase, group gestures, Arisa's solo, a duet between Kelsey and me, Claire's solo, a trio with Claire, Arisa, and Dominique, our score from the fall (Score 2), and an idea for the pre-show. My goal was to finish each of those individual chunks, create the score that opens the piece (Score 1), and develop transitions to string the section together in a cohesive way. Additionally, over the break, I had each of my cast members choose an excerpt from one of their writing explorations and record themselves speaking it. I provided the option to have someone else not associated with the piece record it to maintain anonymity. I knew that I wanted some of these pieces of recorded text to be a part of the sound score for the piece, but I was not sure how to work them in. Figuring out how to incorporate the recorded text, as well as solidifying what music I wanted to use were

necessary components to finishing the piece during our residency period. With the help of chocolate, pretzels, grapes, gatorade, laughter, qualms, and queries, we successfully put the piece together.

Performance

Pre-show

As people checked in on the second floor of Crozier Williams, they received a flashcard with a prompt on it and instructions explaining that the responses are anonymous, that they would be used in the piece, and that participation was optional. Most of the prompts were "I am…," "I feel…," "I wish…," and "I need…," but some asked questions about the meaning of ableism, disability, and accessibility. The ushers provided writing utensils and instructed them to place their responses in the basket that would be in the lobby as they made their way upstairs. When audience members ascended to the third floor of Crozier Williams, they were greeted by Dominique and I walking on the benches that line the perimeter of the Dance Department lounge. Recorded text was playing through a speaker; it included "I am" statements, reflections about experiences with disability, and stories about care and belonging. Each of the pieces of text was written by my cast and me, with the exception of one piece that was written by a high school dance student (that I used with permission). The image of two people walking slowly on the benches came to me very early on in my creative process. I appreciate that the meaning of this image is vague—each audience member can interpret it differently. For me, it relates to the idea of a precipice, existing on the edge, walking a narrow path, and grappling with rigid structures.

As concert attendees filtered from the lounge to Myers Studio and started to find seats, Arisa and Kelsey were on stage, performing a slow motion version of their respective solos. They continued to move during a brief pre-show speech delivered by Dale Lippincott and Moqu

Alqudah (the two other choreographers whose work was featured in the same program), and then the music started and the piece officially began.

Structure

"Head to hand to heart, falling into (this) place" begins with Score 1, which consists of Dominique, Claire, and I briskly entering the stage and interrupting Kelsey and Arisa from their preshow movement as the music starts and the house lights dim. The movement in this score is fast, involves several lifts, and has a driving energy to it. The quickness of the movement and the fierce music compounded by the fact that the piece starts by interrupting something else speaks to the urgency of Disability Justice. Disabled people cannot wait around for the able-bodied world to suddenly care about us; we must engage with DJ principles and create a world in which accessibility is not an afterthought. And we must do it now.

As Score 1 ends, we transition into the duet which starts with me rolling up Kelsey's sleeves and leads into a lot of partnering work. While moments that demonstrate interdependence appear throughout the piece in instances of contact, nonverbal communication between performers, and group scores, our duet really highlights the beauty of interdependence and collective care. The touch in this duet is gentle and meaningful; it establishes a deep connection between the movers and lends itself to complex partnering movements. There are also moments of tender eye contact that underscore the sense of friendship and care between the pair. At the end of the duet, Kelsey exits as I take off my button down shirt and hand it to Arisa, who has just entered. Arisa takes the shirt and begins her solo as I exit the stage.

Arisa's movement has a delicate tone and specificity to it that accentuates her individuality. Towards the end of her solo, Dominique and Claire join her on stage which leads into their trio. As their trio comes to an end, Kelsey and I enter the stage and a group section

begins. This section incorporates our gesture phrase and set choreography, as well as moments of improvisation and a playful spoken game of group counting. The sound score for this section consists of a compilation of "I am…," "I feel…," "I wish…," and "I need…" statements from each of us that I spliced together.

As the group section ends, Claire begins her solo which takes on a deeply human and intense tone, the movement getting increasingly more physically exertive and emotionally desperate as it continues. An audio track that mixes several different pieces of text including her own reflection on disability plays in the background. The overlapping voices mirror the physical rigor and emotional depth of the solo; movements that Claire first executed with precision become messy and distorted as the voices keep getting louder and the individual words become unidentifiable. Her solo ends when Kelsey runs onto the stage and embraces her, pulling her out of her mental spiral (not to mention the quick and dizzying series of turns she executes at the end of her solo). Their moment of stillness as Kelsey holds Claire is poignant and forces viewers to sit with the raw emotion of the solo.

The moment of connection between Kelsey and Claire leads into Score 2, the last section of the piece. The structure of Score 2 is based on the score we performed at Wesleyan University which is described earlier in this chapter. However, we also incorporated the flashcards that the audience filled out into this final portion of our work. At any point, each of us could go over to the basket (which was placed in the downstage right corner of the stage before the piece started), extract a flashcard, and read it aloud. We also had the freedom to choose what to do with the physical piece of paper (place it carefully on the ground? build a paper airplane with it? crumble it into a ball and toss it at another dancer? build a house of cards with them?). Including the audience's voice into the piece was really important to me because for a piece centered on

collectivity and interdependence, it made no sense for me to put up the fourth wall between the stage and the audience. The piece shares bits of our individual stories, but the audience voice deserves to be heard as well. As the music ends, we all form a circle, sit criss-crossed in the center of the stage, and begin to chat. Our conversation could be about anything, but it became a pattern that at the very end, I would ask anyone if they had any qualms or queries (a common question of mine from throughout the rehearsal process). The lights fade on us chatting, laughing, and being ourselves.

Symbolism

Shirts: The costumes for this piece consisted of long sleeve button down shirts left unbuttoned, tank tops, and pants. While we all started wearing the button downs, by the end of the piece, they all accumulated in a pile near the basket of flashcards. Each moment when the outer shirt comes off involves a meaningful moment between two dancers. Whether one person helps another dancer take theirs off, one person drops theirs and another picks it up, or one person takes theirs off and offers it to another dancer, the act of removing the shirts was a motif throughout the piece. After the show, several audience members approached me to ask about the meaning behind the shirts. For me, it represents a few different ideas, including lifting a weight off of your chest, learning to lean on others, and peeling back a layer of yourself to let people see you more authentically.

Sleeves: At the beginning of the duet between Kelsey and me, I gently and methodically roll up her sleeves for her. Like the idea of walking on the benches, this image came to me early on in my creative process. I think the act of helping someone roll up their sleeves is a tender way of expressing care. Like removing the shirts, it also has an element of peeling back layers and

sharing parts of yourself with others. On a more personal level, the sleeves for me demonstrate my own insecurities and process of learning to be more comfortable in my body.

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Throughout our rehearsal process, we endeavored to enact DJ principles not only in our movement but through all of the ways we engage with each other. Our warm-up structure exemplifies this, as it embodies an anti-hierarchical and community-oriented politic. Likewise, consistently checking in with each other demonstrates collective care, and taking the time to chat without worrying about sacrificing productivity represents an anti-capitalist mindset. Additionally, I brought snacks to many rehearsals in an effort to make sure everyone's needs were being met. Sharing a meal is a common practice in DJ circles; it is a small gesture steeped in profound love.

At the beginning of this project, I never could have imagined what the final piece would look like. So much of my research and thinking has been about the process, and although I wanted to make a piece, so much of the richness lived in little moments in rehearsals when two people made eye contact and smiled, when we were uncontrollably laughing, when we lost track of time and chatted about life for an hour, when one person cried, when two people celebrated successfully executing a lift they had never done before. I wanted to figure out a way to transfer that authenticity of our rehearsal space onto the stage. Many pieces aim to be "clean"—to rehearse and rehearse until all the trouble spots are worked out, until everything is practiced and nothing will go wrong. In some of my choreographic endeavors, I, too, aim for that aesthetic. But for this piece, so much of the beauty of it lives in the kinks, in the imperfection.

Conclusion

I do not have any grandiose conclusions or life-altering pieces of advice to end with. I'm not going to say that everyone should go out and try contact improvisation (though that'd be pretty cool). I'm not going to say that everyone should drop everything and become a Disability Justice activist (though that, too, would be awesome). I just hope that by narrowing in on a select few DJ principles and demonstrating how they function in contact improvisation, I have radically de-radicalized Disability Justice concepts.

Disability Justice is radical in that it actively disrupts the dominant structures of white supremacy, capitalism, and heteropatriarchy that breed ableism and force us to live in a society that is not built for disabled people. But many DJ principles are things that *we already do* in many contexts.

Chapter 1 demonstrates how interdependence shows up everywhere in contact improvisation and other art forms. I hope it calls to mind other aspects of life in which interdependence might manifest, and I hope that maybe it makes it seem more realistic, more doable, more manageable to incorporate into everyday life. Chapter 2 portrays how vulnerability can be a beautiful thing, but without consent, it turns into forced intimacy. It is also honest; CI is certainly not perfect. But I hope that delineating many ways that consent can be communicated in CI allows people to reexamine day-to-day interactions and work towards cultivating a culture of consent. Other DJ principles that come up in CI, that I have touched on explicitly or implicitly in this paper, are recognizing wholeness, anti-capitalist politics, and collective care as a stepping stone for collective access and liberation.

Art is one of those things that forces us to slow down and take in the moment. Dance is fleeting—what's happening one second is different the next. I hope that this project allows

people to sit with these concepts for just a minute (or 25 minutes and 19 seconds). The world

will not fall apart if we take time to breathe, lend a friend a hand (or a shoulder or back), and

stand in solidarity with our neighbors. In fact, it might just help us build the world that we want

to live in.

Appendix A: Visual Representation of CI

Note the moments of contact between 4:00-6:00 in "[Head to hand to heart, falling into (this) place](#)" (password: honors2023).

Appendix B: SAS Documentation Requirements

1. Documentation must be typewritten on business letterhead from a licensed professional -- not related to the student -- who is qualified to give a psychological and/or medical diagnosis. The name, credentials and signature of the licensed professional must appear on the documentation.

2. The documentation must include all pertinent diagnoses, clearly stated and explained.

3. Information outlining testing/assessment tools must be included. Learning disability testing must include the actual standard test scores.

4. Documentation must include information on how the disability currently impacts the individual and document "how a major life activity is limited by providing a clear sense of severity, frequency and pervasiveness of the condition(s)."

5. All pertinent positive and negative effects of mitigating measures must be addressed. This could include a description of treatment, medications (and potential side effects) and assistive devices with estimated effectiveness of their impact on the disability.

6. Documentation should provide recommendations for accommodations for the individual and include the rationale for the recommended accommodations. (Excerpted from the SAS website section "How to Register and Request Accommodations")

Appendix C: Description of Poem

The poem that begins Chapter 3 comes from the flashcards that audience members filled out at our April 1st performance. While most of the language belongs to anonymous audience

members, the composition of the poem is mine.

Appendix D: Description of Body-Surfing

To start, Person A lies flat on the floor on their front or their back. Person B lies across Person A's torso but perpendicular to them. As Person A begins to roll, the momentum they create causes Person B to slide off of them in the opposite direction.

Appendix E: Description of Floor Partnering Technique

Person A starts in a tabletop position on their hands and knees with their hands flat on the floor under their shoulders and their knees aligned under their hips. Person B assumes the same position right next to Person A so that their arms and torsos are lightly touching. Person B then starts to slide their body up against Person A who is acting as the base and rotate their body so that their back is resting on top of Person A's back. From there, they continue rotating in the same direction so that they slide down the other side of Person A. Then they can swap roles and Person A becomes the mover and Person B the base. For maximum movement possibilities, when the mover reaches the top of the base's body, their hips should be on top of the base's hips so that they are completely supported. This allows the person on top to lift their legs and arms off the floor so that they are completely balanced atop their partner and explore how the limbs can move through the air.

Appendix F: Description of Baby Lift

To set up for it, one person puts their arm around their partner's shoulder and neck and lifts one of their legs up for their partner to support. As the base holds the first leg, the liftee presses down on the base's shoulder and lifts their second leg to meet the first. As they do this, the liftee leans into the base's body so that a maximum amount of surface area is in contact with one another.

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