Wesleyan University The Honors College

The Touch Project:
Performing Gender Across and Through Our Skins

by

Kelly Klein
Class of 2008

A thesis submitted to the
faculty of Wesleyan University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts
with Departmental Honors in Dance and Feminist, Gender and Sexuality Studies

Middletown, Connecticut April, 2008

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Acknowledgements

First, I would like to thank my wonderful advisers, Katja Kolcio of the Dance Department and Maureen Sullivan of the Feminist, Gender and Sexuality Studies Department. These incredibly intelligent women provided me endless support intellectually and emotionally through this process, helping me sort through three vastly different academic angles to create this interdisciplinary work.

To Pedro Alejandro, Chair of the Dance Department, and Lori Gruen, Chair of the Feminist, Gender and Sexuality Studies Department, thank you for helping me take on this project. These two departments have served as a wonderfully supportive and challenging home for me at Wesleyan University.

Thank you to Michelle Olerud of the Dance Department for your help over the last four years and organizing the thesis shows. Thank you to Noreen Baris for guiding me through the Feminist, Gender and Sexuality Studies Department.

A million thanks to my beautiful and courageous dancers who took on this project with me. Galen DeGraf, thank you for the wonderful soundscape that you composed and performed for each piece. Thank you to Ledah Wilcox for taking the dance photos and the crew of the fall and spring Senior Thesis Dance shows.

To the students of the FGSS Senior Seminar and Professor Aradhana Sharma, I am grateful for your guidance and support while embarking on this thesis last fall. Your faith in the project helped keep me going until the end!

Thank you to my friends and roommates for making life outside of the studio and library filled with life, laughter and love. These past four years would not have been the same without you. You have kept me grounded, sane, and excited throughout the many rehearsals, late nights, and long papers.

I am forever thankful to my parents, Alan Klein and Laura Mueller, for their interest and excitement about this project which helped me stay motivated throughout the year. They have inspired me in countless ways ever since I can remember, giving me the perfect combination of guidance and freedom.

To my sister Rebecca Klein, my brother Josh Shaffer, my cousins, aunts, uncles, Grandmom Carole Sundquist, my grandmother, Lola Klein (1923-2000) and grandfather, Edward Mueller (1923-2008), thank you for your love and care over the years.

This project was inspired by and conducted in the spirit of my late grandfather Donald Klein (1923-2007). His infinite passion for life and learning continues to motivate me; his discoveries, words and wisdom continue to guide me in my goal to live appreciatively; and his love continues to nurture me. Thank you, Grandpa.

INTRODUCTION:
Gender In and Through Touch

Cooldude21*: so how was work?
KellyPK2008*: it was good
KellyPK2008: the bus boy head chef guy touched my ass though
Cooldude21: what?!?
KellyPK2008: yea, i was pretty upset about it
Cooldude21: did you fucking smack him!?!??!
KellyPK2008: it wasn't firm enough for me to do anything about it
KellyPK2008: like, no one saw and it was completely in passing
KellyPK2008: but it was definitely not the way his hand had to go
KellyPK2008: or would go naturally and he was unnaturally close you know?
Cooldude21: yeah i know
Cooldude21: um... if he does it again
Cooldude21: you oughta say somethin to someone
KellyPK2008: how can i though?
KellyPK2008: thats the fucking problem
Cooldude21: or... if that doesn't work
Cooldude21: i can always bring a baseball bat up
KellyPK2008: lol
KellyPK2008: there's no way i can stop that
Cooldude21: which?
Cooldude21: the baseball bat?
Cooldude21: the only thing that can stop that will be his head
KellyPK2008: lol, no him doing it
Cooldude21: what is this guy's position?
KellyPK2008: this guy is like, head of kitchen staff
Cooldude21: play fucking hardball
Cooldude21: because here's the thing
Cooldude21: FUCK working for that place
Cooldude21: if that shit is gonna happen to you
Cooldude21: if he does it again
Cooldude21: just look him in the eye
Cooldude21: and be like "no thanks, not interested"
KellyPK2008: but honestly it happens no matter where you go, and its better in this kind of place
Cooldude21: oh
Cooldude21: man

Cooldude21: no daughter for me
KellyPK2008: but its incidental seeming enough that he could just be like, what are you talking about?
Cooldude21: no no no
Cooldude21: if you say "no thanks, not interested"
Cooldude21: he'll fucking know
KellyPK2008: of course he'll know
KellyPK2008: but he wouldnt acknowledge it
KellyPK2008: i dont think he cares if i'm interested
Cooldude21: right
Cooldude21: me either
Cooldude21: but this happens everywhere?
KellyPK2008: i mean, in some form or another
Cooldude21: i am in the wrong business
Cooldude21: i should work in restaurants
Cooldude21: where i can smack some girl on the ass
Cooldude21: and just be like "come on... we're all professionals here"[1]

**Screen-names have been changed.*

I am a white, middle-class, cis-gendered female in my early twenties. The instant message conversation above took place between me and a male friend during the summer of 2007 when I was living and working as a waitress in Brooklyn, NY. While I didn't know it at the time, this brief conversation illuminates the role that touch plays in our culture, shaping our every day experiences of ourselves and our identities in relationship to others. Modern U.S. culture's dominant touch paradigms carry connotations of sexuality, gender, and power; all of which are communicated through who has access to whom and who is accessible to whom, and, most importantly, how.

As can be seen in the above conversation, I experienced feelings of violation, helplessness, inferiority, and anger which I attributed to an unwelcome and, in my opinion, inappropriate touch that I received from a male co-worker. Whether or not he meant to touch me in that manner is virtually insignificant to the situation, given

[1] Kelly Klein, Personal Correspondence with friend, Jul. 2007.

that I experienced a violation and felt unable to avoid such contact in the future regardless of his intentions. What *is* relevant, though is the power and danger associated with touch in U.S. culture.

In that moment—and in other moments like it that I have lived (or will live)—I experienced my body as able to be violated and easily accessible to those more powerful than me. As many writers and theorists such as Judith Butler have shown, ideologies and practices of gender are inextricably linked to ideologies and practices of power; gendered relationships are in fact power-laden relationships. Further, our gender is wrapped up in the sexualization of our bodies and lives, which also affects our touch paradigms and how touch is experienced on different surfaces of the body. The surfaces of the body are in fact differentiated by their sexualized role in gender signification. This thesis will show how our everyday experiences of touching others and being touched by others create, revise and reinforce our gendered identities and cultural conceptions of gender by embodying and enacting identities in relationship to cultural heterosexual ideologies of power and sexuality.

With this thesis, which I will hereafter call the Touch Project, I approached everyday touch and dominant touch paradigms from three academic angles to provide a greater depth of exploration. First, modern gender theories provide an exploration of how gender is socially constructed and functions in the entirety of our society. Second, social science studies on touch describe patterns in touch behavior based on gender that show how touch is used everyday and vary by gender. Lastly, I used choreographic research which allowed me to research these issues with real people and ultimately create two works for public performance that were focused on touch.

I am in part approaching the role of touch in the creation of our gender identities and cultural conceptions of gender through these three angles with a feminist political agenda. In U.S. culture, knowledge is usually categorized and separated into strict disciplines, creating and reinforcing a cultural hierarchy. I would like instead to reveal the interconnectedness of these discourses and what they have to offer one another, a goal often held by feminist writers attempting to break down the patriarchal regime of knowledge.

Gender theory and social science research reinforce and inform one another, providing a more complete background of the role of gender in our society and how touch is a gendered practice. Social science research on touch illuminates issues surrounding the power and privilege of touch in our culture, exploring how rules surrounding who can touch whom are based on social hierarchies like gender. Modern gender theory offers to this social science research an understanding that actions like touch repeatedly and constantly create and recreate these hierarchies and do not merely passively reflect the cultural standard. However, current gender theory fails to sufficiently account for how gender is experienced and created in our physical bodies in and through relationships (especially contact) with other bodies. The social science research illuminates specific ways that touch is used to communicate and the important role it plays in our development from the time we are born. At the same time, this research often assumes a prediscursive gendered body and does not deeply explore how the specific gendered body functions in and is in fact gendered by touch interactions. This isn’t the whole story that touch has to tell about our gender identities and constructs.

In order to learn more about touch in our culture and more deeply explore its relationship to gender, I decided to utilize choreographic research. This method allowed me to research touch with real people and experience touch and its meanings in a physical, embodied way, which was crucial to understanding the gaps that gender theory and social science research leave on this subject. For the Touch Project, I completed two separate choreographic works that were performed in a showcase of other senior dance theses and projects. The first piece of choreography that I completed for performance in the fall was entitled "touching within between without." It included eight cis-gendered performers (five women and three men) of various body types, sizes, and experience levels as well as a live drummer. The second choreography was performed in the spring. "Polysexed Play: poking, striking, and caressing" included three cis-gendered female performers and a live pianist.

I believe that all touch has erotic potential that is often unrecognized, using Audre Lorde's distinction between the erotic and the sexual/pornographic. Lorde maintains that "the erotic has often been misnamed" and confused with "its opposite, the pornographic."[2] While the erotic "is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings" and "an internal sense of satisfaction" that is full of the power for change, the pornographic is the "plasticized" version that "emphasizes sensation without feeling."[3] This reveals the arbitrary nature of our current systems of gender and sexuality. Our current touch paradigms construct and are constructed by our binary understanding of sexuality, sexual identity, and gender in one particular way based on what touch is socially sanctioned and what is

[2] Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays & Speeches by Audre Lorde*, (Berekeley: Crossing Press, 1984), 54.
[3] Ibid. 54.

not. The suppression of the erotic necessitated by compulsory touch paradigms causes us to "live outside ourselves" and "conform to the needs of a structure that is not based on human need."[4] As Lorde writes, the erotic impulse is a powerful mode of living that allows us to trust the "power that rises from our deepest and nonrational knowledge."[5]A more fluid touch paradigm would allow us to more playfully and consciously create and recreate our identities based on our own erotic impulses and develop a culture tolerant of different and changing identities.

Gender Theory

Recent developments in gender and sexuality theory reveal these not to be characteristics of ourselves and our identities, but forces constantly creating our understanding of our own identities in relationship to our environments and those around us. Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* and *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* explains how the Western cultural matrix creates and deploys the binary concepts of biological sex, gender, and sexuality in and through one another. Using Michel Foucault's assertion that "systems of power *produce* the subjects they subsequently come to represent,"[6] she reveals how our binary gender system creates people as male or female, heterosexual or homosexual, not the other way around. These identity categories are made possible by a system with two oppositional genders and an assumption that each individual only

[4] Ibid. 58.
[5] Ibid. 53.
[6] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), 2.

(or at least primarily) sexually desires people of only one of these genders. Ultimately, Butler argues that the concepts of gender and sexuality are created in and through one another and cannot stand alone. Gender always implies sexuality and sexuality implies gender, and both are constructed in a hierarchal binary that is connected to ideologies of power and the body.

In the ideal world of intelligible identities, identities exist 'naturally' before culture and are internally unified and coherent according to a heterosexual model of sex, gender and sexual desire. The ideal identity is one in which the anatomical sex gives each individual their gender identity (woman or man) as well as their sexual identity (in which woman desires man sexually and man desires woman). 'Intelligible' genders within the heterosexual matrix are those that present a heterosexual continuity between biological sex, gender, sexual practice and desire.[7] These attributes are arbitrarily connected by the normative discourses that create them. However, the power that constructs these concepts insidiously disguises itself as nature and sex-gender-sexuality is presented as naturally and prediscursively connected by the biological facts of our human bodies. Butler expands upon Foucault's observation that there is a search for the "truth" of sex in our society, describing that this very notion:

> is produced precisely through the regulatory practices that generate coherent identities…The heterosexualization of desire requires and institutes the production of discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between 'feminine' and 'masculine,' where these are understood as expressive attributes of 'male' and 'female,'"[8]

[7] Ibid. 17.
[8] Ibid. 17.

In other words, in order for institutional discourses to make sense of sexuality and maintain the heterosexual monogamous ideal, a sharp divide was made between male and female, masculine and feminine, and is always being recreated. The two specific sexual orientations (homosexual and heterosexual) are necessitated by a belief in two discrete and opposite genders. The concept of an internally gendered core is an illusion made possible by the concept of a concrete distinction between the inner and outer self in which the inner self has a fundamental essence before culture. This resulted in the heterosexual matrix connecting sex, gender, and sexual desire.

To counter the concept of a fixed, heterosexually coherent and inherent gender identity, Butler argues that "gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, or a natural sort of being."[9] I agree with Butler that gendering is a process that is always occurring and is never completed, and can therefore disrupt itself and drastically change its relationship to the regulatory frame at any given moment. It is the cultural ideal of the intelligible and fixed gender identity that encourages us to perceive ourselves as such, when this is in fact not the only way to conceptualize and perform our identities, particularly our gender identities.

This conceptualization is not completely free of problems and pit falls. Butler warns us that "the notion that gender is constructed suggests a certain determinism of gender meanings inscribed on anatomically differentiated bodies, where those bodies are understood as passive recipients of an inexorable cultural law."[10] However,

[9] Ibid. 33.
[10] Ibid. 8.

because there is no body that "has not always already been interpreted by cultural meanings," including the anatomical differences usually cited to determine gender, sex has "been gender all along."[11] She goes on to explain that in reality, individuals "become" a certain gender because of a social compulsion to,[12] but do not lose complete agency in this process. I believe that looking at how touch affects the creation of gender identities of both people involved will trouble the binary between agency and social determinism and reveal that gendering is a complex and multi-faceted process that cannot be either fully self-directed or externally determined.

The Transactional Body

I find Butler's framework particularly convincing and compelling in conjunction with John Dewey's concept of bodies as transactional, which Shannon Sullivan expands upon in her work *Living Across and Through Skins*. Theorizing bodies as transactional articulates "the dynamic, co-constitutive relationship of organisms and their environments."[13] This framework emphasizes that "bodies do not stop at the edges of their skins and are not contained neatly and sharply within them,"[14] nor do they have identities without their environments. Butler reflects the concept of the transactional body in her assertion that:

> what the person 'is,' and, indeed, what gender 'is,' is always relative to the constructed relations in which it is determined. As a shifting and contextual

[11] Ibid. 8.
[12] Ibid. 8.
[13] Shannon Sullivan, *Living Across and Through Skins: Transactional Bodies, Pragmatism and Feminism*, (Bloomington: Indiana Press, 2001), 1.
[14] Ibid. 1.

> phenomenon, gender does not denote a substantive being, but a relative point of convergence among culturally and historically specific sets of relations.[15]

The boundaries between transactional bodies are thought of as fluid and always changing, so both self and other constitute one another. Conceptualizing the body as transactional avoids "formulating a nature-nurture dualism with respect to bodies," a problem that Butler acknowledges in her assertion that cultural power presents anatomical sex and binary heterosexual gender distinctions as part of the prediscursive essence of our bodies. Sullivan assures us that "if bodies are transactionally constituted, then bodies are not lumps of passive matter imprinted with significance and meaning by an active culture,"[16] avoiding the pitfall of removing individual agency described by Butler earlier.

Similarly, Butler argues that there is a need to dissolve our common asymmetrical distinctions between mind and body because "the ontological distinction between soul (consciousness, mind) and body invariably supports the relations of political and psychic subordination and hierarchy" given that the masculine has historically been attributed to the mind and the feminine to the body.[17] Theorizing the body as transactional promotes a more holistic understanding of our mind and body as inextricably linked, as it avoids "views of the body as a physical substance that is opposed to the mental substance of psyche or mind."[18] Transactions occur on the physical level and beyond, revealing the connectedness of human corporeality to culture and psychology. As Sullivan states, "human corporeality includes the mental, psychological, and cultural aspects of human life, which are

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[15] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 10.
[16] Sullivan, *Living Across and Through Skins*, 2.
[17] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 12.
[18] Sullivan, *Living Across and Through Skins*, 3.

different from, though related to, materiality."[19] Not only do we constitute and are constituted by our physical environment, but we also constitute and are constituted by our social environment.

Viewing the self in this way, it becomes easy to see that our identities are included in this fluidity of boundaries and change based on context and environment. When I eat a carrot and my body uses the carrot to sustain itself, it is impossible to differentiate between my body and the carrot. The carrot makes up my body just as my body acts on the carrot and changes its composition and identity. Similarly, when I am speaking with my grandfather, my youth and female identity are made more apparent in comparison with his older age and male identity; we transactionally create each other's identity in relationship to one another in that moment, and our behavior probably reflects this transaction.

Sullivan (and Dewey's) transactions are central to Butler's arguments that our habits performatively create our gender identities. As Butler argues, we are constantly forming our gender identities through repeated acts that we perform in relationship to the cultural notion of the gender binary that the very actions themselves maintain and transform. Butler argues that the repetition of gender performances "is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation."[20] Far from being a personal, interior journey to discover our inner truth, "this 'action' is a public

[19] Ibid. 2.
[20] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 140.

action"[21] that allows us to intelligibly relate to one another and create our identities in transaction with one another.

Theorizing the body as transactional necessitates an attention to the activities of the body, particularly repeated, ritualized, or common activities, which is similar to Butler's theories of iterative acts as forming our gendered identities.[22] Looking at what a body "does" rather than what a body "is" allows that body's identity to be inclusive of the actions it performs in its environment and the effect it has, as well as the effect the environment has on the body and its actions. These actions form a sort of repertoire from which the individual can draw upon as they negotiate the constantly changing environment. An individual is seen "as composed of the predispositions to act in specific ways that Dewey calls habit."[23] Habits are formed in relationship to larger cultural norms and form a sense of identity; who we are is composed of what we understand ourselves to do and not to do.

Our habits, our repeated performances, are integral to simultaneously creating our individual gendered identities and cultural concepts of gender identities in transaction with one another. Like Butler argues,

> a sedimentation of gender norms produces the peculiar phenomenon of a 'natural sex' or a 'real woman' or any number of prevalent and compelling social fictions, and…this is a sedimentation that over time has produced a set of corporeal styles which, in reified form, appear as the natural configuration of bodies into sexes existing in a binary relation to one another.[24]

The "sedimentation" of habits is what forms a sense of a coherent identity, although I agree with Sullivan's proposal that this sedimentation never fully occurs, which

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[21] Ibid. 140.
[22] Sullivan, *Living Across and Through Skins*, 3.; Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 140.
[23] Sullivan, *Living Across and Through Skins*, 3.
[24] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 140.

makes the transformation of habit possible.[25] It is the repetition of acts, or habits, through which "one incorporates the gender and other constructs of one's culture. The constructs that prevail within the culture(s) in which I am anchored will inform the habits that I develop, that is, the person I become."[26] We might perceive our habits as fixed and stable, much like we perceive a coherent gender identity, but in fact both can change and do constantly based on the particular context in which we find ourselves.

Choreographic Research

Choreographic research was an integral part of this project and allowed me to address the gaps that these two academic disciplines leave regarding the role of touch in our gender identity development. I believe that choreography is a unique mode of research because it stands at the juncture between what Western culture distinguishes as "real life" and "the stage". In this binary, the stage comprises a performative realm in which we can maneuver separate from our genuine, spontaneous selves. My conception of choreographic research and movement dissolves this binary. I view performative movement and real life movement as transacting to form one movement culture. Movement in each realm is created in relationship to the other realm; seeing a body perform movement on a stage sparks a sort of empathetic response in the viewer which will, in turn, affect the viewer's experience of and/or range of movement in their own body. Susan Leigh Foster in her essay *Choreographing History* describes

[25] Sullivan, *Living Across and Through Skins*, 101.
[26] Ibid. 92-93.

the connection between bodily movement and culture through the image of the "writing body," a body whose movements and actions "write" culture in the same way we do through language, creating language through its use and repetition:

> A body, whether sitting writing or standing thinking or walking talking or running screaming, is a bodily writing. Its habits and stances, gestures and demonstrations, every action of its various regions, areas, and parts – all these emerge out of cultural practices, verbal or not, that construct corporeal meaning. Each of the body's moves, as with all writings, traces the physical fact of movement and also an array of references to conceptual entities and events. Constructed from endless and repeated encounters with other bodies, each body's writing maintains a non-natural relation between its physicality and referentiality. Each body establishes this relation between physicality and meaning in concert with the physical actions and verbal descriptions of bodies that move alongside it. Not only is this relation between the physical and the conceptual non-natural, it is also impermanent. It mutates, transforms, reinstantiates with each new encounter.[27]

Bodily movement is important to the creation of social groups such as gender categories. Cultural groups develop movement language and norms much like verbal language that help us to intelligibly relate to one another. Distinctions in movement vocabularies can help form a sense of solidarity by coalescing a group of people who belong and a group who does not because their movement language is different and therefore unintelligible. Similarly, movement can more specifically distinguish where individuals stand in a hierarchy or which role they hold within a group. Foster writes:

> each body's movement evidenced a certain force, tension, weight, shape, tempo and phrasing. Each manifested a distinct physical structure, some attributes of which were reiterated in other bodies. All a body's characteristic ways of moving resonated with aesthetic and political values. The intensity of those resonances are what permit genres of bodies to coalesce.[28]

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[27] Susan Leigh Foster, "Choreographing History," *The Routledge Dance Studies Reader*, Carter (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 180.
[28] Ibid. 182.

In *Purity and Danger*, anthropologist Mary Douglas writes about the importance of categorization to human life. We are in a constant struggle to define the boundaries of our individual and collective social bodies and:

> ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience. It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, above and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created.[29]

A main political structure of U.S. culture is the hierarchal gender binary. Gender distinctions, therefore, must be formed in part by differences in feminine and masculine movement norms.

Human bodily touch is part of our movement culture but is unique in that it physically creates a relationship with another. Who, how, and where on the body people touch plays a major role in the formation of social groups because, in touch, two people are physically connecting and are, in a sense, re-constituting their personal boundaries to include each other in that moment. Our touch practices are culturally informed and created in a dialogue with norms about what certain touches mean and in which contexts they are appropriate. In the meanings it implies, there is usually an active and a passive participant in which the active agent initiates the touch and the passive participant receives the touch. The active/passive binary is particularly gendered, with the masculine being attributed to the active agent and the feminine attributed to the passive. Further, touch paradigms are created in relationship to the binary of the phallus and the yoni (any object that symbolically resembles a vagina)[30] in which the phallus' touch can penetrate, destroy, pierce, poke, while the yoni's

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[29] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, (London and New York: ARH Paperbacks, 1966), 4.
[30] "Yonic," Wikipedia, January 17, 2008, 3 Mar. 2008 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yonic_symbol>.

touch can envelop, wrap, enclose, hold. Therefore, U.S. touch paradigms create a framework of cultural meaning that allows us to embody and perform and experience our political values *physically*, particularly our hierarchal gender binary.

Our sense of our individual corporeality is affected by how we touch and is important to our identity formation – finding a sense of which groups we belong to and what our roles are within these groups. In what follows, I will expand upon current gender theories to discuss the ways in which normative cultural structures of gender inform how different bodies touch one another, resulting in a sense of an embodied, physical gender identity.

CHAPTER ONE:
What is Gender/Identity?

In this chapter, using recent gender and sexuality theorists I will illuminate how our current cultural understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality construct a rigid concept of a stable, coherent identity through our touch paradigms. First, I will use Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* and *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* to reveal how individuals form their gendered identities (that are inextricably connected to sexuality) through the repetition of acts in relationship to cultural norms about gender and sexuality. Touch will be explored as a specific way in which we create and express our gender identities physically. *Living Across and Through Skins: Transactional Bodies, Pragmatism and Feminism* by Shannon Sullivan expands upon John Dewey's concept of the transactional body and will allow me to explore how these gender norms and identities are embodied while still maintaining a possibility for their transformation. I will then discuss Contact Improvisation, a dance style developed in the 1960's and 70's that is based on two or more people moving while in constant contact with another. The ideologies and methods behind this form of touch-based dance will highlight how our touch practices are constantly being shaped by, while also contributing to the maintenance of the heterosexual matrix.

Gender as a Transactional Repeated Performance

Sullivan, as noted in the introduction, articulates a conception of bodies in which bodies and environments constitute one another, through one another, transactionally. She makes a point that this is not a simple interaction in which two previously constituted bodies interact, but in fact through the interaction, the bodies themselves are created.[31] Touch beautifully illuminates the transactional nature of our bodies. As philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes, "I never become aware of my own existence until I have made contact with others; my reflection always brings me back to myself, yet for all that, it owes much to my contact with other people"[32] When two bodies are in contact, the boundaries between them are both delineated and blurred. At the point of contact, energy, warmth, and sensation are exchanged so that one body is actually connected to the other at that point in time. Simultaneously the act of contact makes tangible the existence of two separate bodies and the limits of each are defined in that moment. Also, skin-to-skin contact delineates and connects the two bodies differently than clothing-to-clothing or skin-to-clothing contact, further exemplifying how our bodies' boundaries morph with our environments in a co-constitutive relationship.

Touch paradigms are created through the repetition of touches that are given meaning through time according to the context in which they occur. This repetition forms our touch habits which continually construct our gendered identities and our conceptions of gender categories in relationship to those around us as the habits

[31] Sullivan, *Living Across and Through Skins*, 1.
[32] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Worlds of Perception*, (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2004), 86.

sediment. Our touch behavior changes based on who we are with and the context of the interaction, again revealing how our identities are constantly and transactionally created.

Touch: The Physical Formation and Performance of Gender

What Butler and Sullivan fail to consider fully, however, is the effect that physical experiences have on our gendered identity formation. Butler focuses on iterative acts, particularly speech acts, that sediment to form a seemingly stable gender identity through a gendered grammar system. Sullivan similarly points to social constructs as informing how habits develop on an intellectual and emotional level. She discusses that our identities (including our gendered identities) shift over time as our surroundings change and we transact with different people and institutions. She pays little attention, though, to the physical experience of acquiring the sense of a coherently gendered body

Neither Sullivan nor Butler, however, discusses habits that we do not initiate ourselves. In other words, while they do speak to the importance of actions that we perform in relationship to a culturally understood binary gender system that create a sense of an internal gender identity, they do not include actions that happen to us repeatedly that inform our sense of self and identity in relationship to others. For example, isn’t it possible that a child whose mother always lovingly pats him on the head when she sees him might experience a certain gendered, relational, and emotional tone with that touch? Or even with that part of the body?

How we touch each other is an important example of Butler's repeated acts and Dewey's habits that constitute parts of our gendered identities. Touch is unique and particularly important to gender identity development because it occurs between people, implicating the "identity" of each in and through the physical relationship and exchange that occurs between them. This indicates that gender is at once externally created in relationships with other people and institutions and internally experienced. Gender is "real" externally to our bodies as well as internally, inverting and dissolving the external/internal binary distinction. This allows for gender to be conceived as a non-natural part of how we experience ourselves without disregarding it as false all together. This is important to Butler's assertion that there is no internal, natural gendered core but gender is in fact created through repeated actions that refer to and comprise the heteronormative ideologies of gender and sexuality.

Through touch, we establish gendered relationships between one another, thereby transacting with others to form our own identities. Touch occurs in relationship to culturally understood "contact codes"[33] that provide parameters around who can touch whom, how, when and where, and what that touch means in a way that is deeply engrained in the heterosexual matrix of sex, gender, and sexuality. We both gain and lose agency in this process because we can both perform and interpret touch as we please as well as have touch done *to* us, rendering touch as an extremely powerful tool of sociality.

Touch and what it signifies is regulated by the same discourses and cultural aims that regulate and create gender and sexuality because both intimately involve the

[33] Laura K. Guerrero, Joseph A. DeVito and Michael L. Hecht, *The Nonverbal Communication Reader: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, (Prospect Heights: Waveland Press, Inc., 1999), 173.

body. There are sexually neutral surfaces and culturally sanctioned public touch that ritualistically clarify and establish social relationships (ex. a handshake between business partners, a hug between a parent and child) as well as particularly private surfaces and sexualized touches that include the obvious (ex. genital touching, deep kissing) as well as the less obvious: those touches that are subtly sexualized because they remain outside of the mainstream repertoire of normative touching.

While gender might not be a natural characteristic of humanity, it is central to U.S. societal organization. Butler asserts that an intelligible gendered-ness is necessary for human-ness in the U.S. context:

> The mark of gender appears to 'qualify' bodies as human bodies; the moment in which an infant becomes humanized is when the question, 'is it a boy or girl?' is answered. Those bodily figures who do not fit into either gender fall outside the human, indeed, constitute the domain of the dehumanized and the abject against which the human itself is constituted."[34]

Touch norms vary depending on the gender being performed and therefore function as signifiers for performing a specific gender. In this system, when an individual touches another in ways that are incongruous with one's perceived gender status and/or the gendered relationship to the person being touched, this behavior is socially unintelligible. The individual risks being dismissed as unintelligible and punished as the abject. Hence, while touch norms do not in any way dictate how people touch, there is a social compulsion to touch according to these guidelines in order to avoid social rejection.

Throughout our daily lives, we maneuver through a variety of frames or contexts, each carrying their own norms of behavior and meaning. Some touches that might be considered sexual in one frame are socially sanctioned in others and are

[34] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 111.

desexualized in those particular contexts. For example, during football games, a male teammate will often slap another teammate's buttocks and, because of the context, the touch comes off as culturally referential joke in which the teammates are building camaraderie and is not sexualized. But if the same man were to slap his teammate's buttocks at a dance club or at a restaurant where the two men were eating alone together, the touch can be more easily sexualized. Because there is no non-homoerotic socially sanctioned precedent (with the understanding that homoeroticism is not culturally acceptable) for this sort of male touch in those particular contexts, the intention behind the touch is immediately sexualized and the sexual identity of, as well as the power relationship between the men is called into question.

Touch and the Heterosexual Matrix: When does chest become breast?

Our bodies are heavily implicated in and indicative of the heterosexual sex-gender-sexuality matrix. Certain parts of our anatomy are sexualized more strongly than others, and this varies according to context, but the fact remains that the body is always in danger of exuding sex if it doesn't follow specific guidelines. The specifics are of course contingent upon gender, which is thought to ideally follow from our anatomical "true" sex. The sexualization of certain body surfaces greatly affects where people are comfortable touching another and where they are comfortable being touched by whom and in what context. Hence, socially acceptable and sanctioned touches are often short and far removed from sexualized zones unless the touch is

occurring between people in intimate relationships, particularly people who are in heteronormative intimate relationships.

This is rarely overtly addressed in every day interactions and sexual surfaces are often compulsively taken as surfaces to avoid during physical interaction (unless a task or goal requires touch on these areas). I was lucky to have the opportunity to discuss this in a rehearsal for "touching…" I asked the dancers to improvise an exchange with a partner in which they focused on touching with or touching on their partner certain body surfaces that they chose randomly and blindly from a pile of small cards. One particular duet between two women included the fingertips, the top of the foot, and the chest. After improvising with these for a while, we gathered to talk about the experience. I asked if anyone had anything to share about what came up for them during that exercise and one of the women immediately answered, "I had 'chest' and the whole time I was just wondering, 'when does chest become breast?' I kept thinking, even if my partner and I agreed to do overt breast-touching, I might have to do this in front of an audience who would probably read it as sexual. If I were a dude I'd have so much more freedom!"[35]

This escalated into a group discussion (mostly between the women) about these boundaries, which turned out to be different among them. A few of the women who considered themselves to be small-breasted said that they thought of their chests as one flat surface that was all open to be touched, except, as one added, "if the touch is cupping the breast or directly aimed for the nipple." Here, intentionality and context is everything. In a dance context in which the dancers are instructed to explore touch with particular surfaces of the body, touch on particularly sexualized

[35] Kelly Klein, Personal Communication with Rebecca, 2007.

surfaces is neutralized to a greater extent than outside of the studio. In this case, the sexually neutralized space was made possible because there were other people around in the dance studio, the dancers had gotten to know each other through the rehearsal process, both dancers agreed to engage in the exploration and could have choosen not to, and the touch didn't have a direct sexual aim. At the same time, direct "cupping" or nipple stimulation would not have been considered appropriate in this context, at least to the dancer who made this distinction, and would presumably not occur because these actions are specifically sexual in the larger normative frame. There are parameters between sexual touch and "dance" touch, even on one sexualized surface of the body.

In this instance, the threat of sex was still experienced between the two women even with the partial neutralization of the space because chests are a sexualized surface on the female body. This affected where and how they touched each other as well as how they felt while doing this exploration. Between men, touch on chests would probably not be as dangerous and specially paid attention to. What is interesting is that the male chest is often a symbol of masculine virility and strength, so is of course sexualized because it is part of what anatomically defines the ideal male. However, ideal sexualized male bodies within the heterosexual matrix penetrate and are not penetrable; their sexuality is not vulnerable, unlike female sexualized bodies within the heterosexual matrix.

A touch to a woman's chest/breast is usually considered sexual (unless it is for a medical or other functional reason) in a different way than a touch to a man's chest. Men's chests are considered strong while women's chests are vulnerable and

defenseless. I believe that because of this, women are more likely than men to experience erotic pleasure/sexual danger when their chests or the area near their chests are touched. Men on the other hand are actively discouraged from experiencing this pleasure/danger in this zone. Men slap each other's chest as a way of congratulating one another, or slap their own as a way of displaying their strength. Many younger boys and men even give each other playfully aggressive "titty-twisters" in which one will pinch and twist the nipple of the other, usually through a shirt. This customary touch and others like it, because they are not intended to be "seriously" aggressive and a true threat, must encourage boys to toughen up and not experience most touch to their chests as erotically charged or sensual.

This interaction in the rehearsal process helps to explicate the transactional nature of our bodies and selves. We do not simply adopt the normative cultural constructs into our selves but instead transact with them and are constantly forming them as they are informing us and our habits. In this particular interaction, context is everything. For example, I believe it is pretty clear that if the duet with touch on the chest was between a man and a woman, the touch on the chest would be both performed and received differently. Similarly, while the women were comfortable in the context of this particular rehearsal with a certain touch on their chests, if a professor or a boss touched them the same way, it could easily be experienced as a violation because sexual interaction is particularly taboo within these social relationships. If the exercise was seen by an outside viewer who was unaware of the frame, the touch could easily be read as sexual. As the rehearsals progressed, though some areas of the chest and some specific touches remained sexually charged and

were avoided, certain areas of the chest were over time neutralized as an area of contact in the context of this dance.

Contact Improvisation

The dance/movement genre of contact improvisation is a particular context in which participants explore touch with another participant. Contact improvisation (CI) is a form of movement developed in the 1960's and 70's as part of a larger movement in the U.S. attempting to "realize a redefinition of self within a responsive, intelligent body."[36] It is an improvisational dance form usually done in duet that is "based on maintaining a point of contact and shared weight in motion."[37] In CI, the two partners are in very close, intimate, and sustained contact, which is rare in everyday life and usually contained to sexual, romantic, parent-child relationships, or other socially sanctioned contexts, as discussed earlier.

In order to see contact improvisation and other dance forms as a site of cultural creation, we need to move away from pervasive notions of mind and body that render the body as irrelevant to who we are. Butler has pointed to the dissolving of this binary as extremely important to the feminist agenda, because historically, patriarchal systems have pervasively subordinated the body to the mind. Sullivan's theorizing of bodies as transactional is useful for acknowledging the body as a rich site of interaction that forms who we are in relationship to others. Sullivan also

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[36] Cynthia J. Novack, *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture*, (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 3.
[37] Keith Hennessy, "Love & Sex, Touch & Weight: 11 notes on sexuality, sex, gender, community, & contact improvisation," *Contact Quarterly*, 21:1, 70.

acknowledges the interconnectedness of our material and psychic selves as she states that "human corporeality includes the mental, psychological, and cultural aspects of human life."[38] Our embodiment allows us to experience identity, without which, no identity would exist. Novack articulates further how movement is important to our embodiment of culture. She proposes that a main way of:

> making sense of the world comes through shared conceptions of our bodies and selves and through the movement experiences society offers us… We perform movement, invent it, interpret it, and reinterpret it, on conscious and unconscious levels. In these actions, we participate in and reinforce culture, and we also create it."[39]

In this light, dance, both for performance and recreation, allows us to transact with our normative styles of movement and meaning inscribed in movement, as it "both [contributes] and [responds] to larger patterns of thought and organization."[40] Reference to cultural understandings of body language, human relationships, and other ideologies surrounding of the body "is central to dance because of the constant presence of the human body and human movement."[41] Thus, as norms and ideologies change over time, dance shifts in response while also potentially creating shifts. In one piece, a choreographer "combines form and reference, tying formal changes in technique to changes of meaning for performer and audience through the body and movement of the performer."[42] On a larger scale, seeing and participating in dance can inform our experience of our bodies and potentially shift "sedimented" bodily habits.

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[38] Sullivan, *Living Across and Through Skins*, 2.
[39] Novack, *Sharing the Dance*, 7.
[40] Ibid. 13.
[41] Ibid. 14.
[42] Ibid. 15.

Dance exists as a transactional institution of culture and utilizes, experiments with, and influences cultural paradigms of gender and touch. It is a site for potential gender transformation for performers, participants, and viewers alike. As Novack describes, "Dance may shape… our ideas of what a man and a woman are. Dance may convey interactions of individual and group, or provide a vision of power and power relationships."[43] CI, because it is based on human bodily contact, is both affected by our culture's ideologies surrounding touch and what it means and also affects U.S. touch paradigms.

CI is a cultural site that is indeed a transactional entity within the larger culture it is a part of, but it also has its own norms of activity and transaction among bodies. CI established itself with a specific relationship to American culture and continues to reinvent itself and proliferate. The form was (and is) thought to embody many of the relevant issues "which must be negotiated in American culture; concepts and practices of physical skill, art, mind, body, touch, movement, play, sexuality, freedom, and difference."[44] It also sought to blur the lines between performance and social dance in that people participated in CI gatherings (called "jams") both as audience members and performers.

CI evolved out of the U.S. modern dance tradition that began at the turn of the twentieth century and the social dance trends of the rock 'n' roll era. U.S. modern dance had started as an intellectual art form and "engaged moral and philosophical issues concerning the primacy of the individual in society and the communication of

[43] Ibid. 14.
[44] Ibid. 12.

ideas and emotion."[45] Around the 1940's and 50's, Merce Cunningham and Erick Hawkins, both third generation modern choreographers, started to shift how dance and the body were conceived. Hawkins was interested in "efficient movement based on natural laws and in sensuous experiencing of movement as a primary focus for the dancer."[46] Slightly later, Cunningham began choreographing dance "from the act of moving, the body, not the mind, producing it." Both of these perspectives informed Steve Paxton, the originator of CI, when creating the dance form. They are similar to the way in which contact improvisers understand their dancing today.[47]

Social dance had also started to change as rock 'n' roll music became more popular. U.S. social dance of the 20th century had started with specific partner dances intended for a man and a woman where there were clear roles for each and a set movement vocabulary. With rock 'n' roll, dance became more improvisational and free-flowing. Novack describes that these dances were "less predetermined, partnered forms so that the participants were more closely connected to a room full of people than to a single person of the opposite sex."[48] These new popular forms of social dance were daring. For example, the twist appeared "shockingly autoerotic"[49] to the opponents of rock 'n' roll. It was dangerous to the social status quo because "it blurred the distinction between male and female in an unhealthy way, promoted wildness, immorality, and social deviance, and contributed to a 'generation gap.'"[50] It had a similar, albeit more positive meaning for the people who danced it in that "it

[45] Ibid. 22.
[46] Ibid. 33.
[47] Ibid. 27.
[48] Ibid. 35.
[49] Ibid. 35.
[50] Ibid. 39.

was sexy, exciting, wild, youthful, and new."[51] For politically-minded people at the time, this form of dance:

> constituted a metaphor for political awareness. The extensive improvisation in rock dance enacted the rejection of explicit structures by New Left and feminist organizations… The lack of differentiation between male and female movement symbolized a rebellion against American gender roles.[52]

In these social dance forms, the body could be used more freely and without regard for gender roles or a specific movement vocabulary. Each dance included varying amounts of touch between partners. I believe that because touch was always a part of, although a highly regulated part of, older social partner dances, rock 'n' roll dancing posed a particular threat in its improvisational nature because presumably participants could not only move however they wanted but touch however and whenever they wanted, as well. Improvisational touch in the heat of rock 'n' roll dancing could almost certainly be assumed to be sexual at the time if for no other reason than the dances were usually high energy, spontaneous, between an opposite-sexed pair, and in the context of social dances usually among youth.

Like the social rock dance at the time, CI could potentially be considered sexually dangerous and autoerotic because of its extreme use of intimate touch. However, the frame the CI attempted to occupy was one in which the body was socially neutralized, unlike rock 'n' roll where the goal was public sociality. Generally in CI, participants seek to think of and use their bodies as responsive physical beings with a certain shape, mechanic sensibility, and weight that moves in relation to other physical bodies according to physical laws. Novack describes that CI "combined sensuality of social dance with an objective stance towards the physical

[51] Ibid. 39.
[52] Ibid. 39, 42.

capacities of the body, an idea developed by experimental theater dance, and with a belief in the inherent truth and drama of the body, an idea prominent in physical theater."[53] ♦ CI was revolutionary, as "many of the early participants, audience members, and critics felt that the movement structure of contact improvisation literally embodied the social ideologies of the early '70s which rejected traditional gender roles and social hierarchies."[54]

The form's methods of touching follow directly from its ideology of the body as a physical entity. CI sought to distance touch from its role in social life as sexually evocative, a form of communication and a signifier of intimacy. Lori b, a long-time contact improviser, in a conversation with Steve Paxton mentioned that "because touch has been so marginalized to the sexual arena in our culture, it is instantly sexually evocative. And touch is the fundament of Contact Improvisation."[55] Paxton replied describing that the "container" he attempts to provide in teaching CI "is one concerned with gravity, momentum, friction; strong investigation into the senses, one's own senses."[56] In this container, participants practice focusing attention on the physical reality of the touch and performing touch for the sake of movement and

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[53] Ibid. 52.

♦ Cynthia Novack describes experimental theater dance and physical theater in chapter 2 of *Sharing the Dance*, pages 42-52. Experimental theater dance in the 1960's and 70's occurred after a temporary economic boom that allowed choreographers and dancers to work more often and in more informal settings. Choreography and dancers "began to investigate ways to increase spontaneity, informality, and collective action in the production and performance of dance." This movement included the Judson Church Dance Theater which was famous for investigating "everyday" movement, improvisational structures, borrowing ideas from sports, the visual arts and theater, and "experimentation with movement and new possibilities for structuring it." Experimental theater dance also "experimented with treating the body as a neutral enactor of movement rather than as an expressive, gendered personality." Physical theater was a collection of experiments with creating theater that were not based on text but "took the body and action as a starting point." This form took on "improvisation, social commentary, and crossing boundaries between performer and audience."

[54] Novack, *Sharing the Dance*, 11.

[55] Lori b and Steve Paxton, "the Sex Issue," *Contact Quarterly*, 21:1, 46.

[56] Ibid. 46.

momentum. As opposed to social and emotional reasons for touch, “in contact improvisation, the functional use of touching predominates. The form depends on communication between dancers through the sense of touch and weight.”[57]

The social implications and intentions of the touches that occur, including gendered and sexual implications, are irrelevant to a certain extent because of the established frame for contact, although they are never fully absent given the perceptual nature of these characteristics. Even as CI’s central focus is “the physical encounter between two bodies considered as weight and mass, [the dance] usually conveys sensuality. But its construction of the body as not gendered enables perception of interactions as not sexual.”[58] This construction does require special attention and work, however. Paxton addresses the sexual nature of touch and eases his students into touching more freely by:

> starting usually on the head - which is a slightly de-sexualized touching place… It’s a point of touch, and this point of touch has parameters, physical laws… Now, the mental focus of each person is just on that point… So this physical model is established in the body, and it rolls down from the heads onto softer tissue, more erotic tissue.[59]

The founders of CI thought that sexual intention must be as neutralized as possible for two bodies to fully engage each with other in this form because the whole body must be available for contact with another. This includes erogenous zones and surfaces of the body that are normatively connected to sexual or private zones and sexual pleasure. Because ideologies of sexuality are inextricably linked to gender and anatomical sex in the pervasive heterosexual matrix, the typical binary construction of gender must be neutralized in order for the movement and momentum between two

[57] Novack, *Sharing the Dance*, 163.
[58] Ibid. 163.
[59] b and Paxton, "the Sex Issue," 46-47.

bodies to be completely free of sexual meaning. This allows for the physical reality and possibilities of movement within the dance to be explored. A stated goal of CI was that heteronormative gender roles would be transformed; women could support men's weight (and vice versa) and any gender combination was accepted. There was (and is) "no gendered codification of movement vocabulary."[60] By subverting normative gender roles in movement and weight sharing, CI provides a space to move and interact where gender does not matter. Facilitated by CI's pronounced objective stance towards the body, gender was supposedly neutralized within the CI container in order to achieve free-flowing contact between all people without the danger of sexual intention.

When compared to other forms of performative dance – ballet in particular – the effect of CI's progressive attempt at gender neutrality becomes clearer. The genders of the characters in classical ballets are clearly oppositional according to a normative heterosexual conception of binary gender. Gender differentiation is communicated through their different costuming (the women usually wearing dresses or skirts and the men wearing long sleeve shirts and pants), their movement vocabulary which typically is more strong and direct for men and light and delicate for women, and their role in lifts in which men lift, support, and manipulate the women. Touch between characters also creates and reinforces these categories and characters, and duets that use a high degree of touch in partnering (called a *pas de deux* in ballet) occur almost exclusively between a man and a woman. The touch that is performed in ballet often serves as culturally referential gestures along with "eye focus, facial expressions, and arm and hand motions, and the glances and

[60] Novack, *Sharing the Dance*, 128.

gesticulations of the performers have meanings which can be socially decoded, often as a message of romantic love."[61] In classical ballet, touch communicates the story and character roles being performed based on a repertoire of meaningful gestures that the form has cultivated over its history in relationship to heteronormative conceptions of gender roles and relationship.

In CI, on the other hand, "those parts normally considered social and expressive in American culture—the head, the arms, the hands—are used as levers and as physical mass, thus distancing them from the emotional or symbolic meanings they might automatically carry."[62] The lack of emotional and social symbolism in gestures, costuming, and gendered relationships in CI allows the dance to have a more fluid meaning which isn't set prior to the performance of the dance. Social meaning, emotion, and relationships can of course be perceived in a CI duet by the audience or by the dancers themselves even if meaning is not set or established before hand. There can be several different perspectives on the same interaction as well. This is true in all dance forms, but ballet and some other dance forms have a goal of telling a specific story and developing characters and specific gendered relationships between them. On the other hand, CI "does not fix any movement quality to a meaning, but it suggests how movement can become associated with a host of values which do not belong in the domain of dance alone but are also part of how we understand our lives and see ourselves as male and female."[63]

Functional touch occurs in both CI and ballet. Despite the heterosexual romance usually intended to be communicated through the gestures, characters and

[61] Ibid. 160.
[62] Ibid. 163.
[63] Ibid. 132.

story present in ballet, these touches are de-eroticized. The movement and touches are rather euphemized, as touches on "sexual zones" such as the inner thigh or buttocks are only performed out of physical necessity. Even in a love scene, the man's hand "rarely caresses but rather steadies or lifts his partner; the audience almost certainly finds an erotic content to the *pas de deux* on a metaphoric level, but like strangers pressed body to body in a crowded subway car, almost no one mistakes these techniques of the body for sexual acts."[64] Intimate or sexual touch in CI, on the other hand, "can have sexual or emotional content invested in it through the interpretation of an observer or by the presentation of the performers."[65] Touch and sexuality are allowed to have a fluid role in the CI duet as they are performed for a functional purpose, but will still, unavoidably, be experienced through cultural and contextual lenses.

It is significant that this objective stance toward the body and gender was taken in CI. It is telling of our conceptions of gender, sexuality, and the body that the sexual nature of touch is consciously neutralized, especially because sexuality was in a sense ignored during the formative years of CI. First, this stance shows that gender always implies sexuality and vice versa; gender and sexuality are inextricably bound up in one another. In CI the neutralization of gender is thought to neutralize the sexual undertones of the touch and movement between two people, revealing that in our understanding of gender and sexuality, one cannot exist without the other. Our gender identities are thought to form the basis for our sexual expression, and our sexual identities in turn recreate and reinforce our gender identities. So, if in CI

[64] Ibid. 163.
[65] Ibid. 163.

gender identities are essentially neutralized, sexuality and sexual intention of touch will be removed, and the dance will be “innocent” of the touchy issue of sexuality. Two bodies will therefore be free to move with each other and touch one another in a way that is free from social (primarily sexual) meanings of touch.

However, sensuality and sexuality are still experienced when watching and participating in a CI jam, which I believe reveals to us that erotic and sensual energy can exist without our common conceptions of gender and the sexual roles our binary gender hierarchy implies. Eroticism still exists without gender (eroticism being opposed to sexuality which is based on the gender binary). At the same time, our culture is based on identifying the gender binary so it is never really possible to avoid identifying another body for its gender. For this reason, participants in a CI jam must always see, acknowledge and be affected by the perceived identities (particularly genders) of the people they are dancing with. With practice, participants might be able to focus more on the physical bodies of their partners and themselves rather than their gender identities and relationship, but I do not believe gender ever completely goes away.

Second, touch is revealed as dangerous because of the sexuality it implies. Sexual intention has to be consciously removed in CI for participants to feel comfortable touching their partners that they may or may not know. Otherwise, participants in CI might be considered dangerous perverts who attend jams just for the opportunity to touch and take advantage of another for their own sexual pleasure. Similarly, spectators might be interested in CI in order to watch other people touch each other in sexual ways. This is avoided somewhat in the CI context because in

jams, there is not a clear distinction between spectator and performer; everyone can participate in both ways whenever they choose, breaking down the performer/spectator power relationship.

In our cultural paradigm, sex is dangerous, risky, and linked to an ideology of power in which one person within the sex act has power over the other. Touching and being touched are important in delineating who is vulnerable and who is dominant. Because each body in the common notion of the sex act can potentially have full access to the other body, how each is positioned and can touch the other directly establishes who holds the dominant role. In CI, the neutralization of gender disconnects this power from heteronormative notions of gender, which in turn neutralizes to a certain extent the dangerous sexual aspect that compulsively arises when two bodies are in contact.

Through the pedagogy of CI, the participants are incited to share non-competitively in movement and touch with a functional goal of continuing and creating momentum. In most other frames in which touch happens in our culture, there is either a close relationship, a sexual reason for the touch, and/or a power differential. This could be in established forms like a consumer/provider relationship (such as paying a masseuse for a massage or receiving a spa treatment) or an authority/civilian relationship. In other frames, touch is used to dominate another and establish a power differential, like in contact sports.

As opposed to wrestling and other contact sports in which touch is performed with the goal of domination, contact improvisers touch and use each other's bodies "to move in concert with a partner's weight, rolling, suspending, lurching together.

They often yield rather than resist, using their arms to assist and support but seldom to manipulate."[66] This pedagogy has a political agenda, or at least a political consequence, in that a new acceptable context for touch is created that is not based on domination (which undoubtedly is a part of cultural notions of sexuality as well). Touch is instead explored for its own potential as separate as possible from normative hierarchies, domination, and gender roles.

I do not personally believe, however, that the gender and sexual neutralization sought in CI is ever truly possible. It took several years after the "founding" of CI for teachers and facilitators to directly address the "sexual/emotional boundaries in contact improvisation,"[67] but as these discussions began, it seems that contact improvisers realized this, as well. *Contact Quarterly*, a magazine put out by the CI community, devoted two issues to the topic of sexuality, gender and identity. In it, they gathered a variety of articles about how sexuality and desire were experienced and handled in CI jams. Many discussed the possibilities for including an awareness of the erotic and the sensual in the CI context and the effect that might have on individual experiences of sexuality as removed from the genital- and gender-centric notions of sexual pleasure.

This brings us back to Butler's description of the heterosexual matrix in which, for intelligibly identified people, anatomical sex indicates gender which indicates a specific sexuality. Steve Paxton wanted CI to contribute to the sensualization of the whole body, de-centering human sexuality from the genitals. Butler mentions a similar ideal and maintains that sex and sexual pleasure being so

[66] Ibid. 8.
[67] Ibid. 21.

intricately connected to the genitals is necessitated by the heterosexual matrix and the sex-gender-sexuality link. She writes, "that penis, vagina, breasts, and so forth, are *named* sexual parts is both a restriction of the erogenous body to those parts and a fragmentation of the body as a whole."[68] Bodily pleasures are not always reducible to sex but "they become readily interpretable as manifestation or *signs* of this 'sex'"[69] in the heterosexual matrix. Here, 'sex' refers to an internal natural impulse or desire that Butler repeatedly shows is part of and supposedly and ideally corresponds with one's internal biological sex within the heterosexual matrix.

If CI is successful in shifting our sexual feelings away from the genitals, the whole chain falls apart and eroticism has a chance to thrive. Anatomical genitalia no longer hold the secrets of our sex, because our sexuality can be found everywhere on our bodies and experienced in many different ways. In the even slightly de-gendered experience of sensuality and eroticism that can arise in CI, perhaps a transformation can take place in which sexual pleasure no longer has to be tied to common conceptions of gender and power that is intricately connected to and often symbolized by the genitals. Perhaps this form of movement and contact with others can begin to liquidize the connection between gender and sexual pleasure and a new sensual eroticism can arise, freed from the old sexuality that was included in the sex-gender-sexuality link.

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[68] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 114.
[69] Ibid. 95.

CHAPTER 2:
Social Science on Touch

In recent sociological research, touch has been studied as part of nonverbal communication, found to be necessary in the development of infants and children, and examined for its role in relationships with power differentials. Much of this research supports and can be better understood through the theories discussed by Butler and Sullivan. Most of this research relies on an assumption of sex and gender differences prior to the behaviors being studied and do not account for the role that these behaviors play in the creation of these differences. Applying the theories of Butler and Sullivan to the findings of these examinations of touch behavior, I will illuminate the role touch plays in creating our gendered identities in relationship to others and our social environment. This chapter will discuss the complex relationship that touch has on our development and identity formation using sociological research on touch and nonverbal behavior. Being a physical experience, bodily touch affects our physical experience of ourselves and our bodies on biological and energetic levels as well as social levels, revealing the interdependence and mingling of these categories which are commonly thought of as disparate and unconnected.

Most sociological research on touch falls within two categories: proxemics and haptics.[70] Proxemics are "concerned with the perception and use of space" and

[70] Guerrero, DeVito and Hecht, *The Nonverbal Communication Reader*, 173.

include how space is organized in social settings, how territory is defended, and the distance between and among people.[71] Haptics, while related to proxemics, are "concerned with touch behavior, which is sometimes called tactile communication."[72]

One of the main goals of proxemic and haptic research is to determine how people balance the combating needs of affiliation and privacy. On the one hand, we all need to have contact with others because stimulation from being with and included with other people is "needed for psychological and physical health."[73] On the other hand, privacy is necessary as well. People prefer to limit who they affiliate with, usually avoiding affiliation with strangers, and also simply want be alone at times.[74] In order to balance these two needs, we control our territories (specific geographic areas that are often marked with objects such as a home or a restaurant table) and personal space (the area around your body that moves with you) through a variety of behaviors.[75]

These territories are fluid and change constantly, particularly given the public vs. private nature of the context. Laura K. Guerrero, Joseph A. DeVito and Michael L. Hecht argue that "your personal space will expand and contract depending on the situation. It will be larger in a formal situation among strangers. Here you want more space between you and others. Your personal space will contract, however, when a close friend approaches."[76] It becomes clear that we balance our affiliative and private tendencies differently when in private or public spaces. Sullivan's concept of

[71] Ibid. 173.
[72] Ibid. 173.
[73] Ibid. 173.
[74] Ibid. 173.
[75] Ibid. 173.
[76] Ibid. 173-174.

the transactional body is useful here: in some situations, our bodily territory is larger and in a sense, we are larger, than in others. Thinking of our bodies as transactional, including how much space we hold as personal space, allows us to understand that being close to or touching another person in one situation is not the same as in another. With this understanding, we can see that in a situation where an individual's personal space is large, such as in a formal business setting, another person in that space can easily be experienced as a violation of that individual's person. Here, we avoid discounting personal experience and emotions that occur when appealing to 'objective' facts of appropriate distance in a given social situation, hereby empowering the individual perspective.

Touch as a Social Tool

Touch is certainly important in achieving both affiliation and privacy. It is commonly understood that "touch is one of the most basic human needs… Research shows that people need touch for physical and psychological health."[77] At the same time, U.S. citizens, "who are among the world's least tactile people, limit touching to family members and sexual intimates."[78] This is because touch has been infused with both sexual meaning and the power to dominate in U.S. culture and is therefore dangerous and a powerful tool of sociality. I believe that touch is one social behavior that is critical in maintaining the sexualization of power differences necessitated by the heterosexual matrix in the U.S., a topic which will be explored further later.

[77] Ibid. 174.
[78] Tiffany Field, *Touch*, (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2001), 9.

The physical act of touch creates boundaries between inner and outer – both on an individual level and in groups – by indicating what/who is included and what is not. Touch is a site of intense regulation because it indicates who is included in an individual's social network and repeatedly establishes the boundaries of a group. Mary Douglas in *Purity and Danger* suggests that the boundaries of 'the body' are established through cultural discourses that create and naturalize concepts of appropriate and inappropriate exchanges, body postures, and limits of behavior and argues that the body is treated as a microcosm of the larger society.[79] As Butler describes, Douglas' analysis suggests that "the limit of the body is never merely material, but that the surface, the skin, is systematically signified by taboos and anticipated transgressions."[80] Butler argues that "'inner' and 'outer' make sense only with reference to a mediating boundary that strives for stability. And this stability, this coherence, is determined in large part by cultural orders that sanction the subject and compel its differentiation from the abject."[81] ♦

Our touch practices happen in relationship to cultural paradigms of meaning related to these taboos of the body that allow us to create semblances of stable boundaries between individuals and social groups. These paradigms include which parts of the body are considered public and which are private, as well as which are sexual or intimate and which are neutral, which also correspond to ideologies

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[79] Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 115.
[80] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 131.
[81] Ibid. 134.(134).
♦ The abject is a term coined by Julia Kristeva for things that are between the concepts of the object and the subject – things that are alive, yet not – and are cast off. This term is often applied to often-marginalized groups like people of color, handicapped people, homosexuals, poor people, and convicts, as well as parts of the body like hair, blood, semen and excrement that can be removed from being physical included as parts of oneself. ("Abjection," Wikipedia, March 6, 2008, 7 Apr. 2008 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abject>.)

concerning which are central or sacred to an individual's essence (inner spaces) and which are more publicly available (outer spaces). In the realm of nonverbal behavior, Stanley E. Jones distinguishes between vulnerable body parts (similar to inner spaces) and non-vulnerable body parts (outer spaces). Non-vulnerable body parts (the hand, arm, shoulder and upper back) are considered more open to touch and to be touched by others, even between strangers, although not in every situation. Vulnerable body parts include every other site on the body and are only acceptably touched by those within one's close social network.[82]

In one of the first rehearsals for "touching…" we discussed touch that the dancers had experienced and had performed on another person, and the dancers had a chance to write about these experiences. A common theme that arose was most of the touches that were brought up were "romantic/sexual"[83] or somehow "connected to emotion."[84] When we discussed why this was, we concluded that these touches were thought to be more "relevant"[85] or "salient"[86] and therefore were the first to be remembered. Only after these personal touches were discussed or written down did the dancers include touches between friends that weren't as close or strangers where the emotional effect wasn't as salient for them. The only touch that was written about that occurred between a dancer and a stranger was being bumped and jostled in a way that felt to her like a "violation."[87] It is clear that for the most part, touch characterizes our close and personal relationships and has a distinct role in forming

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[82] Stanley E. Jones, "Communicating with Touch," *The Nonverbal Communication Reader: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, Guerrero, DeVito and Hecht (Prospect Heights: Waveland Press, Inc., 1999), 195.
[83] Kelly Klein, Personal Communication with Stephanie, 2007.
[84] Ibid.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Kelly Klein, Personal Communication with Elissa, 2007.
[87] Kelly Klein, Personal Communication with Spencer, 2007.

our lives, personalities, and what is important to us. Given this, it also makes sense that the touches that we experience with strangers are most likely to be salient to us and remembered if they somehow violate our sense of ourselves and our boundaries.

Positive Affect Touch

Human bodily touch can be used to convey an array of positive feelings between two (or more) people. Jones describes five distinct categories of what he terms "positive affect touches" that he observed in a study in which college students recorded all of their touches with others over a period of days. Two of these categories (supportive and appreciation touches) occur between people of varying degrees of closeness. Supportive touches, which "nurture, reassure or promise protection," were described as a hand or arm being directed to one or two body parts and always occurred in situations in which comfort or reassurance was necessary. Further, the individual giving the support usually initiated the contact.[88] In this category, it is clear that the context in which the touch occurs is crucial for understanding what the touch means, as is the nature of the touch itself and who initiates the touch. Touch is also used to show appreciation or gratitude for someone. Here, it is necessary for the receiver to have done something for the initiator and the initiator usually verbalizes their appreciation (by saying a version of "thanks") for a touch to convey appreciation.[89]

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[88] Jones, "Communicating with Touch," 196.
[89] Ibid. 196.

Inclusion touches occur usually between sexual intimates and close friends and occasionally between immediate family members. These touches "draw attention to the act of being together" and "suggest psychological closeness."[90] These are usually sustained touches including leaning on someone, holding hands, sitting with knees touching, or having an arm around someone, usually with a sexual intimate or close friend.[91] Further, physical attraction or sexual interest can be communicated through a combination of holding and caressing or a touch between sexual intimates to vulnerable body parts, particularly the chest (on women), pelvis or buttocks.[92] The most common type of positive affect touch conveys general affection for another. These touches do not have a specific context that gives the touch a more specialized meaning and usually occur within a close relationship,.[93]

Through our societal ideologies about social context and inner and outer sites on the body (or vulnerable and non-vulnerable body parts), we can use proximity and how/how often people touch each other to begin to characterize the nature of their relationship. Sociologists have acknowledged that touch can be used as "an excellent unobtrusive measure of relationships, because of its subtlety, and because it probably reveals closer discriminations than would another indicator such as, for example, first naming, which is rather ritualized."[94] These last three of Jones' five positive affect touches (inclusion, sexual interest, and general affection) mostly occur within close relationships, which he defines as "romantic intimates, close friends, and immediate

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[90] Ibid. 196.
[91] Ibid. 196.
[92] Ibid. 197.
[93] Ibid. 197.
[94] Nancy M. Henley, *Body Politics: Power, Sex, and Nonverbal Communication*, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1977), 108.

family members."[95] This supports the finding that who we allow to touch us and who we touch is a way of including people in our personal network. We even refer to developing a relationship as "getting close" to someone,[96] indicating physical proximity as a measure of emotional connection, of which touch is basically as close as two people can get.

Controlling Touches

Some touches are used as a way to control others. Jones delineates three forms of control touches. In these situations, the initiator either has or is attempting to establish dominance over the individual being touched, even if this dominance is only intended to last for a short moment in time. In a compliance touch, the initiator is attempting to "direct behavior and oftentimes also attitudes or feelings of another."[97] As the touch is initiated, the person attempting to influence the other verbalizes their request or even physically manipulates the other's body.[98] Further, an attention-getting touch is used to direct the focus of another, is usually brief and directed to one or two body parts, and occurs with a verbalization.[99] Lastly, a touch that occurs when one is announcing a response or a feeling (directly or indirectly) usually implies a request for a similar response from the individual being touched.[100] These touches

[95] Jones, "Communicating with Touch," 195.
[96] Guerrero, DeVito and Hecht, *The Nonverbal Communication Reader*, 174.
[97] Jones, "Communicating with Touch," 198.
[98] Ibid. 198.
[99] Ibid. 198.
[100] Ibid. 198.

form or maintain an attempted or existing power differential and are often only sanctioned between people in an unequal power relationship.

Touch as Domination

In maintaining and protecting our sense of self at the margins of our body, an area Douglas deems as especially vulnerable in a society,[101] (and which is protected "in small on the human body"[102]), we exercise "extraterritorial rights over both internal and external space."[103] While external space is important to indicating our place in society and providing a sense of home and belonging, it is argued that "control over 'inner space' is the quintessence of individuality and freedom. Violations of 'inner space' are carried out by domination,"[104] one method being assertion of physical or emotional control with touch, or establishing one's superior status on the societal hierarchy through touch. Given how social meanings accumulate and shift over time, "it seems likely that touch gains its association with dominance as a remnant of earlier days when physical force was the means of establishing and maintaining power."[105] An unwelcome touch is a direct violation of an individual's personal and, arguably, inner space.

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[101] Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 121.
[102] Ibid. 115.
[103] Stanford M. Lyman and Marvin B. Scott, "Territoriality: A Neglected Sociological Dimension," *The Nonverbal Communication Reader: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, Guerrero, DeVito and Hecht (Prospect Heights: Waveland Press, Inc., 1967), 179.
[104] Ibid. 179.
[105] Henley, *Body Politics*, 121.

Touch: A Crucial Part of Human Development

From the time we are born, touch factors heavily into our development by affecting how we experience ourselves physically in relationship with others. Touch is our first sense to develop and we rely on it greatly as newborns in order to develop physically and communicate.[106] Touch is crucial for infants in order to explore and learn about their world, and, although it is not widely recognized, is also critical for adults.[107] Tiffany Field argues that "children need touch for survival. Their growth and development thrives on touch."[108] She warns that touch deprivation is a serious threat to children's health, the effects of which are unmistakable in the case of children in Romanian orphanages and orphanages during and after World War II who died or had serious health problems because they weren't touched or shown physical affection.[109]

In addition to touch being necessary for physical development and communication, touch is also important in building an infant's self esteem and confidence. Through physical contact, "a child's first emotional bonds are built… laying the foundation for further emotional and intellectual development."[110] For adults, touch can at least be pleasurable if nothing else, but I believe it is much more important than is commonly thought. However, little research has been done on adult emotional/physical well-being and touch. It is telling, though, that today in the U.S.,

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[106] Field, *Touch*, 8.
[107] Ibid. 8.
[108] Ibid. 5.
[109] Ibid. 1.
[110] Ibid. 9.

where touch is highly regulated and rare, adults spend a lot of money to be massaged, receive spa treatments, or buy hot tubs and Jacuzzis to fulfill the desire to be touched.

The Effect of Gender on How Humans are Touched

Societal understandings of the differences between men and women affect how children are treated almost from birth based on their assigned sex, including the amount and type of touch that children of each sex commonly experience. This difference is seen as early as when a child is six months old. A study by S.M. Jourard showed that female infants were touched more by their parents than male infants and daughters touched their parents more than sons did.[111] In a similar study, daughters were found to be touched on more areas on the body and touched their parents in more areas than sons.[112] Given these findings, it seems that part of the process of being identified and identifying oneself as a female is simply being touched more often and on more areas of the body, and the opposite is true for males.

What is it about U.S. culture's understanding of "femaleness" that causes this? What about the understanding of "maleness"? Our ideologies of touch, including what is appropriate to touch and when, reveal that touch has a double meaning, indicating both the capability to nurture and include, as well as to possess and control. Through two very different gendered socializations into touch behavior, males and females primarily experience touch at these two extremes, although both genders do experience the whole spectrum at times. The effects of being touched as a male child

[111] Ibid. 25.
[112] Ibid. 25.

and a female child are discussed in the following, revealing how touch affects behavioral traits and one's overall relationship to touch throughout one's lifetime.

The Effects of How Humans are Touched on Gender Development

There is evidence that differences between how female- and male-assigned infants and children are touched can have profound effects on how each group develops. As noted earlier, boys are usually touched less than girls. It has been determined that animals that are touch-deprived from an early age grow to be more aggressive, indicating that it is likely that "the more aggressive behavior noted in boys might derive from their being touched less often by their parents."[113] While this is an attribute that is often linked to the "natural" and biological essence of male humans, this evidence suggests that culture and nurture does in fact play a major role in the development of this particular trait.

The nature of how one is touched from a young age affects how one experiences contact with others, how one experiences oneself in relationship to others, and one's overall well-being. Not all touches promote intimacy, compassion, comfort, or support. In the U.S., boys often experience rough touch with their fathers and male friends as part of their socialization into normative masculinity. Stanford M. Lyman and Marvin B. Scott observe that "'rough-housing,' mock-fighting, and pseudo-hostility are commonly employed in masculine affective relationships."[114] This way of touching encourages boys and men to develop a resiliency to harsh

[113] Ibid. 25.
[114] Lyman and Scott, "Territoriality," 180.

physical contact while they are simultaneously socialized to initiate this kind of contact with others. This toughness is necessary in contact sports like football, a highly respected and important sport in U.S. culture in which boys will ideally participate. It is no coincidence that contact sports are one of the few social frames in which a high degree of male-on-male touch on vulnerable body parts is accepted.

Similarly, abuse and painful touch can greatly influence how one feels when touching or being close to others. This form of touch indicates to the person being abused that they are not important to or cherished by others and hold little or no power over their own body and experience. Results of abuse can vary, leaving victims fearful of and compulsively retreating from touch, feeling unable to establish boundaries for how they are touched or who they are touched by, or even reliant on abusive touch.

It is often noted that for women touching is more of an intimate act than for men. Women are more responsive to touch at all ages; they literally feel it more strongly and are more sensitive to touch than men. It is impossible to determine if women somehow become "hyper-sensitive" or if men become desensitized to touch. It is possible that because "boys are handled less, caressed less often, and held for shorter periods than girls… they are less responsive to touch."[115] For boys and men, touch is not as important to their experience of themselves, partly because cultural understandings of maleness don't necessitate a high degree of touch after a certain age.

Further, a lack of touch from such an early age must hinder the development of nerves and the sensory ability to experience touch as acutely. A commonly

[115] Field, *Touch*, 56.

accepted theory of brain development from birth is that it works according to the "use it or lose it" principle. We are born with many more neural connections (synapses) than we will have later in life and "only those connections and pathways that are frequently activated are retained. Other connections that are not consistently used will be pruned or discarded so the active connections can become stronger."[116] Given this finding, the environment of a child greatly affects brain development "through experiences that a child's senses — vision, hearing, smell, touch and taste — absorb."[117] Therefore, early touch experiences, and the lack thereof, will "have a decisive impact on the actual architecture of the brain."[118]

This exploration of touch reveals it as an interesting point where the nature/culture binary intersects and dissolves. Touch is often assumed to be an emotional necessity because it means love and intimacy in our society and is not thought to be a biological necessity, which explains why the children in the orphanages during WWII were fed, cleaned, and given water but never caressed or held. Several studies on children and infants reveal touch as a fundamental necessity for human development and can affect personal characteristics that are often assumed to be inherent. Even still, touch carries with it a great deal of cultural meaning and happens in reference to a vast network of norms as one becomes more attuned to their surrounding cultural environment.

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[116] JumpStart Tulsa, "Brain Development," 13 Mar. 2008 <http://www.jumpstarttulsa.com/brain_development.htm>.
[117] Sean Brotherson, "Understanding Brain Development in Young Children," North Dakota State University, 13 Mar. 2008 <http://www.ag.ndsu.edu/pubs/yf/famsci/fs609w.htm>.
[118] Ibid.

Creating the Individual through Touch

I believe that the amount and nature of touch that one experiences affects how we situate ourselves within the larger society and how we experience ourselves as being connected to others. Research consistently shows that "the way that parents, families and other caregivers relate and respond to their young children, and the way they respond to their children's contact with the environment, directly affect the formation of the brain's neural pathways," indicating that these experiences and bonds are important to how children interpret their behavior. As Karen Prager argues, "touch seems to greatly affect intimate experience, perhaps because it eliminates the space between people."[119] Many spiritual perspectives stress the importance of feeling one's interconnectedness with all of existence, and I believe that touch experiences play a role in how this is experienced physically.

In short term contexts, touch is often used as a way of creating cohesion and a sense of community and support within a group. This is documented by participants in contact improvisation who describe the touch-based dance form as "a nurturing kind of dance."[120] Many participants comment that "they often feel protective or caring towards their partners, even when the partner is someone they do not know."[121] In rehearsals for "touching…" our focus on touching one another seemed to greatly contribute to the dancers' camaraderie and comfort with one another. One

[119] Karen J. Prager, "Nonverbal Behaviors in Intimate Interactions," *The Nonverbal Communication Reader: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, Guerrero, DeVito and Hecht (Prospect Heights: Waveland Press, Inc., 1995), 300.
[120] Novack, *Sharing the Dance*, 170.
[121] Ibid. 170.

dancer commented, "I've never been in a dance like this, nor have I felt this sense of communion with my fellow dancers before."[122]

Feeling included in and constituted through those around us because of how we are touched seems likely to affect the amount of responsibility and empathy we feel towards others. Could it be that the degree of touch determines in part a person's individualistic nature? Touch is a physical experience of connection with another which translates into intimacy and compassion as one becomes accustomed to social cues and meaning. It would seem that with a lack of this physical experience from an early age, an individual will feel like they are just that: an individual who will not be as tuned in to the transactional nature of oneself and one's involvement in and responsibility to others. Hence, as discussed earlier, boys (who are on the whole not touched as much as girls from infancy) are more likely to develop patterns of aggression or other destructive behaviors, perhaps out of a frustration with feeling disconnected and not fully included in their surrounding community.

Feminist psychoanalytic research points to this phenomenon of gender differentiation as a result of the fact that for the most part, children are reared from an early age primarily by their mothers, which must include children being touched more often by their mothers and not their fathers. Nancy Chodorow describes that with equal parenting by the mother and father:

> children could…establish an individuated sense of self in relation to [people of both genders. In this way, masculinity would not become tied to denial of dependence and devaluation of women. Feminine personality would be less preoccupied with individuation, and children would not develop fears of *maternal* omnipotence and expectations of *women's* unique self-sacrificing qualities. This would reduce men's needs to guard their masculinity and their control of social and cultural spheres which treat and define women as

[122] Klein, Personal Communication with Spencer, 2007.

> secondary and powerless, and would help women to develop the autonomy which too much embeddedness in relationship has often taken from them.[123]

Here, Chodorow is alluding to the confusion that must be experienced as boys become more socially aware to the meaning of their mother's touch. It is easy to see that in a culture that is obsessed with power and dominance, particularly as a part of ideal masculinity, older boys and men would feel that their mother's touch and touch from other women is threatening to them establishing their power as a man.

Furthermore, evidence suggests that a lack of touch from an early age affects how comfortable one feels being touched or touching later in life or how one interprets and responds to touch in general. In a study by Fisher and Gallant of hospital patients going into surgery:

> women who were touched [by nurses] reported less anxiety concerning surgery than women who were not touched, but men who were touched [by nurses] reported more anxiety. The touched women also reached out and touched the nurse's hand more than men did, and tended to have lower blood pressures in the recovery room, whereas the touched men had higher readings. The researchers suggested that being touched might make men feel more vulnerable and more dependent.[124]

I believe that these differences in how touch affects patients of different genders have everything to do with how people of different genders are touched throughout their lifetime. Field suggests that these differences might relate to "women being touched more often by a variety of people (mother, father, same/opposite-sexed friends) than men."[125] If women are on the whole more accustomed to touch from people close to them, human touch can be a comforting way of establishing connection and care. At the same time, if men are not touched as much from an early age and are instead

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[123] Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*, (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1978), 218.
[124] Field, *Touch*, 24-25.
[125] Ibid. 25-26.

encouraged in many ways to be independent and strong (especially in the U.S. where individualism is a core value of our economy and lifestyle), touch from another can feel dangerous, patronizing, and/or a sign that the individual has failed in some way at being an independent man.

While touch can be a source of connection, comfort, and support, there is a dark side. Being touched renders us susceptible to physical injury, pain, or a violation of areas that we hold as personal or even sacred. Again, it is apparent that our cultural treatment of people varies by gender from an early age, particularly with touch practices, and can have profound effects on an individual's development. Through touch, we learn how much access we have to others or to what extent we are accessible to others, affecting our sense of to what degree our bodies are our own private, personal space. As female children are touched on average more often and in more places than male children, women learn that their bodies are more accessible to others than men do. Because people who are higher on the social hierarchy are culturally given the privilege to touch those of less power, a concept that will be more fully explored later, women, "as a group deliberately socialized to docility and passivity,"[126] are touched more often in order to maintain their status as less powerful by rendering their bodies more easily accessible. A female child's increased exposure to touch has complex effects in that she may be more comfortable with intimacy as well as more vulnerable to physical control and bodily invasion.

[126] Henley, *Body Politics*, 15.

Touch Patterns and Consequences in Public vs. Private Spaces

Our behavior, and our touch behavior in particular, changes based on the context we are in and is greatly affected by the public- or private-ness of the space. Public territories are those in which:

> individuals have freedom of access, but not necessarily of action, by virtue of their claim to citizenship. These territories are open to all, but certain images and expectations of appropriate behavior and of the categories of individuals who are normally perceived as using these territories modify freedom.[127]

In public territories, there are certain expectations of behavior that serve as a sort of baseline for our cultures values and norms. In a public setting, we have little to identify each other by besides our common conceptions of how to interpret the bodies around us based on visual factors like race, gender, class, age, and sexuality. Calvin Morrill and David A. Snow explain:

> In a broad sense, identity is the way people classify others in 'systematically related categories,' which, in turn, enables meaningful social interaction to occur. Personal identities (such as a proper name or a singular set of traits) signal one's uniqueness, whereas social identities (e.g., being an African American woman or a regular member of a group that congregates at a bar) locate one as part of a broader social role.[128]

When we are relating to others in a formal and/or public setting, we tend to touch according our generalized idea of their social identity and their place in relation to us. Touch between strangers is compulsively avoided unless it is impossible to do so, and people of higher status are usually permitted to touch those of lower status. U.S. culture's touch paradigms:

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[127] Lyman and Scott, "Territoriality," 176.
[128] Calvin Morrill and David A. Snow, "Taking Stock: Functions, Places, and Personal Relationships," *Together Alone: Personal Relationships in Public Places*, Calvin Morrill (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2005), 229.

> are very strong and guide who is allowed to touch whom. In general, people with more power and status are free to touch those with less power and status. Some areas of the body, such as the hands, arms, shoulders, and upper back may be touched by almost anyone. Other areas such as the head, face, neck, torso, buttocks, chest, legs, and feet may only be touched by a select few.[129]

I will show that these rules are guided by and help create many social distinctions and identities including intimacy, power, gender, and sexuality by regulating the meaning of the physical access to certain parts of the body and to certain bodies. These patterns both create and reinforce our concepts of who is higher and who is lower on the hierarchy as well as the notion of touch as a tool for establishing dominance.

Our social identities are usually the first to enter in to a relationship with a new person and our touch practices usually follow the norms of the specific public setting we are in at first. As Mark L. Knapp describes, "at first we reveal our public selves to others. Gradually, more and more of our personal or private selves is made available to our relationship partners."[130] Nancy Henley explains that:

> In touch, we can observe mutual privileges of touch between equals, with intimates exhibiting a great amount of touching and wide distribution of touchable areas (and more meanings to a touch), and mere acquaintances having, generally, no touch rights except perhaps task-oriented ones.[131]

Functional or task-oriented touch is more widely permitted and can often occur between people who do not know each other very well, perhaps because it is not considered emotional, intimate, or sexual but simply a necessity of the situation. This can be a ritualized or contextual necessity, an example of a contextual necessity being tapping someone on the shoulder to get their attention.

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[129] Guerrero, DeVito and Hecht, *The Nonverbal Communication Reader*, 174.
[130] Mark L. Knapp, "Nonverbal Communication in Developing and Deteriorating Relations: A Conceptual Framework," *The Nonverbal Communication Reader: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, Guerrero, DeVito and Hecht (Prospect Heights: Waveland Press, Inc., 1983), 310.
[131] Henley, *Body Politics*, 107.

The handshake is a ritualized touch, (ritualized touches being "those that occur as part of ceremonial practice and other rigid behavioral patterns,"[132]) and is part of the greeting ritual. This gesture ritualizes touch by ceremoniously indicating a "coming together of some sort" through the simultaneous "request for access to another and an offering of access to oneself."[133] Interestingly, many researchers have observed the handshake as a masculine ritual, an "obligatory act in the male subculture" which serves to "perpetuate male clubbiness and to exclude women from the club."[134] Again, the power of touch to include, exclude and create social boundaries reveals itself, particularly along gender lines.

As we get closer to someone, "we can show our availability and permeability to another person by providing greater access to ourselves and our possessions" through being in closer proximity to them, allowing and performing more bodily touching in general, and touching the specific body parts that are inaccessible to most others.[135] With people we are closer to or more intimate with, we know their personal identity and our touch behavior with that person usually can more easily deviate from formal touch paradigms. Following this, just as people in closer relationships relate on more levels than large societal hierarchies, "in more intimate circumstances, touch does not differ by sex"[136] and both men and women are equally likely to touch one another. I believe, then, that touching in many public relationships is a behavior through which social power differentials are created and maintained as the behavior is

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[132] Guerrero, DeVito and Hecht, *The Nonverbal Communication Reader*, 174.
[133] Henley, *Body Politics*, 110.
[134] Ibid. 110.
[135] Knapp, "Nonverbal Communication in Developing and Deteriorating Relations: A Conceptual Framework," 310.
[136] Field, *Touch*, 26.

repeated, contributing to the cultural notion of which bodies are socially subordinate and which are dominant.

Many researchers have concluded that our being social in public is important to how we perform and experience our gendered and ethnic identities. Carole Brooks Gardner exemplifies this in her argument that "wariness toward transitory public sociality, together with a constant vulnerability to harassment, stigma, and crime, especially when alone, is a constitutive aspect of being a woman in many public places throughout North America."[137] Hence, a woman's sense of vulnerability, or any other gendered trait, is regularly cultivated when one enters a public space and embodies their social identity.

While touch is prominent in the creation of social hierarchies, this is not to say that touch does not play a role in the creation of relationships in which individuals are equal with one another. One study observes that two "best friends" who are of opposite genders and are not romantic partners repeatedly touch each other, "exchanging pats, caresses, or spot touches back-and-forth. This 'ping-pong' trading of touches seems to symbolize the equality of this kind of relationship."[138] In this example, it is notable that each individual has equal and great bodily access to the other, hereby creating an equal friendship in which touch is not performed for sexual reasons or to assert dominance.

It is illuminating to think of people in these relationships as transactionally being of equal gender identities *on a personal level within this particular relationship* because the relationship is not hierarchal and the touches they perform do not make

[137] Morrill and Snow, "Taking Stock: Functions, Places, and Personal Relationships," 229.
[138] Jones, "Communicating with Touch," 194.

up a dominant and submissive exchange. On the broader social level, the heterosexual matrix allows for the male in this relationship to have power over the female which is perhaps why he feels comfortable enough to touch her in ways that he would not touch his "socially equal" male friends. Also, he might feel comfortable being touched by her because she holds less social power and poses less of a threat to his social standing. Both equality and inequality exist at once within this interaction, revealing how we constantly constitute and are constituted by systems of power in complex and contradicting ways.

Sex: The Ultimate Touch

Touch is the foundation of sex and, by association, human reproduction. Ashley Montagu describes that "in no other relationships is the skin so totally involved as in sexual intercourse. Sex, indeed, has been called the highest form of touch."[139] Saul Schanberg writes that touch is linked to both our survival and development and sexual reproduction:

> If we did not like the feel of touching and patting one another, we would not have had sex. Those animals that did more touching instinctively produced offspring which survived and had more energy, and so passed around their tendency to touch which became even stronger. We forget that *touch is not only basic to our species, but the key to it.*[140]

As touch has become linked with the ability to dominate and overcome, sex has taken on an air of danger and become a place for power play. Arguably, a sexualization of

[139] Ashley Montagu, *Touching: The Human Significance of the Skin*, (New York, Hagerstown, San Francisco, and London: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1978), 158.
[140] Field, *Touch*, 57.

power differentials drives much of what is normatively considered to be sexual desire and practices.[141]

Sex, particularly heterosexual sex, is often considered to have a dominant/active participant and a submissive/passive participant. Similarly, in a touch between two people, one is usually thought to actively perform the touch and the other passively receives it. The privilege of touching another is normatively granted to the person who is highest on the hierarchy, which affects societal expectations of how people in unequal relationships interact sexually. For example, in heterosexual couples, the man, who is above the woman on the social hierarchy, usually initiates – or is at least expected to initiate – touching, especially sexual touching, as intimacy progresses. [142] He is compulsively granted the power and expected to determine the nature and closeness of the relationship because of the normative hierarchal paradigm.

Touch, power and sex are truly wrapped up in one another. Just as many make the distinction that sex is often not about physical pleasure but is instead a site to exercise power, sexual intent does not account for why people with more power often touch those with lesser power. Instead, touching is often a way to assert dominance and establish one's higher positioning. Sexual desire is an almost compulsive answer when considering why men touch women more than the other way around because touch is an integral part of sex and "we are so used to thinking of men as sexually

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[141] Celia Kitzinger, "Problematizing Pleasure: Radical Feminist Deconstructions of Sexuality and Power," *Power/Gender*, Radtke and Stam (London, Thousand Oaks, and New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1994), 194.
[142] Henley, *Body Politics*, 107.

active (and women as sexually passive)."[143] This is not a sufficient answer, however, unless we assume that women have lower sex drives than men.[144] Instead, normative male sexuality is constructed in and through their superior social standing and ideal ability to dominate and female sexuality is inextricably linked to her status as inferior to men, creating and maintaining an eroticization of power differentials.

Touch: A Tool of the Heterosexual Matrix

Our touch norms are simultaneously influenced by, a part of, and maintain the heterosexual matrix. Given that overall, men are granted the privilege to touch women, a man's touch holds a lot of cultural power; power to dominate and overcome another, both symbolically and physically. Further, because touch is often associated with sexual desire, "there is generally…a greater frequency of touching reported between the sexes (in both directions) than within."[145] This can be explained by both heterosexual attraction and homosexual inhibition, (which "seems to be especially marked between males"[146]), both of which Butler argues to be mechanisms of the heterosexual matrix. In this system, homosexual touch indicates homosexual desire and is not intelligible. Male-on-male touch is particularly dangerous because the power to dominate is turned on those who are thought to hold it, disrupting our stable sense of a hierarchy all together. As it normatively stands, men have the power to touch women, their inferiors, as they please, and, ideally follow very stringent rules

[143] Ibid. 117.
[144] Ibid. 117.
[145] Ibid. 117.
[146] Ibid. 117.

for touching other men: handshakes are ritualized greetings and closings for interactions between men; the hug is reserved for close male friends; pats on the buttocks are exchanged between teammates.

Touch in our culture has a double effect that helps to maintain the binary structure of the heterosexual matrix. It can at once symbolize domination, power, and physical threat as well as support, comfort, and establish intimacy. Its role in domination is probably crucial to it being a way in which people develop trust and care for one another. Touch paradigms communicate issues of who has access to whom and how accessible individuals are to one another. Touch is a way to include two people in the same social network and is also a way to lay claim on an object. Objects, being readily accessible, can be taken up, used, and possessed by anyone. An object's possession usually is established through a touch from a powerful, autonomous subject.

In this way, female's socialization through touch, in which females are touched more often, renders them vulnerable to objectification, which is facilitated by, but not the same as, socialized submission. This has specific effects for how women experience their bodies in different contexts, particularly in transaction with men or other people of power. This could result in a sort of disembodied experience in which the female shuts down consciousness of her body and resorts to the anonymous, blank state many of us experience when crowded onto overstuffed subway cars. U.S. female's particular submission is revealed to be one of objectification and is perpetuated through our current touch paradigms.

The Possibilities of and Limits on Touch Experimentation

Our participation in these touch and gender paradigms is arguably essential, or at least widely experienced as such, to our overall survival given our need for affiliation. Again, Butler's concept of the heterosexual matrix reveals how one's social intelligibility is contingent on performing an identity in which one's anatomical sex, gender, and sexuality are in line with the normative, heterosexual binary configuration. Given that the heterosexual matrix is a major structure of our social reality, it is understandable that it would seem that one's gendered identity must be intelligible in order to assure affiliation with others in society. This is especially true in public settings in which normative ideologies of social identity are relied upon more deeply. Private and intimate settings or other "free territories" (a place that is "carved out of space and affords opportunities for idiosyncrasy and identity"[147]) are more stable and safe, allowing for a greater freedom of expression and identity.

Unfortunately, it has been observed that people overall have less free territory in contemporary U.S. society. These territories are created through "boundary creation and enclosure. This is so because activities that run counter to expected norms need seclusion or invisibility to permit unsanctioned performance, and because peculiar identities are sometimes impossible to realize in the absence of an appropriate setting."[148] In other words, people and groups need the opportunity and means to create spaces in which non-normative behaviors can be explored, for example, touching practices that are not limited by power hierarchies and gendered

[147] Lyman and Scott, "Territoriality," 175.
[148] Ibid. 175.

identities. Luckily, I was able to experiment with touch in two different rehearsal/performance settings, both of which I consider free territories because the dancers were able to perform and experience touches that were not assumed to be indicative of their "true" identities. This is not to say that there were no limitations, as sexual surfaces were still largely off-limits for the group, and we needed to work to become comfortable with a high degree of touching one another that did not exist when rehearsals started.

However, these opportunities to touch others non-normatively are not only rare in contemporary society but explorations of touch involve an added barrier in the association between touch, sexual desire, and bodily danger. As many social scientists have observed, "touch is a powerful channel of communicating, in part because it is so commonly associated with three of the strongest messages we send: sexual interest, emotional intimacy, and dominance."[149] For these reasons, non-normative ways of touching and being touched are mostly explored in intimate sexual relationships, which, because sexuality is often considered private and unspeakable, have some, but little potential for sparking societal change. The role that touch plays in subordination and domination, as well as in emotional intimacy limits its use and exploration of its possibilities in public, non-intimate situations for upholding egalitarian values.

[149] Guerrero, DeVito and Hecht, *The Nonverbal Communication Reader*, 174.

CHAPTER THREE:
Polysexed Touch in My Choreographic Explorations

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler theorizes gender identity as an ongoing process made up of repetitive acts that refer to cultural understandings of masculine and feminine, male and female. She invites the reader to consider gender "as a personal/cultural history of received meanings subject to a set of imitative practices which refer laterally to other imitations."[150] These imitative practices through time, create a performative "*corporeal style*," performative suggesting a "dramatic and contingent construction of meaning."[151] Much like a theater performance must use elements of the larger culture in order to create intelligible characters and story lines, we perform our gender through various, repeated meaningful acts every day.

The connection between stage performance and everyday performance effectively dismantles the existence of a "true" identity or self all together. I believe that the stage can be considered a "free territory," (a territory that is "carved out of space and affords opportunities for idiosyncrasy and identity"[152]) a concept discussed in detail previously in chapter two, because it is a venue in which performers can express identities that are incongruous with their everyday performed identities, although certain expectations do remain. It is commonly understood that in a

[150] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 138.
[151] Ibid. 139.
[152] Lyman and Scott, "Territoriality," 175.(175)

performance space, the actions are not real and the performers are putting on a character; a guise that comes from the external culture rather than the performer's genuine, natural internal impulses. However, the only thing that renders these actions/characters fake is the frame in which they are being performed. If gender is a performance as Butler argues, what is the difference between performing a woman on the stage and performing one in real life? With the concept of the naturally gendered internal core abolished, nothing. Just as Sullivan discusses how the variety of institutions and people we transact with on a daily basis reveal our identities to be transient and dependent on the environmental frame, the stage can be considered a different frame, but the actions are just as real. At the same time, this frame provides a great deal of freedom to experience methods of expression and relating that might not have been performed in any other way and will undoubtedly have an effect on one's "real life" performance style.

Including choreography in the Touch Project allowed me to explore how everyday performativity and stage performativity are similar and connected. Foster effectively articulates how all bodily movement is given meaning by its connection to all of the other bodily movement that has happened and is happening:

> Each of the body's moves, as with all writings, traces the physical fact of movement and also an array of references to conceptual entities and events… Each body establishes this relation between physicality and meaning in concert with the physical actions and verbal descriptions of bodies that move alongside it.[153]

This argument works alongside Butler's theory of gender identity as a performance that refers repeatedly to cultural ideologies of gender and simultaneously creates these ideologies. Movement, whether on a stage or in one's living room refers to,

[153] Foster, "Choreographing History," 180.

contributes to, revises, and reinforces the larger culture's understanding of what specific movement means.

The performers in both of the pieces created for the Touch Project used experience from their own lives in order to create movement. Inspiration and movement came from and referred to recent "real-life" touch experiences, old memories of touch, and experiences of touch within the rehearsal process (which is also a "performative" space and therefore a "free-territory"). Because many of the touches explored in a "performance" context occurred in "real life," the performers' "real" identities were central to the pieces. At the same time, they had the chance to try out their peers' touch experience, switch roles in the touches, and transform how the touches were performed and experienced and what they meant. This blurs the distinction between their "real" identities and stage identities because there are elements of both real movement, improvisational actions and reactions, and movement designed or altered for the stage.

Touch occurring on a stage produces the performers' gendered identities and relationships in that period of time in a similar way to real life because both are read in relationship to larger cultural ideologies of what touch signifies. My choreographic research allowed me to explore and experiment with the specific force, tension, weight, shape, tempo and phrasing of different everyday touches and the gendered realities these touches suggested, created and performed. The performance space created a frame in which the performers felt safe exploring new touches and experiencing touches that would in a "real-life" frame be experienced as violating or

harmful in some way, which was crucial to a complete exploration of the good, the bad and the ugly faces of touch in U.S. society today.

In the following, I will show how conceptions of femininity and masculinity revealed themselves and functioned in the two works through the use of touch. First, I will explain my choreographic projects in relationship to the genre of contact improvisation and how CI's ideologies of touch and gender helped me make profound discoveries about touch and its meanings and effects. Then, I will discuss specific issues and themes that were brought up in rehearsals and/or explored in the final pieces of choreography that were performed.

Contact Improvisation's Influence on My Choreographic Process

In rehearsals for "touching…" and "polysexed touch play…", I looked to contact improvisation for ways to approach the use of touch from an angle other than its social implications and expand the use of touch non-normatively. I based much of the rehearsal process on the ideology of contact improvisation in order to create a sense of ensemble, help the cast be comfortable with touching one another, and sharpen their physical awareness to touching and being touched. The tenets of contact improvisation allowed me and the cast to explore touch more freely and experimentally, although I did not abide by contact improvisation techniques strictly by any means. Instead, I used the basic principles of CI in new ways and in a very different rehearsal process. Overall, I sought to expand upon these tenets by consciously bringing social implications and norms, emotions, and the multitude of

identities of the cast into the movement exploration and dialogue. Unlike most CI classes and gatherings, I wanted to use socially constructed touch conventions, digging deeply into them in order to transform their effect on the performers and the audience.

Creating Comfort with Touch

My dancers and I used some basic CI structures for warming up our awareness of and comfort in touching the other bodies in the room. One that we used repeatedly began with two people sitting back to back. I guided the dancers to simply experience how it felt to be in this relationship to one another and explore giving and receiving weight by leaning forward and back. This progressed into the dancers shifting the point of contact as they rolled over one another and moved through space. Back to back contact is impersonal enough for the dancers to be able to focus on exploring their own body and fusing with another person to be able to move as one without feeling self-conscious. At the same time, it usually progresses into extremely intimate movement as the dancers roll on one another and the dancers become more comfortable with their partner. Going into the exercise avoiding face-to-face eye contact permitted an internal focus that smoothly transitioned to the more intimate dance that arose in rehearsals.

Public Functional Touch in Everyday Life

In CI, touch is performed for the functional purpose of creating and maintaining the momentum of the dance. As I thought about touch in my every day life, I realized that here, too, a lot of touch that I experienced was also functional, as opposed to emotionally performed for the sake of its own erotic energy. In many public situations, I jostle and am jostled by people on the street as we rush to get somewhere on time, press my body against a stranger to fit onto a crowded subway car, or tap someone on the shoulder to get their attention. Interestingly, this emotionally removed form of touch is a good deal of the touch occurring everyday and takes on specific qualities in order to be considered safe, emotionally uninvolved touch for public context.

"Touching…" explored this phenomenon in depth. The dance started with the dancers touching and relating in generalized ways that regularly occur in crowded public spaces. This section was heavily influenced by my experience in the bustling New York City the previous summer. The dancers began in coats, walking in lateral lines and bumping into one another, as people often do as they maneuver their way down a busy street (see Figure 1). I remember bumping into people when I first arrived in New York as I tried to get by and apologizing profusely every time. I quickly realized that not only was it impossible to apologize to everyone I accidentally came into contact with, but it simply didn't seem necessary. Bumping and jostling and standing uncomfortably close to others was just part of living in such a crowded city, and no one seemed to even notice. Over time, I also got used to it,

switching into an anonymous mode in which I kept my mind on where I was going and avoided presenting myself at all as I entered crowded spaces. In this mode I was desensitized to extreme uncomfortable closeness with strangers.

Figure 1: The group walks laterally, bumping and jostling. (Photo by Ledah Wilcox)

This odd feeling of extreme awareness and complete tunnel vision as I was pressed up against strangers translated into a section of the piece where the dancers all attempted to sit on a bench as if it were a subway car. I wanted to show how we commonly touch and are touched impersonally and functionally in our every day lives and explore the difference between how these instances are read for their gendered implications versus intimate, personal, erotically charged touch. To do this, I gave the performers the direction to have everyone sit on this bench facing forward. With such a small area and eight bodies to accommodate, the performers unavoidably touched each other, squishing close together and sitting on top of one another to sit on the small platform. With blank faces, they began to touch each other's faces, legs, arms, without any clear purpose or intention as they repeatedly said "I'm sorry" to one another (see Figures 2 and 3).

Figure 2 (Photo by Ledah Wilcox)

Figure 3 (Photo by Ledah Wilcox)

I was interested in the tension between functional touch (in this case, touch that occurs because the space is so small, it is unavoidable) and intentional, personal touch. The dancers were pressed up against each other because I had given them a limit on the space that they could occupy. At the same time, however, they were going out of their way to touch each other in ways that don't usually occur between strangers in public. Further, the genders of the performers were not the focus of this section. The individual touches were not read differently based on the genders of the dancers performing them and gendered relationships were not created. Instead, the group formed a tight, anonymous group. The mass of people in such a small space, their blank faces that didn't relate to the people they were touching, and the reiterations of "I'm sorry" gave the impression that these touches were somehow unintentional and compulsory even as the dancers were clearly making the decision to touch each other. These touches had little to do with the individual people performing them and their relationships. Instead, they exaggerated the simultaneous extreme physical closeness and lack of personality and personal relationships within the group.

Then, I asked the dancers to walk across the bench to get to the other side one by one. In this instance the space was confined to a small one-foot-by-four-foot bench already occupying eight people (see Figure 4). Therefore, touching was necessary to allow the performers to accomplish their task of getting from one side of the bench to the other as they walked precariously over the several layers of thighs. In this section, the dancers were clearly touching each other to complete a task, not to revel in the joy of being in contact with another body. In this context, a man walking across several women's thighs did not connote a physical overcoming of the women or a specific relationship, but was read instead as necessary contact in order to get to a specific point in space.

Figure 4: The dancers walk across one another. (Photo by Ledah Wilcox)

The dancers experienced this section in interesting ways. It was a way of touching that most of us didn't immediately think of when we thought back to when and how we touch in our daily lives. One dancer explained in a journal entry that "the opening feels pedestrian… Touch as a pedestrian, street person is so different from

what we first (or I at least) think of with 'touch' – a 'caress' as the book reads… but bumping into someone or rushing along – impersonal – but it happens."[154] While this form of public touch might be a common experience for many people, it is anonymous and occurs because our bodies are unavoidably present, not for reasons personal to who we are in relationship to one another.

I think the fact that we don't tend to think of this touch as meaningful to who we are, or even violating to our boundaries, reveals that repeatedly experiencing these crowded public spaces causes us to shut down our awareness of our own boundaries and each other and retreat our identities into ourselves; we take on an anonymous public persona to protect our boundaries and uphold a stable sense of our identity. As Douglas describes, "the construction of stable bodily contours relies upon fixed sites of corporeal permeability and impermeability"[155] and we are in a constant struggle to define the boundaries of our body and selves. Social research shows that touching and being in close proximity to others culturally indicates a close, personal relationship. We are corporeally permeable to these people because we physically include them in our bodily space through touch. Strangers are normatively not welcome in this space. However, in this form of public functional touch, we are in close contact with people with which we have no social relation, thus we inadvertently allow a violation of our learned social rules about our bodies' corporeal permeability and impermeability.

The opening choreography embodied the issue of how confined space affects touch paradigms in our contemporary culture. Desmond Morris, a zoologist, "attributes modern society's avoidance of physical contact to its crowded living

[154] Klein, Personal Communication with Stephanie, 2007.
[155] Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 132.

conditions and to the confusion of tactual contact with sexual contact, which therefore necessitates avoidance of *non*sexual contact as well."[156] Because avoiding contact is not always possible, particularly in crowded urban conditions, it is necessary for us to make this contact as impersonal as possible in order to protect our own personal space and respect that of those around us. This is even more necessary given that touch is often construed as sexual; we cannot acceptably enjoy, or let on that we enjoy, this unavoidable contact with strangers. I believe that this has to affect our overall relationship to touch. Given that we are often in situations where we touch people that we otherwise wouldn't if we could avoid it, and in these situations are in a state of having our personal spaces violated, we are then repelled by touch and make even greater attempts to avoid it in order to maintain our personal boundaries.

Personal and Emotional Touch

As "touching…" progressed, more personalized touches were explored, many coming from the dancers' recent experiences of touching or being touched. The specificity of these touches caused a collection of stories, relationships and identities to be experienced by the dancers and viewers. While I don't have testimony from audience members, the dancers themselves wrote and spoke about what they saw in sections with others that they were able to watch, which gives at least a peek into how the dance could be read by an outside viewer. At the same time, as is true with all art, each viewer experiences any work differently, bringing their own experience at that

[156] Henley, *Body Politics*, 99.

specific moment in time to their viewing eye, allowing for an endless number of interpretations.

The performance of more personal touches rooted each performer in their experience as an embodied human with an identity, a past, a present, and a future. In one section, each dancer approached and touched one female dancer (Elissa) in different ways. For example, in one touch, a male dancer approached Elissa and nuzzled his face in her neck, coming up from below (see Figure 5). In another, a different male dancer came up behind her and slid his hands into the pockets of her coat as she tilted her head back to touch his head with hers, put her hands up around his head and neck and closed her eyes (see Figure 6).

Figure 5 (Photo by Ledah Wilcox)

Figure 6 (Photo by Ledah Wilcox)

With each touch, a small sketch of a relationship was formed between the two dancers. One dancer wrote that “the dance beginning feels like a play/narrative story to me… I like it. It has to do with the way Elissa reacts to each of us, and how

different we each are."[157] This observation points to the transactional nature of identity formation. Not only does the specific touch create a sense of a relationship between the two dancers, but the reaction to it and the bodies of the two people involved gives a more nuanced sense of identity and the meaning of the touch. In other words, the actions of both people occurring in a cause and effect relationship and the cultural signatures of their bodies create a sense of who each person is and who each is to one another in a very human way.

Gender in Contact Improvisation vs. Gender in My Choreography

As discussed earlier, CI teaches its participants to neutralize gender roles within the dance and adhere instead to maintaining a continuous flow of movement. Gender was of course a highlighted aspect of my rehearsal processes, not only because it is an important part of how we order our lives but because my specific interest for this project is in touch as a way gender is created and performed. I was definitely interested in exploring alternative gender relationships and expressions, and, accordingly, did not adhere to dominant gender roles (for example, men always lifting women). Similar to CI, I directed the performers of "touching…" to work mostly in duets and mixed up the gender pairings often. Every person got the chance to work closely with (and touch) almost everyone else in the group, regardless of gender, during warm-ups, guided improvisations, and movement creation.

At the same time, I recognized the limits of gender neutralization. Gender can never be effectively neutralized as the body of the performer will always be

[157] Klein, Personal Communication with Stephanie, 2007.

deciphered for its gender identity, even if this is an ambiguous gender identity. Gender is central to how bodies are identified and will always be present when human bodies perform. As Novack states, "reference is central to dance because of the constant presence of the human body and human movement."[158] In order to deal with this phenomenon, I did not seek to neutralize the gender expression of the performers in their presentation or movement but instead attempted to play with how the expression could shift, however subtly, at various points throughout the piece.

While sexuality and gender were central elements of the pieces, they existed fluidly, constantly shifting in the performers throughout the piece. No story line or characters were attempted to be explicitly conveyed, like in CI, although each viewer had the potential to decipher meaning, characters, or even a story line. However, unlike CI, movements and structures were choreographed and practiced multiple times before being performed with an audience. Many of these movements included explicit references to dominant touch paradigms; often, touch and movements that were performed had strong social connotations.

Choreographed Gendered Touch and Gender Theory

Through the choreographic component of the Touch Project, I sought to fill some of the gaps that are formed in the convergence between theories explaining the construction of gender through repeated performative actions and social science research on touch as non-verbal behavior. The rehearsal process for "touching…" was in large part dedicated to exploring what issues came up in different touch

[158] Novack, *Sharing the Dance*, 14.

explorations in this mixed-gendered large group of eight dancers. The physical distance between people (proxemics) and the various meanings that arose from their touch behavior (haptics) were two main themes that we explored. Gender issues arose in the mixed-gendered group based on comments and writings by the dancers because each person had different touch experiences and were comfortable with different kinds of touch exploration, with gender usually being a main factor.

Touch, being a central focus of this piece, allowed the dancers to relate to each other physically as well as energetically. In my choreography, the dancers' physical interactions and contact played a crucial role in transactionally creating the shifts in gender expression within the individuals and as a whole. We openly discussed and wrote about the emotions that arose in various touch exercises and the different ways of touching and being touched that were explored, which gave the performers permission to more fully dig into and express how they were feeling in rehearsals and express shifts in emotion in the piece itself. In this way, the performers were intimately tied to one another in that how they touched one another physically and energetically was allowed to be fully experienced and expressed, and ultimately guided how the individuals shifted and the piece progressed.

In the touch explorations that I asked the performers to complete, their gender roles, relationships and identities were very clearly expressed in the movement they created without any conscious effort on my part. In fact, I had not even decided on a thesis topic but gendered nuances emerged in the first explorations of touch completely unexpectedly and were intriguing. This was how I discovered that in

performing touch, gendered identities and relationships were very easily and almost compulsively experienced both by outside observers and performers.

I decided to go with this instead of fight it, instead melding together sections so that each performer would shift their gender expression, encouraging the performers to change roles within their movement sections, or simply teaching the movement to a new performer or group with a different gender configuration. In order to maintain the integrity and individuality of these explorations and shifts, I only minimally directed the specifics of how and when to do the movement. I wanted instead for the performers to find their own flow between these different gender expressions and movement vocabularies on their own and within the group.

Touch Creating Dominance and Submission

Gender mainly revealed itself in the dominant/submissive dynamic that the specific touches created (who has more power, who has more access, and who does not), which was affected by the physical articulation and performed identity of the specific bodies performing the touch as well as the touch itself. The dominant and submissive relationship was created and indicated by many factors: who initiated the touch and how; how the receiver responded; and where the touch occurred on the body (vulnerable body parts vs. non-vulnerable body parts, sexual surfaces vs. non-sexual surfaces, distinctions that were defined in the previous chapters, particularly chapter two). Taking on a dominant role is usually conflated with masculinity and

vice versa, so the dominant person in the touch was read as male in relationship to the submissive individual who was read as female.

In most situations, the initiator of the touch was granted the dominant role in the touch. For example, when Elissa was touched by each of the other dancers one by one, she did not take on a powerful role in the relationship that was indicated by the interaction. Instead, she seemed to be passively receiving different forms of welcome and unexpected/violating touches. One dancer wrote, "I feel as though it is powerful to have so many people touching one person."[159] In a few of the touches, the touch itself would not be indicative of a power differential on its own. In one interaction, a male dancer came up to her and nuzzled her cheek and neck, which could easily be seen as him showing affection for her within the context of an equal relationship. In another, a woman sat next to her and jostled her from the side, which, as it occurs in non-performative situations on public buses, for example, is usually assumed to be an accident and not indicative of a power relationship at all. But because one person clearly initiated the touch and upheld a good deal of agency in approaching Elissa, making contact, and leaving, they were granted the powerful role of initiator with a large degree of freedom and agency in how the touch occurred and the type of relationship that formed between them. Elissa, on the other hand, was read as submissive and passive in each of these relationships.

The choreography itself in this section constructed a compositional environment in which Elissa's autonomy and agency were suppressed, although her personal identity and touch experience played a role in creating this dynamic, as well. Because of the rules and compositional form that I instructed, (in which Elissa was to

[159] Kelly Klein, Personal Communication with Sarah, 2007.

enter and then be touched one by one by the other dancers and react) she was more static and passive while the others had the freedom to both approach her and distance themselves from her on their own terms. This is consistent with social science research findings that the dominant individual (based on the social hierarchy) has the ability to initiate touch on those less powerful and not the other way around.[160] Hence, it makes sense that the person who initiates as well as ends a touch would be read as more powerful compared to the person being touched.

At the same time, I gave Elissa a great deal of freedom in how she chose to react to each touch and simply told her to react in a way that felt natural. With every touch, she seemed to acquiesce to it and allowed it to happen, expressing mostly positive emotions and only a slight annoyance when she was jostled. Again, this reinforces social science findings that women are accustomed to being touched in many different ways and do not tend to react harshly or defensively against touch. The performance frame probably also facilitated this, as Elissa felt comfortable with the other dancers and maybe did not feel a need to defend herself or retaliate unwanted or unpleasant touch from them.

Subverting the Dominant and Submissive Paradigm: You may be on your knees but you got him by the balls

The initiator-as-dominant paradigm did not hold up, however, in interactions where body positioning and the part of the body where the touch occurred indicated a more complex dominant-submissive exchange. For example, a repeated motif of "touching…" was a variation on a waltz in which two people stood palm to palm and

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performed a duet reminiscent of a social partner dance. At one point, one of the dancers slowly bent their knees and put their face on their partner so that their nose grazed down the middle of their chest to their waist and back up. While the person who was lowering themselves was in a way initiating this part of the dance, they became submissive in this exchange because they were lowering their body in relation to their partner while their partner stood straight and tall (see figures 7 and 8). I believe this was possible because the hands were not the main body part involved in this touch. It is clear that the hands carry a great deal of power in touch and are often seen as active agents of touch, which is interesting because the fingers resemble phalluses. Touches initiated with other body parts do not always carry the same power as active, dominant agents.

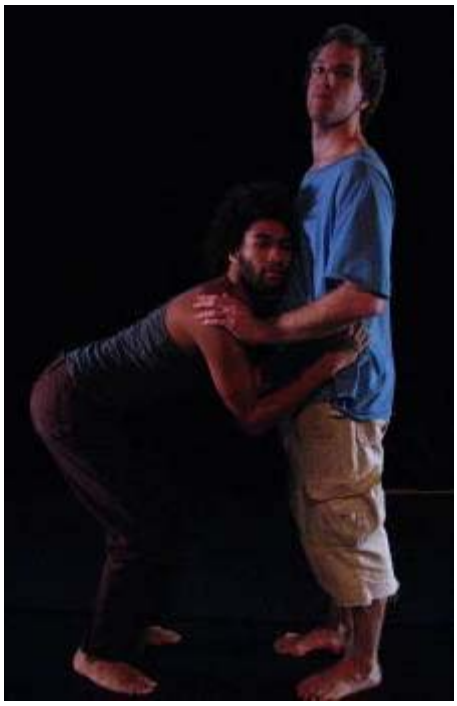

Figure 7 (Photo by Ledah Wilcox)

Figure 8 (Photo by Ledah Wilcox)

Even still, this touch was complicated by the place on the body in which it occurred. The face of the lower body was touching the torso of the higher body and was very close to the genital region. This suggested a sexual exchange which carries its own connotations of dominance and submission. On the one hand, the person who lowered themselves appeared to be submitting to the standing person and providing them with sexual pleasure and/or the sexual thrill of being in the dominant position. At the same time, however, the lower person, who initiated this lowering, is in some sense taking control of the other by initiating contact with a (and in some ways, the most) vulnerable body surface. This comes full circle, however, because the person who was still standing can be seen as somehow forcing or at least assertively suggesting that the other bend down and perform this sexualized touch. In this exchange the binary of dominant and submissive was loosened by the contradictory factors involved.

Interestingly, the degree to which the dominance was perceived as powerful or threatening by others outside of this interaction varied by the gender of the people within the touch. A male body in the higher position elicited a stronger sense of power, whether over another male body or a female body. A female body in this position, however, confused the distinction between dominant and submissive. One dancer commented in a journal entry that:

> watching as well as performing the part of the dance in which one person "goes down" and touches the other person's belly and chest on the way up provoked the most discomfort for me. What I noticed, however, was that when two women performed this action I did not feel as though gender roles were fusing dynamics of power, sexuality, and dominance, but that it was simply a loving act. When Miles and Mark did this part of the dance, I felt very uncomfortable by the roles that I felt that action created. The person who

> bends down assumes (in my mind) the subordinate role that alludes to the sexually dominated.[161]

With this, we return to the power of a man's touch in our society. How the dancers' performed this choreography was no doubt affected by their "real life" experiences with touch and comfort in these positions and contact with others. Much of U.S. normative male touch is based on asserting dominance and is infused with a great deal of power and danger. A man standing over another man who is touching low on the standing man's body is more easily read as an expression of power and domination. Women's bodies don't carry this threat as easily and can perform this action with the more fluid sense of which body is dominant.

A similar subversion of the dominant/submissive binary occurred in a duet in which the body positioning of the two dancers utilized images of dominance fluidly. Two female dancers engaged in a wrestling duet in which there were a few points where one dancer assumed a position that was physically above the other. In one, one woman was sitting and the other was standing with her hand on her head. The seated woman then pushed the other's legs and the standing one fell to the ground, acquiescing to the other's touch. Later, Sarah was standing with her upper body bent over her legs and Rebecca came up to her, threw her leg over her back and her hands up in the air, again signifying a form of domination. Then, Sarah slowly lunges and moves away from Rebecca so Rebecca's leg lowers and she is carried out of this dominant role. Rebecca wrote of this moment, "I think the movement when Sarah and I go to downstage center and she's bent over and my leg is on her back is sort of powerful. It's the only movement where I feel like there is true… domination?

[161] Klein, Personal Communication with Sarah, 2007.

defined power roles? in the choreography that I do. But it's still soft and gentle, which is interesting."[162] In this duet, the dancers managed to find fluid moments of domination and compliance, revealing how dominant and submissive roles rely on each other.

Sedimented Gender in Culturally Relevant Touch

Some touches are so strongly infused with power implications that the gender roles of the touch are incredibly rigid. In one rehearsal, I asked the dancers to write a list of touches that they had performed on others and touches that had been performed on them in the past twenty-four hours. I then paired them up and asked them to improvise a duet going back and forth touching one another using a touch that had been done to them. In one male-female pair, Miles started by falling into Elissa and putting his head in her neck. This touch was interesting because when Miles described it later, he explained that someone had bumped into him at a party and he had felt annoyed and that his space had been violated. Elissa, on the other hand, wrote that the touch was "a nuzzle that made me giggle and surprised me. Ticklish and playful, flirty and sloppy but ultimately endearing and enjoyable."[163] Perhaps because Elissa as a woman is used to being touched in more places, more often, and in more ways, she was more receptive to enjoying this contact. Miles, on the other hand, as a man is not as accustomed to being touched unexpectedly and had a different interpretation of the touch.

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[162] Klein, Personal Communication with Rebecca, 2007.
[163] Klein, Personal Communication with Elissa, 2007.

In the touch exploration, Elissa then came up behind him, grabbed his waist and thrust her pelvis onto the back of his in a grinding motion. Miles' reaction was immediate, loud, and disgusted. When we discussed this exercise later in the rehearsal, he explained his discomfort: "Anything with someone touching me in this part of my body, my pelvis, with their pelvis… Ew, I don't know how you ever deal with this ever in your life." He was completely appalled at how that touch felt, and I imagine the audience was surprised and maybe uncomfortable seeing a man in this position.

Figure 9 (Photo by Ledah Wilcox)

Miles had probably rarely if ever experienced this touch before because of its meaning in social life, which is part of why he reacted way he did. It is a touch that normally occurs at social dances between heterosexual pairs in which the male grinds on the female (literally, this dance is called 'grinding'). The women dancers all agreed that they were used to this kind of touch, whether or not they want to

experience it when they do. The closeness of the pelvises clearly insinuates genital sex and therefore also implies an active and passive role, the person standing behind being the active agent. This touch is unambiguous because of its role in "real life" and the powered and sexual relationship it connotes. Miles, taken out of his usual role as the active agent, had an adverse reaction to being forced into the passive, feminine role.

His reaction was facilitated by the heterosexual matrix and the constant threat of homoeroticism that it constantly must evade. Where the touch occurred on his body, the buttocks/back of the pelvis is highly associated with homosexual sex on the male body. This surface is the heterosexual man's Achilles heel and can easily be threatened by a touch, particularly from another pelvis. In one rehearsal while performing this section he even exclaimed, "Defeated!" after experiencing this touch. Miles' reaction was homophobic in the deepest and most inwardly directed sense of the word.

I have experienced a similar role reversal in grinding that was facilitated by a different semi-performative space. At my first week of college, there was a drag dance party hosted for the frosh. Everyone cross-dressed and it opened up a whole different way of interacting and behaving. As Butler argues, drag "reveals one of the key fabricating mechanisms through which the social construction of gender takes place"[164] and it is telling that not only did dress and behavior change, but how people touched changed as well. I remember awkwardly trying to take on the male role in the grinding dance and generally "dance like a man." The men were eager to try female dance moves and the female role in the grind. I believe that the playful performative

[164] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 136-137.

atmosphere allowed for a greater freedom of gender expression which made the grind role reversal much less threatening.

As the grind role reversal in “touching…” was explored and varied along with the stumble into Elissa’s neck that Miles was performing, the pelvis-to-back-of-the-pelvis touch shifted meaning and became an act of desperation. When the dancers lowered to the floor, Elissa performed her touch on Miles as he was on his hands and knees, which still read as a form of domination but was less threatening. Elissa then laid down and Miles laid on top to perform the neck nuzzle on her. Their horizontal position and Elissa being under Mile suddenly rendered Miles as the powerful one. Then, Miles walked away. Elissa ran to jump on him and then perform the pelvis to pelvis contact. It seems that the normative positioning in which both people are standing and one approaches the other from behind makes this touch the most threatening, perhaps because that is how it usually occurs in real life. In the other versions, the pelvis-to-back-of-the-pelvis contact was not as physically invasive to Miles, and a similar but opposite transition happened in Miles’ touch on Elissa.

Fluidness of Gender in Intimate Touch

“Touching…” included moments depicting extreme intimacy which were able to achieve a non-threatening fluidness to the gender roles performed. One of the last parts of the choreography was a duet between a male and a female that in rehearsals was called the “Lover’s Knot.” It began with Stephanie seated behind Jeremy with one hand over his eyes and the other around his chest. In this opening position,

Stephanie was in a sense the dominant one in a protective manner. After caressing each other's arms, Jeremy leans forward and takes Stephanie off of her feet and onto his back, fluidly transitioning to a position in which Jeremy holds more of the control. They continued to shift weight and control back and forth. At one point Stephanie held Jeremy up, completely supporting his weight as he lay horizontal to the floor. Later, Jeremy gently lowered Stephanie to the ground as he held and supported her neck.

I believe this fluidness of control and submission was made possible by the setting the choreography implied. Stephanie and Jeremy both had their eyes closed most of the time and enjoyed the sensuality of being with one another without openly being aware of performing for the audience. One dancer commented in a journal entry that the duet, "which is so sensual and tender (really metaphorical love-making) shares with the audience an intimacy usually reserved for private spaces."[165] Socially, I believe our associations with public vs. private spaces allowed this to be a non-threatening way of expressing and shifting dominance. In private, intimate settings, equal relationships and a fluidness of dominant and submissive roles are almost expected. These exchanges do not pose a threat to the larger social hierarchy because they occur in private free-territories.

Touch Between Females: A Different Approach in "Polysexed Touch Play"

The process for "polysexed touch play" was much different than that for "touching…" and was focused on applying the concepts discussed in social science

[165] Klein, Personal Communication with Spencer, 2007.

studies of touch. This piece included three female dancers who all had a relationship outside of the rehearsal process. This allowed me to start right away with more in-depth touch explorations because the women were all very comfortable with one another. The challenge of this piece was to find ways for the women to explore both feminine and masculine ways of touching and relating to one another. I utilized choreographic exercises in which the dancers took on supportive and loving as well as manipulative and controlling ways of touching one another.

The piece began with a regimented touch pattern in which the dancers counted out loud and touched each other one at a time with the rhythm. This sped up and began to disintegrate, evolving into less organized touches and then finally into a playful game-like choreography that resembled a unique handshake between friends. Two of the dancers then began more inward choreography on the floor in which they comfortably came into contact with one another, sensuously sharing an experience with one another. Throughout the first half, the dancers massaged themselves and touched each other sensuously, mostly with their hands, simply enjoying this healing contact with one another.

Towards the middle, the choreography made direct references to contexts in which females normatively touch one another. As a group of four women, we had the opportunity to discuss our common touch experiences, and a lot of touch between females was discussed and explored physically. For example, the dancers depicted a childhood sleepover where girls do each others nails and make-up and play the game "Are You Nervous?" (a game in which one participant places their hand on their partner's foot or knee and slowly brings it close and closer to the inner thigh and

groin area, repeating the phrase, “are you nervous?” This tests the point at which the partner pulls away because the touch initiator is too close to a vulnerable/sexual surface). Culturally, these images are recognized as specifically female experiences.

At the same time, the women often controlled one another physically and took on more domineering ways of touching one another, a version of touch usually associated with men. In one duet, one dancer literally decided how to move the other, manipulating her body to touch certain points in space. The dancer being manipulated maintained a blank expression and simply went along with the whims of the manipulator. After rehearsing this duet for a while, we decided to add in the reiterations of “are you nervous?” to this section as well.

This addition transformed the piece, making a connection between female childhood touch patterns and the effects that they have on many women’s relationship to touch. As discussed in chapter two, social science research on touch and gender has shown that females are touched more often as young children, which prepares them for being touched more than men as adults. This phenomenon is simultaneously a way in which women are subordinated, given that being touched is often a sign that one is of lower status as compared to the touch initiator, and a way in which women (and all people) connect to and are supported by one another emotionally and physically. The double nature of touch in the U.S. was expressed in the dance as the women went through a range of ways that they touched themselves and one another, from sensual and loving to domineering and harsh.

Breaking the Fourth Wall: Touch in the "Real Life" Space of the Theater

Another unique feature of "polysexed touch play" was the inclusion of props: small balls that were one and a half inches in diameter called energy balls. These balls had two metal contact points that, when touched in a way that completed a circuit – either by one person touching both contact points or one person touching one, another touching the other, and the two touching each other – lit up and made a noise until the circuit was broken. The dancers each had a ball. I wanted to include the audience into the performance, creating a frame similar to that in CI jams in which the audience and the performers are not strictly defined but people instead fluidly move between these roles, breaking down the power differential between audience and performer. I hoped to create an opportunity for strangers to interact and maybe even touch one another in a context that touch between strangers would typically be avoided as much as possible.

To accomplish this, the dancers handed about twenty energy balls into the audience throughout the dance. They spoke the instructions of how to complete the circuit out loud and the instructions were also written in the program. I wanted to create a space in which the audience felt involved in order to facilitate a deeper engagement with their personal touch practices and comfort with touch. The audience definitely got involved, as a buzz of light and sound permeated the room. Audience members passed the balls to one another, interacted with the dancers, and completed circuits with one another.

I was aware that the addition of these props in the audience would perhaps be uncomfortable for some audience members because their expectations about their role as an audience member were challenged. The last night, I experienced this first hand. I was sitting next to an older man whom I did not know. After I received a ball and played with it for a few moments, I went to pass it to him. I presented the ball with my finger on one contact point and asked him to touch the other, offering my other hand for him to touch. He seemed caught off-guard and confused, taking the ball from me carefully, as to avoid touching me and the contact point. This was an interesting moment. He was probably hesitant about interacting with others during a performance, as the audience is typically a silent observer in U.S. performances. On top of this fact, I am sure that especially because we did not know one another, my identity as a younger female stirred a certain amount of discomfort in him when presented with the proposal to touch and interact with me in this public setting. Our social identities exist in a strong cultural hierarchy due to the combined power discrepancies of our gender and age, and it is especially unusual in the U.S. for a younger woman to attempt to touch an older male in any context.

Privacy on Stage: Breaking Down the Performance Space / "Real Space" Binary

The difference between public space and private space came into play on the stage itself for the performers. In "touching…" there were moments in which the dancers felt separated and hidden from the audience which affected how they felt

while performing, which is usually considered a very public act. One pair took this opportunity to play and have private interactions without the audience knowing:

> One very comfortable moment in the dance that comes to mind is at the very end, when Miles and I are behind the bench waiting to go out into the audience and finish the dance…I have a rare moment to myself on stage. The audience knows I'm behind the bench, and they can probably see Miles pretty clearly, but I imagine they are thoroughly engrossed in Steph and Jeremy's duet…And there I was, hiding from view on stage, the place where I am normally the most exposed. Sometimes Miles would do weird things like blow on my neck, and it was so interesting to have these private joking moments between friends while Steph and Jeremy put what I consider a piece of their love life in plain view. The dance was all but over, and here I was given this delicious moment of privacy after exposing so much to the audience throughout the dance.[166]

This sense of freedom that the dancers felt when they were not publicly performing reiterates the importance of free-territories in subverting touch norms. In private spaces out of the public eye, we are more able to touch playfully and erotically without conforming to norms of behavior that are usually greatly informed by gender roles and hierarchies.

[166] Ibid.

CONCLUSION:
Liquidizing Gender through Non-normative Touch

Through the Touch Project's interdisciplinary research, touch was revealed to be crucial to our individual gender development and the formation of societal conceptions of gender, particularly the gender hierarchy. How we are touched and how we touch others create a part of our gendered habits, which form an illusion of a sedimented gender identity. This occurs in and through touch paradigms that are influenced by and help maintain conceptions of power and sexuality in that touch establishes and communicates power hierarchies in social relationships. Through touch, we literally embody and reify power differentials, both creating meaning of our bodies' surfaces and reinforcing cultural meanings established through other means. Touch is one way in which gender is physically created and experienced through ideologies surrounding the anatomical sex, the body and power and is particularly salient because it occurs on the surface of our skin. We experience the meaning of touch based on how the touch feels physically, emotionally, culturally, and politically, connecting these fields in our bodies. Our bodies are how we experience the physical and cultural world, so it is important not to ignore the physical manifestations of gender we experience and reinforce on a daily basis.

Conceptualizing the body as transactional was essential to this project, as it allows a greater understanding of how various actions, particularly repeated actions, continually create and re-create our identities in relationship to our environment in a co-constitutive relationship. In our touch practices, this conceptualization of our identities proved to be particularly useful in understanding how we in the U.S. physically embody our gender(s) in relationship to one another on a moment-to-moment basis.

Perhaps most importantly, this understanding of our gender provides new possibilities for creating ourselves and our identities in relationship to one another, bringing to light the great deal of agency we have in this process. Given that our relationship to societal constructs is fluid and changes based on context, "the incorporation of cultural gender constructs means that one can reconfigure one's culture in and through the ways one transactionally bodies it."[167] While cultural constructs might "constrain one's performances of gender, producing the particular gendered subject that one is, these constraints are simultaneously the very tools by which effective resistance to hegemonic norms is made possible."[168] Similarly, Butler argues that the "coexistence or convergence of…discursive injunctions [to be a given gender] produces the possibility of a complex reconfiguration and redeployment"[169] of gender. In other words, the very norms that make up the hegemonic matrix of heterosexuality can be recombined to reveal alternative gender possibilities.

Further, great discrepancies exist in the various discourses that continually produce the notion of a naturalized gender binary. People today transact with a

[167] Sullivan, *Living Across and Through Skins*, 98.
[168] Ibid. 97.
[169] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 145.

number of social and cultural institutions throughout their lives simultaneously, each with their own ideals. As a result, our "habits constitute a variety of different and potentially conflicting dispositions."[170] We are able to embody these different dispositions and use them as we see fit according to the context we find ourselves in. It is the places of conflict between sets of habits, particularly between habits that are "inflexible because of the rigidity of the institution that helped form it" that have the most potential for transformation of cultural conceptions of gender on individual and cultural levels.[171] In these sites, certain "habits begin to wear upon and challenge and influence each other. As they do so, the resulting friction between and weakening of some habits disrupts the usual ways adults habitually transact with the world, opening up possibilities for reconfigurations of habit and thus of culture as well."[172]

The problem that Butler and Sullivan see with how mainstream culture conceptualizes gender today is that gender is thought of as an inherent, coherent, and fixed part of our selves and our identities. It is our truth and reveals much about how we live our lives. Sullivan proposes that using the idea of freedom as existing "in and through structure, we can say that precisely in order to free ourselves from the current ways in which we are gendered, we should try to change *how* we are gendered."[173] Our gendering process must be allowed to be fluid in order to trouble existing cultural norms of where and when our various "identities" are acknowledged and accepted. This fluidness is achieved in theorizing the body as transactional. This necessitates room to allow ourselves to play with how we transact and perform ourselves in order

[170] Sullivan, *Living Across and Through Skins*, 104-105.
[171] Ibid. 105.
[172] Ibid. 105.
[173] Ibid. 94.

to loosen our habits and reveal our fluidness and the fluidness of the institutions we constitute and by which we are constituted.

Of course this freedom of gender expression is difficult to find, given the pervasiveness of the binary gender hierarchy. It is fundamental to our class structure because capitalistic organization relies on hierarchies and strictly delineated groups. Fluid gender expression is in a sense a luxury for those who can afford to go against the grain of society. This is not to say that people of the lower classes hold little or no agency when it comes to their gender expression, just that there are more barriers to achieving a fluid sense of self. I do believe, though, that any amount of fluidness or subversion is useful to liquidizing our societal gendered structure.

With the understanding of bodies as transactional and gender as a performative act comes a great deal of potential for the transformation of gender. Because touch plays a largely unrecognized role in creating and reinforcing gender categories and identities, non-normative touch could draw attention to the ways in which this happens. This effectively reveals gender as a constructed, non-natural entity and liquidizes our sedimented gendered habits. However, finding contexts in which to experiment with touch is a challenge for people of any class, given the strength and pervasiveness of our touch practices and the meanings associated with them. Again, “free territories” as well as time are necessary for this exploration, and both of these resources are unequally distributed to people in the U.S.

CI is one route that I believe is useful in finding freedom within the structure of gender and in which experimentation with touch paradigms can liquidize our gender identities. This is possible because of its intimate connection with our

experiences of our bodies touching and moving in relationship to other bodies, which is deeply embedded in our experiences of our sexuality. Because touch can create connections between beings and has a role in intimately transacting with others as well as oneself, its exploration lends itself to opening up new possibilities for being and relating to one another. I believe this is what Steve Paxton is getting at when he says he wanted to create a container for CI that captured that time before "we entered school and a kind of rigidity came into our lives – a really intense denial of the body."[174] This container was:

> a place of incredible exquisite quiet, with great patience, with a lot of attention to what's going on in the body. It doesn't preclude sexual arousal, but I think that sex is just part of that spectrum. We're incredibly focused on it, we're very genitalized in this culture. I think that if I were to look at the whole thing from a sexual perspective I would say that I want the sexual sensations to be throughout the body and the senses, rather than crotch-bound.[175]

CI utilizes a form of functional touch that does not entail the domination that exists as the function of wrestling and many other contact sports. In "touching…" I was interested in creating this kind of energy in which two bodies engage in a dance of fluidly shifting between physically submitting to and taking control over each other without a clear purpose and without end of domination and victory. I instructed two men to play around with this kind of wrestling movement and they hit the ground running, thoroughly enjoying being thrown around and throwing around another body. Because they were not concerned with overwhelming the other body, they could experience the pleasure of losing control and gaining it again, which has profound gender and social implications.

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[174] b and Paxton, "the Sex Issue," 47.
[175] Ibid. 47.

Similar to this choreographic exercise, one interest of CI is to create a space in which participants can explore playing with losing and taking control in contact with another body. This has reveals how engagement in CI can be a dangerous engagement with physical and social boundaries. Novack explains that "the edge of physical danger in contact improvisation has always been appealing and exciting to some people,"[176] rendering CI as a form in which these boundaries can be explored without the ultimate goal of dominating another human being. Within this activity, participants are even charged with taking responsibility for their partners, and must also give their partners the ability to take control of their bodies at times. Novack describes this as an "act of minimizing control" which, particularly in U.S. culture, can "carry frightening social implications. Disorientation in American social behavior is usually interpreted as a sign of mental instability, and lack of physical control is generally thought of as a sign of injury, illness, or intoxication."[177]

I believe that the impulse in U.S. culture to view disorientation as dangerous is particularly strong in CI because it involves contact with, and even surrender to, another body. Touching in non-normative ways is particularly threatening to the status quo (the heterosexual matrix), which is undoubtedly why U.S. culture holds such strong touch paradigms according to the social hierarchy. To practice the fluid exchange of receiving control of and giving control to your partner in CI has important political implications, particularly given CI's gender-neutral stance. To have a people give and receive control in this way that is not dependent on gender hierarchies is important to liquidizing our compulsory touch paradigms in which men

[176] Novack, *Sharing the Dance*, 151.
[177] Ibid. 151.

and those of higher social standing have physical control over those below them, particularly women, through touch. In the CI frame, touch is not regulated by gender hierarchies and the physical control that touch implies is given and taken as the momentum of the dance necessitates.

Through the rehearsal processes and final works, I hoped to create ways for the performers to experience gender on the stage differently than they usually do in "real life." Foster asserts that the relationship between physical movement and the concepts it expresses is non-natural and impermanent: "it mutates, transforms, reinstantiates with each new encounter."[178] New movement experiences, "new writings, even as they jar perceptions with their arresting inventiveness, recalibrate… bodily semiosis,"[179] semiosis being "any form of activity, conduct, or process that involves *signs*, including the production of *meaning*."[180] Hence, by having the dancers experience new touch, which has been shown to be heavily influenced by and reiterative of the heterosexual matrix, the performers had the opportunity to expand upon and liquidize their usual touch paradigms and experience of their genderedness. Further, the audience viewed bodies touching and interacting in non-normative but culturally referential ways, which provided a new experience of what meanings are communicated through human bodily touch.

This project aimed to understand touch as relevant to our gender identity formation. Further research might consider touch practices in specific relationships and contexts in order to understand the effects of and revolutionize these paradigms.

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[178] Foster, "Choreographing History," 180.
[179] Ibid. 181.
[180] "Semioses," Wikipedia, February 24, 2008, 7 Mar. 2008 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Semiosis>.

This would contribute to the larger activist project of liquidizing our societal conceptions of gender in order to create a fluid culture of acceptance.

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