

Ethical Agility in Dance

Rethinking Technique in British
Contemporary Dance

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First published 2024

ISBN: 9780367628673 (hbk)

ISBN: 9780367628635 (pbk)

ISBN: 9781003111146 (ebk)

Chapter 2.4

Steps towards decolonising contact
improvisation in the university

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The chapter DOI: 10.4324/9781003111146-12

Funded by the University of Winchester

2.4 Steps towards decolonising contact improvisation in the university

Tamara Ashley

To begin the work of anti-oppression and anti-racism is to start from an acknowledgement of positionality and privilege or oppression. Mine is a privilege of a mobile life lived in many countries as well as the complexity of a multi-lineage family, with traumatic histories of migration and displacement, as well as arrival and settlement. I am of Scottish, English, Portuguese and South Asian descent, and my pronouns are she/her. I am a dancer, teacher, researcher, yoga and somatic practitioner, with degrees from universities in the UK and United States. I have focused my work in somatic practice, contact improvisation (CI), yoga, bodywork and contemporary dance through the lenses of critical pedagogy and ecological justice for over 20 years. I have been interested in how oppressions intersect and how harm is perpetuated across minorities and marginalised populations as well as the planet itself. As a teacher, I also believe that practices such as CI provide contexts in which critical, activist and reflective processes of individual and social transformation can occur through the engagement with the form itself. Decolonising the practice of such a form is a logical extension of a critically engaged pedagogy and becomes essential to an ethical anti-racist teaching practice when it is acknowledged how racism permeates every aspect of social, cultural and political life.

CI is an open-ended practice that is taught through a wide range of methods from the teaching of partnering forms, to the exploration of scores for improvisation, to anatomically based explorations that serve as impetus for moving and relating. A core principle is negotiating weight flow through relating in touch/contact, whether that is with the earth, or other with other bodies, and there are several techniques that aim to refine this skill in practitioners. These techniques are principles for moving rather than specific movements, and they are open to interpretation by each individual practitioner. CI already reorients the ethics of teaching dance technique, in that there is no imposition of form on the body. The details of the movement developed are the responsibility of the practitioner, and work within the practitioner's own experience and capacity, developing agency and ownership of the movement learning and process from the very beginning. Advanced- and beginning-level dancers can explore the same principles, and an advanced dancer might

be recognised for their nuance and sensitivity, over perhaps, form-based virtuosic accomplishment. At the University of Bedfordshire, the assessment criteria for CI technique assessments privilege skill in sensitive response to self and others, skill in navigating one's own capacity in weight flow, trust and touch and creative response within one's expressive and physical range. Because of this open-ended exploration of key principles, and the freedom to create and innovate with the form, I have mostly regarded the form as accessible, inclusive and progressive in that dancers of mixed levels can be in the same class. However, when starting to investigate CI from a decolonial perspective, it can be seen that the practice contains within it both tools to aid processes of decolonisation as well as practices and assumptions that are exclusive and harmful to people of colour.

I was initiated into practicing the form of CI by white teachers from the United States. I have noticed, over the years, a lack of participation in jams, festivals and other such events by black dancers and also of efforts by leading teachers and organisations to reach out to some of these dancers. It has been a concern of one of the form's founders, Steve Paxton, and, in a recent interview with Mitra, he acknowledges that the form has not been very successful at integrating black dancers. Paxton explains:

As the recent Black Lives Matter movement signals to us, what we once considered was institutionalized racism as practiced by the police is in fact systemic in our society, our culture. So, it might well be that rubbing skins with your oppressors is not an appealing prospect within contact. It seems to be a bit of a canary in a coal mine situation this. It warns us that something might be up, and has been, for the whole time that contact has been around.

(Paxton in Mitra, 2018: 15)

What is interesting about the development of CI is that despite its roots in the inclusive politics of the 1970s American counterculture, the form is acknowledged as predominantly white and yet it draws heavily upon aikido, and in the approaches developed by Nancy Stark Smith, Tibetan Buddhism. CI is simultaneously hybrid, by incorporating diverse cultural and indigenous knowledges, and exclusive, through its implicit and systemic failure to truly engage a diverse range of people in the practice. Nonetheless, I have taught the work extensively in education settings and universities, trying to integrate a critical pedagogical approach that offers a questioning approach to the somatic experiences of the body and mind in the practice. The recent thinking and scholarship outlined above have prompted me to reflect more deeply and consider what it might mean to decolonise CI as a practice for the twenty-first-century curriculum.

In this chapter, I will discuss three steps that I am developing in my own practice to decolonise my teaching in order to develop some ethical agility

as a practitioner committed to developing anti-racist progressive relations in teaching and learning. These three steps are rendered from experiential insights, ongoing research in critical pedagogy and current research in dance on racism, anti-racism, decolonisation, whiteness and oppression of the body. The three steps are not definitive and I am open to developing them. However, it is useful to ground teaching practice and action in tangible steps. I have explored the three steps in practical teaching, in the development of my own research and in the context of research supervision. In this chapter, I will offer a discussion on the application and development of each of the steps in detail. In summary, these three steps are:

- 1 Understand the body as a site of identity development and change and that oppression is embodied (Caldwell and Leighton, 2016).
- 2 Understand that my teaching begins from an inherently racist standpoint.
- 3 Critically interrogate white privilege and embed critical questioning from the beginning (bell hooks).

What does it mean to engage in a process of decolonisation? Shifting from a focus on diversity to a focus on decolonisation.

Before going in-depth into each of the three steps, it is useful to discuss a broader meaning of decolonisation of teaching in dance and somatic practices. Decolonisation is a contested and debated term subject to multiple renderings and applications. However, broad definitions can be gleaned from the literature. In the UK, there has been a growing movement to decolonise the curriculum, which further develops the concerns of postcolonial studies, cultural studies and social and environmental justice movements through the works of scholars such as Sarah Ahmed, bell hooks, Paul Gilroy, Stuart Hall and many others. Initiated in 2015, #whyismycurriculumwhite, for example, is led by the National Union of Students Black Students' campaign. The campaign seeks to deconstruct the concept of whiteness in higher education, where whiteness 'exceeds the individual and is a ubiquitous, multifaceted and inconsistent manifestation of power' (Magd, 2016). Further to that, Magd asserts that the normative white curricular bias of the university is no longer acceptable. Such bias is seen not just in curriculum and reading lists but in student admissions, staff representation, and assumptions pertaining to knowledge ownership, fees, rent and the broader economic structures of universities. In fact, the legacies of colonialism are present in campuses in highly visible ways such as in statues of benefactors and in the naming of buildings. Activists have focused on some of these symbols as catalysts to raise awareness around issues of colonisation.

Gebrial's essay *Rhodes Must Fall* (2018) foreshadows events of summer 2020, when in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd in the United States, and a resurgence in support for the Black Lives Matter movement, the statue of Coulston was thrown into the dock by protestors in Bristol. Earlier

in 2015, students at the University of Cape Town in South Africa campaigned for the removal of the Rhodes statue from their campus. The protest movement inspired the Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford campaign in 2016. Gebrial discusses how an impact of the Oxford campaign was a shift in the rhetoric in anti-racism work from one which focused on diversity, to one which focused on decolonisation (2018: 20). What is significant about this is that, in Gebrial's view, decolonisation calls for structural transformation at all levels of the institution and goes far beyond measures developed to encourage campus diversity and inclusion. In the discussion of the Rhodes Must Fall campaign, Gerbrial calls for a 'reorientation in the antiracist framework from diversity to decolonisation, and what this might look like' (2018: 20). The recent shift towards decolonisation as a focus in anti-racist work means that what it might look like is still under refinement, definition and development. In fact, *decolonisation* is defined by its active process-oriented approach to developing anti-racist perspectives for individuals, institutions and society.

Dance scholars have developed critiques concerned with making explicit racist assumptions and exclusivity in the field. Contemporary dance, particularly postmodern dance, has been problematised by anti-racist thinkers, such as Mitra, in the UK, for its use of abstraction in choreography. The film *Racism and Contemporary Dance* by Mitra, Arabella Stanger and Simon Ellis (2020) touches upon the tendency of white patriarchal culture to write the body itself out of discourse, to make it visual, objectified and conceptual. This is a reason why abstract concept-based work in dance can be experienced as racist and exclusive. If the experiential body is silenced, so is the violence acted upon it. This happens in choreography when the virtuosic and visual are given privilege over feeling, energy and aliveness of each individual performer.

Similarly, Chaleff's analysis of postmodern dance in the United States critiques the construction of the ordinary and neutral body in postmodern dance, asserting that 'Any body does not have the potential to be read as neutral, and so not every body has the same access to what is presumed to be ordinary' (2018: 79). While Chaleff focuses on the works of Trisha Brown and Yvonne Rainer, the tacit values of embodying ordinary neutral bodies, pedestrian movement and the natural in the moment state of moving are present in allied practices of somatics and CI. Moreover, to start to consider the decolonisation of these practices, as well as considering who feels they are able to participate, the lineage and knowledge sources should be investigated. These practices often draw heavily on techniques derived from martial arts, Buddhist meditation and yoga. Stark Smith, who was a practicing Buddhist and a co-founder of CI, has been referred to as a dancer bodhisattva. Because postmodern dance, which would include practices of CI and some somatic practices, developed in a context of white privilege, the acknowledgement of these forms as exclusive and white, and potentially culturally appropriative, would seem to be necessary for an inclusive environment to truly develop.

As dance scholar Davis points out, ‘inclusivity without explicitly naming Whiteness when it presents is not an inclusive environment at all’ (2018: 125). Moreover, *inclusion* might not be a sufficient term in that it assumes inclusion to something established, when perhaps what should be sought is a co-created environment that evolves and changes with those who are present.

Decolonising contact improvisation through the three steps

To engage critically in a process of decolonisation is complex in a postcolonial, globalised world in which migration, knowledge exchange, hybridity and fusion are commonplace. What is it to look openly to other cultures for inspiration and guidance while also holding anti-racist decolonising attitudes? How can CI, for example, be decolonised? How are its foundations in postmodern dance, Buddhism and martial arts made sense of in current contemporary discourses of decolonisation? In the wider practice of the form, CI is not only practiced as art and performance but also shared through international festivals, retreats and events in exotic locations, where rich Westerners, clearly privileged, practice in the vicinity of communities of extreme poverty in a scenario that might be described as *contact tourism*. For the purposes of this chapter, I am focusing on CI practice and teaching within the university teaching setting but investigation into the development of contact tourism, and the decolonisation of the international travelling practitioner are certainly worthy of further discussion in the future.

Discussing the three steps in detail

For the remainder of the chapter, I will discuss the three steps with detailed reference to teaching examples and situations.

- 1 Understand the body as a site of identity development and change and recognise that oppression is embodied**, and that it manifests in discomfort, pain and resistance (Caldwell and Leighton, 2016). Co-create a non-judgemental space for free expression of ideas, actions, reactions and processes. Understand how embodiment can generate meaning and worldview, and that movement systems are value systems, inherently exclusive to different modes of embodiment, and thereby meaning, experience and sense of self. Deconstruct the authority of codified systems and approach them as tools and technologies for learning. Offer choice and the chance to follow different paths.

The film *Racism and Contemporary Dance* (2020) is critical of conceptual and abstract works that do not provide space for experiential narratives of trauma and the oppressed. In contexts of oppression, Caldwell points out that ‘oppression in any form does violence to identity development’ (2016: 33). Caldwell further explains that where body

identity development is suppressed there is no acceptance of the body and the body is made to feel wrong in relation to the dominant culture. Remedying this feeling of being wrong in the body can mean taking on behaviours of the dominant culture – a form of internalised oppression. Caldwell advocates for the development of a practice called *bodyfullness* in which the practitioner pays attention to ‘our moving bodies in response to sensory signals’ (2016: 34). Given that CI is based upon principles of sensing and somatic awareness, it would seem that it might accommodate a bodyfullness approach.

While the practice of CI is essentially a score that is organised around following the points of contact between bodies in relation to gravity and momentum, the ways in which skills for that score can be developed can include a great deal of experiential exploration that encourages the development of self-exploration and self-knowledge; a form of bodyfullness, perhaps? Such an exploration might begin with the Small Dance/The Stand, a foundational exercise developed by Paxton, where one listens to the inner movements of the body as organised by the breath in its resting state. The exercise offers opportunities for dancers to come into a relationship of self-sensing while being guided by the teacher. In a teaching and learning context sensitive to decolonisation, the position of knowledge between teachers and learners is important to interrogate. Imposition of knowledge, for example, might be experienced as a colonising force on bodies. Offering choices and cues that are invitational, on the other hand, enables students to choose how to interact with the information on offer. Moreover, when practiced regularly, the small dance reveals to the dancer the changing states of mind, body and organisation and starts to release students from perceptions of fixed and stable identities. Each time that they come to practice the small dance, the student can perceive and accept the different sensations of body and mind that arise, and let go of ideas that the practice gives a particular imprint on the practitioner. Rather the practice enables the practitioner to observe themselves, their own habits and reactions and enables them to develop movement knowledge that starts in self-awareness.

In the practical learning of CI, tasks are designed to help dancers become sensitive to their in the moment sensations: their senses of weight, momentum, flow and relationships that include partnering through space, level and touch. These become the ground from which the dance develops. Foundational tasks such as lying on the floor to sense weight, to be in touch-based relating with a non-family member or partner and to support and give weight can all give rise to culturally exclusive environments. Consent and giving overviews of sessions with clear choices for a range of participation options can help students to feel safer, if not completely safe. Students can be given tasks to adapt and invent their own tasks that enable safer participation, and the definitions of safety and safe practice can be discussed and agreed upon with each individual. Even when consent is

agreed and there is a committed engagement from students, because the trauma of racial and other oppressions is embodied, it will be present in the dancing and, since also in CI, the practice is about following sensation, the practice may bring up strong feelings that manifest as pain, resistance and discomfort. I have observed that sometimes resistance can manifest both in injury and in emotional pain, which has been the case in my own practice and is also what I have witnessed in the practice of others. Many students are drawn into the performing arts precisely because they have stories to tell, strong emotions and expressions that they can channel and release in performance. It is also important to recognise that the teacher is not a therapist and to offer a supportive yet clearly defined non-judgemental space.

The creation of a non-judgemental space that can enable free expression of processes is skilful, particularly when artistic and educational assessments are part of the learning environment. To be able to look at pain, suffering and trauma in any practice requires courage from the practitioner and a supportive environment in which to do it. It is well documented that CI practitioners often stop attending jams and events when they feel unsafe, which has happened recently in the context of #metoo (see Beaulieux, 2019) as well as in situations of implicit racial exclusivity (see Brooks, 2018). It is an ongoing work of dialogue and reflection to hold space in a non-judgemental way that enables dancers to feel accepted with the permission to be themselves.

When teaching CI in an educational setting, such as a university, students are often in a situation where the curriculum requires them to study the form, rather than them being able to make an independent choice to learn. This makes the teaching and learning situation of the institution very different from the open class or jam that might be offered in the community. There are often students in a class who would not have elected to be there, given a choice. Such a situation can compound the dynamics of exclusion that might ordinarily be present and sensitivity to this can be helpful in developing the teaching and learning relationships.

A teacher can initiate students into the form with confidence by designing tasks that meet the students where they are, all of which take listening, good communication with students and responsive task design, and it is not always successful. Teaching is a process of failing and nearly failing, again and again, trying to develop the confidence of students in practices and forms that might be of use to them. In CI, it is important not to assume consent to touch. It is usual that there are students in a group who wish to engage in the practice without touching, and the practice includes many scores for solo, and spatial partnering. No matter how critically aware and reflective the teaching practice, there may also be behaviours and values in the form that are inherently exclusive or alienating for some students that the teacher has not foreseen, leading to potentially harmful engagements in the learning environment in terms of social, psychological and overall

well-being. For this reason, it is necessary as an educator to enter into the teaching learning dialogue with an attitude of fallibility and incompleteness, where openness to not knowing gives permission for imperfection and failing. Such an attitude can help generate compassion and greater understanding between teachers and students.

- 2 **Understand that teaching begins from an inherently racist standpoint** due to the racist viewpoints that we have inherited, the inheritance of dominant knowledge, canonical knowledge that has systematically excluded, and struggled to include people of colour, women and the global majority. At the same time, acknowledge and be fully explicit of your knowledge lineages being unafraid to critique them and being aware of the dynamics of cultural appropriation.

Attending a recent training on Racial Equity in the Dance Classroom in November 2020, led by the organisation *Race Forward*, I was reminded that teaching begins from a racist standpoint. Due to the inheritance of racist views, dominant narratives of white supremacy and internalised oppression, it is not possible to engage in teaching and learning environments that are free from racial bias and oppression. In UK higher education, there are documented attainment gaps in progression, retention and completion of undergraduate degrees, and there is documented bias in curriculum, reading lists and representation of racial groups (Advance HE, 2021). When it is accepted that racism is inherent in the teaching and learning environment, then the work of anti-racism can take hold in a meaningful way because all are endeavouring to question the biases and assumptions that affect the learning environment. Such biases and assumptions typically include curricula that prominently feature the work of white artists, while failing to include artists of colour, and that contemporary dance is a western form of dance, when in fact it has culturally appropriated movements and ideas from a wide diversity of global traditions, both with and without acknowledgement. By interrogating these biases and assumptions, anti-racism can become a collective endeavour that can build critical and supportive relationships among teachers and learners. This work requires trust and sensitivity because anti-racist work can bring up feelings of anger, shame, guilt and blame, as well as trauma.

The racist standpoint in teaching is concerned with not only our personal views and histories but with the forms that we teach. CI is a distinct and unique form that developed on from a creative research project undertaken by Paxton at Oberlin College in the United States in 1972. The form was then developed by Paxton and collaborators such as Stark Smith and took hold as a social movement, with jam culture proliferating as dancers shared the work, as well as an artistic practice that continued to develop in the context of postmodern and contemporary dance. CI did not set out with an exclusionary agenda, rather, as can be seen from the work of Rebecca Chaleff, introduced above, it could be understood as

implicitly exclusive to people of colour and marginalised groups. But it is interesting that in the context of the 1970s counterculture that there was not a decision to be actively inclusive either, as opposed to the preceding work of Anna Halprin in leading the Dancer's Workshop in San Francisco, which in 1968 created the first racially integrated dance company in the United States. Privilege often plays out in the non-actions and implicit frameworks of a practice. It is also interesting that part of decolonising the practice of CI also means understanding its influences from indigenous sources, such as aikido and Tibetan Buddhism, in order that they not be culturally appropriated, which I will discuss below.

The influence of aikido on CI is profound and many practitioners take up aikido as a complementary study to their dancing. The contact between bodies has evolved from a rough and tumble approach that can be seen in *Magnesium* (1972), to more informed and nuanced uses of touch that have drawn from massage, bodywork and somatic practices. In the Kagyu lineage of Buddhist meditation, as beginners, we are invited to sink down through the layers of the earth, and Stark Smith invites us, in no small amount of detail to bond with the earth, to drop down into nothing, no tone, to see what movement comes, so that we can follow the rituals of body patterns or see what arises. I experience incredible somatic resonance across the traditions where the feeling states of my body are similar if not the same in guided dance improvisations and Buddhist meditations. I have taken refuge as a Buddhist myself in the Kagyu lineage of Tibetan Buddhism, which is the lineage of Chögyam Trumpa Rinpoche, a teacher of Stark Smith. While Stark Smith did not explicitly frame her teaching as Buddhist, I consider Stark Smith a significant teacher in my Buddhist path, in that she opened my mind to the potentials of mindfulness through movement, and following my studies with her, I was intuitively drawn to the Buddhist path. The *shakedown*, as taught by Stark Smith, and a meditation documented in Akong Rinpoche's book *Taming the Tiger* are two such exercises that generate these similar feeling states of relaxation and openness. In the dance, the feeling state opens the practitioner to movement possibility, relationship and co-creation of movement, while, in meditation, the feeling state opens the practitioner to deep relaxation that enables the mind to release tension, generating a sense of spaciousness and awareness.

In the dance, I have adopted and inhabited Buddhist teachings, often starting sessions, as my teachers have done, with simple focus on breath, sitting and awareness of body. These tasks are not introduced as meditation or mindfulness and in the moment of teaching, I do not always attribute them to a tradition. Contextualisation and lineage reflection might occur at the end of the session, which in regard to being rigorous by not culturally appropriating and drawing on forms without due acknowledgement is important. However, the practice seeks to foreground the dancers' experience and support the development of

presence. Offering too much information ahead of the activity can occupy the mind and distract from the embodiment process. So where to offer historical, contextual and philosophical information on the practice raises questions about the design of the learning environment, what is privileged in that learning environment, how learning happens and what order of activities and tasks are undertaken. I do think that this is highly individual based on teaching style, student needs and the overall situation of a session within a course and learning programme because in teaching and learning the development of trust between learners is a foundation of the whole enterprise. Teachers and learners negotiate the dynamics of trust daily, and it influences what all members of a learning community feel comfortable and empowered to share. Racism and other oppressions inhibit the development of trust.

The lines between cultural appreciation and cultural appropriation are not always easy to perceive. As the generations move on, the lineage of practices is less acknowledged and less known. Teaching styles that focus on practical in the moment tasks do not often give their reference points or background, partly because the focus of a session is to practice and to tune bodily intelligences that are not in the worlds of language or rational thought. Because of the focus on bodily sensations of self, the dance is mindful and it can resemble a moving meditation. There can be states of motion and feeling that comprise bliss, flow states and expansive inclusive perception that are also experienced in yoga and meditation practices. The practice of CI can also be performed with these spiritual goals in mind but I would assert that the distinctness of the form, its orientation towards artistic knowing, means that practitioners can appreciate the cultural and spiritual influences on the form without appropriating them and so can clearly distinguish that the influences on the form are not the form itself.

As a teacher, I develop tasks that cultivate presence, sensitivity and awareness of the moving body solo and in relation to others. Some tasks come intuitively, although with reflection perhaps lineage influences can be found, but overall I am guided by my knowledge of the form of CI and what I perceive to be valuable to the students with whom I am working. I have developed much of my knowledge through experience and immersion in the form. CI, like the Kagyu lineage Buddhist practice, is primarily an oral tradition, passed in the doing of practice from one practitioner to the next and this generates a context of fragility where knowledge is mostly known in bodies that move, change, grow, age and forget. There are documents to support the practice, such as videos, interviews, scores and symbols, such as those used in the underscore that are only decipherable to the initiated. Initiation is through moving, doing, improvising and learning in workshops the protocols and conventions of the form. It is the teaching that passes the form from one generation to the next and it is in the teaching that the ethics of contemporary practitioners intersect the practice and perhaps change it. Knowing that the lineage of a form is

infused with confusion, undocumented and unacknowledged cultural and religious influences, scandals and abuse, the ethics of introducing students to that form are important to consider.

- 3 **Critically interrogate white privilege and embed critical questioning from the beginning** (bell hooks). Ask students to reflect upon their embodied experiences, training, body histories and body stories and the knowledge that they bring to the classroom. Empower students to develop self-knowledge and self-actualisation as part of the teaching and learning. Reflect on meanings of safety and inclusion and co-create these with students.

In *Teaching to Transgress* (1994), bell hooks discusses how self-actualisation processes in the classroom must be undertaken by both students and teachers if the classroom is to truly empower students. Both teachers and students need to be vulnerable and take risks. hooks points out that it is often the teacher that should take the first risk, to link personal narrative to curriculum content, and show how ‘experience can illuminate and enhance our understanding of academic material’ (1994: 21). Of course, experience can also show how the relevance of curriculum content is questionable and subject to change; such is the importance of critical questioning and being open to review in order to develop learning environments that are progressive and do not simply reproduce the status quo. It is healthy to view forms and contents as open to change, with the potentials for transformation that serve the needs of students.

While tasks that develop skills for CI do invite experiential reflection on the sensing self, more explicit invitations for narrative explorations of individual histories and experiences can be a foundation for student empowerment. It might seem paradoxical to engage in practices that seek to develop acceptance of impermanence and change while also encouraging students to come to know their own stories better. However, by using tools from art practice such as journaling, drawing, dancing and devising with text, emerging stories can be appreciated as truthful tellings of life experience which while also being released through imagination and creativity can be encountered with qualities of fluidity and change. Moreover, where body identity development has been suppressed, telling stories and developing narratives offers possibility for reclamation of a fuller identity, a reclamation to feel right in the body. This ability to feel right in the body, to inhabit a sense of ease, well-being and comfort is not to be taken for granted and the embodiment process is inhibited where discomfort, pain and lack of well-being prevail.

To start the teaching and learning endeavour from the assumption that a safe and inclusive space is inhibited from the outset by the presence of white privilege is a step towards decolonisation. It is perhaps in moments of introduction that structural intervention towards decolonisation can be made. Simply stating values of inclusion and equality is not seen as sufficient

by many current practitioners. Practitioner, Taja Will reflects that she does not believe in ‘spontaneous equality’ (2018: 38). Will writes:

I hear in CI spaces sound something like “all are welcome here; here we are all equals,” which perpetuates a guise of radical acceptance. This definition of inclusion **does not** promote the visibility of people of colour (POC) in CI culture.

(Will, 2018: 38)

CI Sessions often begin with an opening circle in which dancers talk about feeling states, injuries and anything else that they would like to share with the group. There is opportunity in such situations to engender trust through listening, mutual respect and empathy. In the beginning, trust cannot be assumed and lack of trust in the teacher, the group and the learning process may be present for all kinds of reasons that go beyond the individual into collective histories of racial oppression, slavery, migration and poverty. While the UK and United States experiences of slavery are different, the histories of slavery and white supremacy continue to permeate our consciousness. For example, mayfield brooks attributes a lack of trust in a student group to that where she writes:

I noticed this deep distrust. I don’t think it was just because they were mostly African American, but I think it is part of it. There is that feeling that you have to watch your back, and the young people named it. I think it’s directly related to slavery, this incredibly traumatizing, disruptive history, and we have to figure out how to negotiate that now.

(brooks, 2016: 37)

Similarly, Kent Alexander calls for an active critically engaged approach to the facilitation of CI spaces, where ‘when all participants acknowledge the limitations of white normative spaces, the CI community learns to liberate itself from a white normative reality’ (2018: 37). If a student starts a session with the feeling of having to watch their back, their potential for allowing their nervous system to relax enough to come into a state of weight sensing is going to be inhibited. In this respect, the very foundational qualities of the dance arise from the privilege of safety, of feeling safe and not having to watch your back. My own experiences as a beginner echo this where weight sensing was so foreign to me that when I finally experienced it, it felt indulgent and luxurious in ways that I had not experienced before in my body and I felt guilty for the sense of joy that I also experienced. I did not know that my body could feel so relaxed, expansive and spacious while at the same time I would feel panic at the vast openness engendered by the practice; both freeing and terrifying at the same time. I also felt shame for

coming into positive experiences of my body that I had not witnessed in my upbringing and had not been modelled to me in family or community settings.

I think about how essential it is to the practice of CI for dancers to have a true felt understanding of the weight of their bodies in order to find the momentum and flow in their bodies that enables the dance to happen. In CI, the dance is too fast to be conscious of the muscle support. This can also be challenging for dancers with classical training who have been taught to pull their muscles up and away from the earth to create images and sensations of lightness in the body and have often trained their minds to entrain the muscles with particular movements. Such students are not used to moving without tracking the movement with the mind and the dance in CI has the potential to move faster than the mind can track. Improvisation calls for in the moment intuitive responsive organisations of the musculoskeletal system, and other body systems, which can be challenging for beginners to trust. This is why many beginning-level exercises are repetitions of rolling, falling and catching, so that these gradually become instinctive responses that can be relied upon in the dance. Teaching a workshop to predominantly 18- and 19-year-old students in the university sector, directions to sense the weight can not only be racially exclusive but also be provocative to students who may have struggled with body image and eating disorders, as well as the implications of cultural interpretations of the word weight.

When teaching principles of weight, I often use touch and bodywork to access the sensations of weight without necessarily explaining to students that this is a focus of the exercise to sense the weight. Students support and manipulate the body parts of others, and practice giving up their weight entirely to the support of their partner and the floor. Use of gentle shaking and moving the joints can give experiential sensations of differentiation in the musculoskeletal system, experiencing joints, muscles and bones as separate, and sometimes a sense of more space. Taking these sensations immediately into dancing in the space and together can help to integrate the understanding in motion. Discussion can follow, where students are given space to articulate their experiences and insights. Discussion is one of the most important elements of a critical learning environment that aims towards decolonisation and social justice, giving learners the chance to not only make sense of their experiences but to also continue the dialogue of consent, trust and safer practice with peers and facilitators.

Conclusion

The concept of decolonisation has reinvigorated the ethics of my teaching practice. The explication and application of the concept of decolonisation have helped me to develop tools to teach with an anti-oppressive and anti-racist attitude. Because teaching and learning is a process and a dialogue

that is not fixed, the attitudes that are cultivated in the teaching and learning exchange have profound effects on the development of relationships in terms of trust, depth and human development. Being able to develop tools that move my practice from one that promotes diversity and inclusion to one that engages in a process of decolonisation is a significant and meaningful adjustment in attitude that I am still coming to appreciate the full impact of. As an educator with commitment to practicing engaged critical pedagogy, I find resonance in the words of bell hooks who writes that ‘To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin’ (1994: 13). Caring is an aspect of teaching practice that brings the educator into ethical relations with students. By caring for each student and by asking what serves each student, the educator can discern tensions, oppressions and obstacles to the teaching and learning process. When those oppressions and obstacles are institutionally and systemically inherent, as with racism, it is not only ethically agile to develop teaching and learning dialogues that deconstruct such oppressions but ethically necessary.

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