Sensitive knowledge through an autoethnography of Contact Improvisation

1. **Intimacy as a Research Topic**
    a. CD & CI
    b. Tanzania
    c. Research question emerges from fieldwork: a question that triggers, an observation that stresses the unfamiliarity of the event/action. Pre-fieldwork. Why? How?

2. **Question of access and method: How to grasp such "an intimate topic?"**
    a. Limits of interviews (production processes in Swiss CD)

As Brenda Farnell said, a lot has been talked *about/of* the body, but much less *from* the body (Farnell 1999, 342).

    b. Fieldwork and Autoethnography

Autoethnography, "a method of self-study in which the researcher is viewed as a viable data source" (Leavy 2009, 37). *Complementary to classical ethnographic fieldwork, I consider autoethnography as an advantage in the investigation of intimate questions. It also enables the sharing of sensoriality, which isn't routinely expressed in discourses*.

According to anthropologist Roger Lancaster, "autoethnography is an embodied practice: it is ethnographic investigation that takes auto-reflective perceptions of the world as the starting point for generalizations and theorizations about the cultural, the social, and the political" (Lancaster 2011, 46). *Writing from my own dance practice allows me to anchor my experience and to reach a deeper layer in the understanding of the body*. Lancaster added that autoethnography goes beyond the individual, reporting about the anthropologist's own world. Personal storytelling is intertwined with political, historical and academic discourses from within a social context (Lancaster 2011, 46).

3. **Dancing Aesthesia: focus group & movement based research**

Warm up

duett: what do I touch and how?

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a dance sequence to describe

I shared my questions and hypothesis with practitioners, who confronted my hypothesis. ″I″ is here a collective one, an ″I″ that emerged out of the CI dance community. As Patricia Leavy wrote, ″*autoethnography r*efers to writing about the personal and its relationship to culture″ (Leavy 2009, 37).

4. **Hypothesis:**
    a. Dance (re)defines the boundaries of intimacy experienced in daily life
    Montreal – Paris - Dakar

When a newcomer attends his/her first Montreal's jam, (s)he might think that contact is mainly about touch and dance caress. (S)he sees dancers sitting on the floor, eyes closed, breathing and touching each other's skin with the back/forearm in slow motion. According to contact teachers, touch is not the first aim of the dance, although it appears to be the more apparent sign. In fact, contact is first meant to be a dialogue of weight transfer (Novack 1990, 105). The closeness is the visible sign, what a traditional ethnographer would observe and describe. But from the dancer perspective, I was aware of the presence of elements that mark a distance in intimate situations.

    b. Emotional versus physical intimacy

I was looking for taboos-conventions regulating touch (which body parts are touched? How? What kind of texture is promoted? What quality of touch?)

5. **Politics of Representation of Otherness**
    Autoethnography as a writing method

Nicole Seiler

Eric Luke. Lassiter. 2005. Collaborative Ethnography: co-definition research questions. Co-interpretation.co-writing

In October 2019, I attended a workshop with Nita Little. In her introduction, she mentioned the importance of the eyes in western culture, adding that it was touch that allows communion in CI.

Touch allows us to capture signals from a dance partner: ″what we want to know when we touch the other is to feel where is the other in its relationship to the earth. Where are the anchors?″ Touch aims to connect to a partner's sense of gravity. In that sense, touching is not the aim, but the consequence of an underlying goal. Nita introduced us to several exercises. We intended to hear the intention of the partner in a long handshake. We were playing with the degree of attention we were giving in the hand, while looking at each other's eyes. Nita specified that touch was more than a skin to skin contact, a gift exchange.

When I started to reflect on the politics of touch in contact, I noticed the presence of informal conventions regulating the way people were touching each other. However, these conversions are not formalized neither written. It is only through learning-by-doing that contact dancers develop the right quality of touch. Actually, a touch reveals the degree of knowledge of a dancer, whether s(he) is experimented or is a newcomer.

I started looking for ″taboos″ – body parts that shouldn't been touched. I thought of hair, hands and neck, which are considered as more private than the back, shoulders and legs. I noted a hierarchy between body fragments. One of the simple ways to start a dance is to begin back to back, or shoulder to shoulder. Then, the dancers can slowly roll on the side, touching one another's shoulders, and then forearms while facing each other. Back, shoulders, forearms and legs belong to the easiest body parts in establishing contact. The more dancers rehearse together, larger are the opportunities of contact, because each dance pushes intimate boundaries a step further.

After additional observations and exchange with other practitioners, I realized that it is was less a taboo of specific zones than a question of circumstances. Dance is subjective and experienced differently from one dancer to another. *For myself, I wouldn't feel comfortable if a male dancer touches my hair and neck with his fingers the first time we share a duet. If we start dancing regularly, building a trustful relationship, and if I feel an honest intention behind his dance, it wouldn't bother me if it happens coincidentally. Other dancers might have less resistance than me. I also noticed how flexible my "intimate boundaries" are, depending on my dancer partner, circumstances, as well as my emotional and physical states. The same gesture can be felt too intimate in specific contexts, and not in others.* I've noticed the constant change of perception of intimacy and the way it is intertwined with notions

of time and experience: the more a regular dance practice occurs between dance partners, the more closeness will be allowed.

In a long conversation with four practitioners in a workshop I lead at the *White Wall Studio* in Montreal in autumn 2019, we agreed that it is not the physical texture or the quality of the touch – the pressure (soft, strong, engaged), the strength – that makes the touch appropriate or not. Neither is there a taboo of body parts, because each dancer engages differently with his/her body. Some CI teachers recommend avoiding hands, forbid grasping and caressing with fingers. But on the dance floor, all of this can happen. We agreed about the relativeness of these constraints since the experience of touch is subjective.

One of the participants assumed that the "hand-taboo" was a way to encourage new practitioners to focus on other body parts. Indeed, at the beginning of learning CI, it can be challenging to establish contact apart from with the hands. Newcomers need to learn another way of touching than the ones familiar in daily life. Also, what we all agreed about is the question of intention: if we can feel a respectful intention of our partner (caring, listening, interested in the dance and not in sexuality), we open up ourselves to more proximity. Furthermore, we agreed that touch can happen anywhere if it is to support. A hand placed on the torso or very close to genitals wouldn't be judged inappropriate if it happens ″coincidently″ in a lift.

In my own experience, CI is a specific area where touch is shared beyond therapeutic or erotic intention. As Manning wrote, touch is an ″act of reaching toward″ (Manning 2006, xv). Nevertheless, I noted that any CI dancer undergoes a process of de-leaning and re-learning: there is a de-eroticization and de-sexualization of touching. So what happens in the CI touch that is more than physicality but less than eroticism?

I was wondering to which extend the experience of touch is an intimate phenomenon. At which physical proximity does intimacy begin between bodies? Dancers recognize the specific sense of intimacy produced in a dance encounter, creating different boundaries than the ones of daily life. Closeness between bodies (touching each other, sweating, dancing naked and sharing emotionality) generates a particular (inter)subjective intimate experience.

Following the proxemics of anthropologist Edward T. Hall, ″man unconsciously structures microspace – the distance between men in the conduct of daily transactions, the organization of

space″ (Hall 1963, 1003). Distance between bodies is organized in social interactions, and the body knows how to get adjusted to any situation, composing with the space/distance conventions of each place. Edward T. Hall distinguishes between intimate, personal, social and public spheres distance between bodies.[1] The ″intimate distance″ – less than 40 centimetres – refers to situations such as embracing, touching or whispering, when head and genitals come in contact (Hall 1968, 93). In CI, dancers move within this ″intimate distance. ″ However, this physical intimacy doesn't necessarily imply an emotional one (dancers can be close, without developing emotional feeling).

The body operates transitions from place to place to adjust to distance conventions. Usually, these adjustments happen intuitively. Only unexpected incidents remind us of socialization and embodied knowledge. *For instance, when I came back to Switzerland after fourteen months working in Tanzania, public transportation's users were kindly pushing me, manifesting their discomfort toward my bodily presence. Used to crowded buses without a free centimetre between people, my body had incorporated a different social concept of acceptable distance between bodies. In Switzerland, I needed to re-embody local proxemics*. Unlike Hall, I think that intimacy cannot be measured objectively. It is not a matter of centimeters. In my opinion, the issue of what is intimate should be explained through other "invisible" features, such as affects and intentions.

Ethymology: Intimare

Etymologically, intimacy bears the idea of exhibition: *intimare* means ″to tell about, to relate″ (Manning 2011, 26), ″to publish or announce″ (Marar 2014, 20). *There is a movement toward the outside*. Psychologist S. Tisseron calls ″extimity″[2] the drive individuals are animated by, to share/expose their intimate lives, physical as well as psychic (Tisseron 2001/2011).

Intimate and distant:

Jean-Luc Nancy considers *proximate* as the correlate of *intimate,*[3] arguing that the two aspects are inseparably intertwined (Nancy 1996, 103). The philosopher writes that the proximate is the closest to oneself, without being oneself. At the same time, proximity with the other is also the infinite distance to him/her: it is what separates us from others. *Being with* simultaneously

[1] Hall distinguishes four spaces, each one regulated by another proximity/distance between bodies: intimate (- 40 cm), personal (40-125 cm), social-consultive (120-360 cm) and public (+ 360 cm). The personal sphere is characterized by the distance of an elbow and the social sphere by a stretched arm distance (Hall 1963).

[2] In original language: ″extimité.″

[3] In original language : ″ le *proxime* est le corrélat de l'*intime*″ (Nancy 1996, 103).

underlines a contact and a gap, an incommensurability and a shared intimacy (Nancy 1996, 105). This co-presence of closeness and distance in intimate relationships is a phenomenon also revealed by poet and art critic Okwui Enwezor: *Intense proximity* refers to the strong degree of proximity cultures share today because of their co-existence in same spaces, which also implies frictions, fractures and cultural antagonism (Enwezor 2012, 24). For the poet, intense proximity defines the oscillation between distance fading away (in a world with multiple connections) and an intensification of boundaries (emerging to recreate difference) (Bouteloup 2012, 37).

Since the beginning of my research, I was looking for these signs of distance, for theses boundaries, to understand how dancers recreate boundaries under such proximity. For instance, these mechanisms are expressed through

- Distinction between relationship on the dance floor and in daily life (best friends/strangers)
- Gaze

Intimus: Inter/Intus

6. Cultural aspect of Intimacy : Universality of CI and touch?

> Touching, as an activity, is tremendously culturally loaded. CI does offer a relatively neutral vehicle for exploring the exchange of movement and impulses through the touch – not particularly clinical, not necessarily social, but human and physical – but even so, we're never completely free of our cultural assumptions and patterns.
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> (Koteen and Stark Smith 2008, 8)

German lecturer Jakob Maché shared his experience while teaching in Lagos since 2013. As a CI practitioner, he tried to implement the somatic practice. The first jam was finally organized in

Nigeria in 2019 with fifteen local dancers.[4] One of them, from Benin, described his difficulties with touching and lifting:

> One of the biggest difficulties was to be in touch with another body. I wasn't used to it, and therefore I needed time to listen and accept the proposition of the other body. Moreover, I struggled to get out of my comfort zone with the lifts, as I prefer to be the one lifting than the one being lifted. It was a challenge, but I could overcome it.
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> (Maché and Busayo 2020)[5]

K.S. Armand, from Mali, stressed the resistance faced by female dancers:

> Dancing close to another body is nothing new to me, but (…) I saw that the girls were in their shy corners, but once they started to work with touch, I saw them let go and they spoke out things they would never dare to otherwise, and then we had a lot of fun.
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> (Maché and Busayo 2020)[6]

[4] Videos: https://archive.org/details/img3265_201910/IMG_3265.mov (accessed 28/02/2020).
[5] https://contactquarterly.com/contact-improvisation/newsletter/#view=voices-from-west-africa-on-contact-improvisation (accessed 25/02/20).
[6] Idem.