Myths to Break Down: Moving Toward Ethical Communication and Ethical Sexuality in CI

by Sarah Gottlieb • 2018/04/24 • 10 Comments

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Hi all, this is Richard. I'm pleased to introduce guest blogger Sarah Gottlieb, who has been thinking about topics related to contact improvisation, sexuality, consent, and rape culture, and who will be sharing some of those thoughts on my blog. This is the first of what may be several articles from Sarah. Now Sarah:

Hello! I'm Sarah Gottlieb and I'm a CI practitioner/teacher who invests a lot of time thinking about ethical sexuality. I'll just start out by saying that I am a queer survivor of multiple forms of sexual violence and that this affects my relationship to my body, how I experience social relationships in dance spaces, as well as my approach to facilitating CI.

Talking about ethical sexuality is how I survive CI, and since that's the case, I find myself regularly engaged in such conversations. About a year ago, I began a collection of written responses to what I consider to be erroneous or unfounded beliefs commonly held in CI circles, called "Myths to Break Down." Some of them are come-back fantasies: things I wish I had said, or in some cases felt awesome about saying. Others are less dialectical, and function as opportunities to explore in depth some of the more complicated aspects of ethical communication and sexuality in CI.

These thought pieces are intended to be contributions to ongoing

conversations. I welcome feedback, continued discussion, and hope to have a productive impact on the work that is already happening within the CI community.

Happy reading, respectful dancing!

Love

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#1: It makes people uncomfortable to talk about boundary setting and sexuality right before dancing together.

There is an idea that talking about boundaries, sexuality, or ethical communication in opening circles is an awkward way to build the kind of relaxed, trusting environment necessary for CI dancing.

But for many people, intimate experiences such as dancing contact improvisation feel better if the facilitators have explicitly addressed ethical sexuality. For example, when as a facilitator I've confronted why we shouldn't take advantage of CI's innately intimate qualities to catalyze romantic connections, I've had many people—first-time jammers, beginners, and veteran dancers alike—tell me they were relieved to hear someone voice their concerns. The fact is, issues related to sexuality are for many people the source of concern and confusion about CI.[1]

Resistance to this discussion is problematic because CI is an inherently social form, and therefore should take into account how we affect others, even if addressing those effects could be uncomfortable.

Actually, I know this is a radical statement for some people, but to me *contact*

improvisation includes developing social responsibility. And so part of being concerned with how we affect others means that we talk about ethical sexuality, boundary setting, and power dynamics.

What I'm proposing around consent, sexism, and ethical communication is actually not such a radical extension of the form. CI already develops skills related to consent and ethical communication. The concepts of listening and shared agency in a dance are considered fundamental. This shared agency is re-negotiated throughout the course of a dance. It seems logical that we would extend those skills into a larger realm of social consciousness that takes into account sexuality, sexism, and power.

When facilitators and practitioners are silent about these issues, it becomes an unconscious yet harmful expression of privilege[2]. Maintaining a distance from the topic is not possible for people who must constantly set sexual boundaries while dancing (perhaps the majority of women and queers). Myself, I had no choice but to learn how to dance CI in ways that helped me set sexual boundaries.

Furthermore, the failure to address boundaries, consent, and sexuality leads to the false notion that CI is inherently "safe."[3] While CI spaces can be nurturing, they are not inherently safe. Promoting them as such perpetuates a damaging impression that assumes that all students/practitioners have inherently equal power in a dance.[4].

#2: It's okay to massage me after we dance.

A response to romantic hands after dancing

Some dances resolve in a sort of post-coital lull, a moment when the shared energy generated by a dance continues to play and swing around our resting bodies.

Sometimes I have no interest in this moment. It's too intimate. Too sexual. Sometimes it feels icky or overwhelming. Sometimes I'm embarrassed to be in public. Sometimes I feel self-conscious about the image being projected into the room by my body lying in the corner breathing with another.

But it's also true that at times it is wonderful to ride a dance down, allowing my nervous system to find its still point before disconnecting from my partner. This resolution can be beautiful, medicinal—part of the magic that I love about contact improvisation.

However.

When that calm moment becomes a platform to offer pleasure, or seek to bond in a romantic way, this is transgressive. I'm speaking to a collective YOU: a conglomerate of so many people over the course of years. Let me be clear, our physical intimacy in that moment isn't really personal. Dances that reach a level of physical or energetic intimacy are not by default sexual, romantic, or emotional to me. I'm not presuming anything about your feelings. I'm not creating a narrative. So please, don't let your hands make assumptions.

It is not ethical to interpret CI as permission to touch my body with sexual or romantic intention. To avoid ambiguity, the best thing to do is to ask for verbal consent before massaging or caressing me.

#3: Saying "No" is easy

If you think that saying "No" to unwelcome sexual touch or behavior is easy, you are wrong.[5]

I'll be honest, I get really frustrated when a conversation about ethical sexuality becomes focused on dancers learning how to say no, leave a dance,

or better protect themselves against unwanted sexual/ sexually-charged/ sexually-ambiguous attention. This emphasis on educating people about how to appropriately *respond* to unwanted sexual touch after it happens, versus developing a deeper understanding of the underlying dynamics that create instances of sexual violence in CI, is problematic. (This isn't the subject of this post, but before offering further reflections, I think it's important to state upfront that people are responsible for not transgressing others' boundaries with their own sexual agendas, and for developing awareness about sexual consent.)

And while consent and boundary-setting are important skills, the idea that at any given moment one can just say "No" to even subtle sexual advances is simply uninformed. To begin with, people talk about saying "No" as if it's this neutral thing—someone does something and you say yes or no. But it's not. Saying "No" is a response to having had your boundaries crossed, and it's a way of re-establishing power or control over a situation in which you are no longer safe, or when your safety has been compromised.

Saying "No" is not setting a boundary, it's re-establishing a boundary

Sometimes discussions about establishing boundaries miss the fact that boundaries are primarily negotiated nonverbally. People don't actually move through the world verbally negotiating their boundaries in every interaction.

When we dance contact improvisation we also assume that most negotiations will occur through touch and physicality. We assume that all parties are invested in responding to the physical cues of their partner or partners.

Often we think of saying "No" as setting a boundary. But that only becomes necessary after nonverbal boundaries have been ignored, missed, or

misunderstood. Saying "No," either verbally or nonverbally, is not setting a boundary, it's re-establishing a boundary after it has been transgressed.

When a *sexual* boundary has been transgressed the act of re-establishing that boundary can have an especially significant emotional cost.

The experience of saying "No"

The leap from dancing to verbally saying "No" is not easy. That just needs to be understood. For me it goes like this:

- First, I have to recognize that I am feeling uncomfortable. Since I am socialized as a woman, with the expectation that I should be able to easily make emotional accommodations and put others before me, I usually brush that feeling off a few times before I accept that it is strong enough to deserve attention.
- Then I have to check in to make sure that the source of my discomfort is someone else, and not my own headtrip or gas.
- Then, I swell with a mixed sensation of disappointment, dread, and anxiety (as well as fear, rage, or any other cocktail of heightened emotions which could be related to the specific details of the current experience, past trauma, a response to other factors about the environment, etc.).
- Next I have to calm myself down using strategies developed over the course of a lifetime fending off unwanted sexual advances. I charge myself with assessing the situation carefully, pinpointing the nature of the pressure I'm experiencing. I remind myself that I don't need to understand my experience fully or justify it, and that the mere fact of feeling a transgression is valid. I remind myself that I deserve to stop it immediately.
- At this stage, I also do a lot of subconscious caretaking. I get concerned

for the other person, feel guilty for the possibility that they might feel uncomfortable, attacked, or offended. I also experience fear of backlash, rage, or violence. In a split second I am running through how safe I feel, considering my options for escaping and/or changing the situation, and making a decision about how and what to say so that I can re-establish my own comfort and wellbeing with the least violent outcome.

- Then I need to find my voice. I need to take a deep breath. I need to actually speak. I always say less than what I feel. I always minimize my discomfort, apologize for it, or communicate that it is not the other person's fault, even when it absolutely is.
- And even if all goes well and my message is immediately heard, I then need to protect my very raw heart, and search for a safe way to come down from that experience. I need to find a safe person to sit next to, who given the context, may or may not be present. I need to calm my nervous system and recover from a highly activated state. It's very triggering to have to set verbal boundaries against sexual transgressions, and the adrenaline rush can set me off for days.

This whole process can take 10 seconds.

That's an overview of my personal experience, but the experience of setting boundaries is further complicated by intersectional power dynamics and oppressions. Race, gender, ability, experience with CI, a sense of belonging within a particular jam/community, age, etc. can all affect a person's ability to say "No."

So no, saying "No" is not easy. Furthermore, it's an uninformed micro-aggression (that is, a small but wearying form of oppression) to suggest that it is. As much as I advocate for myself and others to practice setting boundaries and speaking them, I also advocate for the world to do better at not transgressing in the first place.

Footnotes

1. The subject of how CI or conversations about sex can be triggering is a big one, perhaps to be addressed in another post.
2. For an explanation of privilege, see "Privilege 101: A Quick and Dirty Guide" or "Intersectionality 101: Understanding Your Privilege And Oppression"
3. This is a very large topic; perhaps I will address it in a future post.
4. Another myth; again perhaps for a future post.
5. We work with lots of different types of "No"s in contact improvisation, but in this piece I'm focusing on the verbal "No." However, the difficulties and complexities of saying "No" are generally also true of nonverbal ways of saying no.