

Queering Contact Improvisation

Addressing Gender in CI Practice and Community

by Kristin Horrigan

As a professor of Dance and Gender Studies at Marlboro College in Vermont, I have been researching the intersections of CI and gender for several years and leading workshops on the subject in the U.S. and Europe. In this self “interview,” I engage with common questions that have been posed to me about this work. [K.H.]

Why talk about gender in CI?

There’s an interesting tension around gender in CI. On the one hand, CI seems to have nothing to do with gender—there are no assigned gender roles in this dance form. On the other hand, we bring our humanity with us into our improvisation, and that includes our gender. Gender shapes how we organize our bodies and move in space on a fundamental level. And gender dynamics, particularly heteronormative ones, are a key feature at many jams.

My genderqueer university students find CI to be a paradise of gender freedom. But I know many queer dancers who don’t come to mainstream CI events because the scene is so gender normative. Moreover, the more I learn about how gender lives in the body, the more I see gender patterns playing out in my own dancing, sometimes in direct contradiction to my intentions and goals as an improviser.

What do you mean by “gender”?

When I speak about gender, I am talking about socially constructed ideas about what behaviors and attitudes are expected of people based on their biological sex, and its intersection with other factors, including age,



photo © Carolina Frank

Niklas Heiland [*hand to chest*] dancing with workshop assistant Diana Thielen [*eyes closed*], with Shaun Sheffield and Paula Hierzi looking on, at Kristin Horrigan’s CI and Gender workshop at Tanzfabrik, Berlin, Germany, August 2016.

role in society, race, class, and sexual preference. Gender varies by culture. In most Western cultures, gender has historically been constructed as a binary, with masculine and feminine understood as the only two categories. More and more, Western cultures are opening up to an idea of gender as a spectrum or field with many more than two options. Transgender, gender neutral, gender fluid, or genderqueer are examples of some gender identities outside the binary.

Isn’t this just a lot of intellectualizing, which takes us away from the dancing?

Gender is not just an idea we have in our minds. Gender is something we DO. Gender lives in our movements, our gestures, our postures. It is part of how we organize our physicality, how we imagine ourselves,

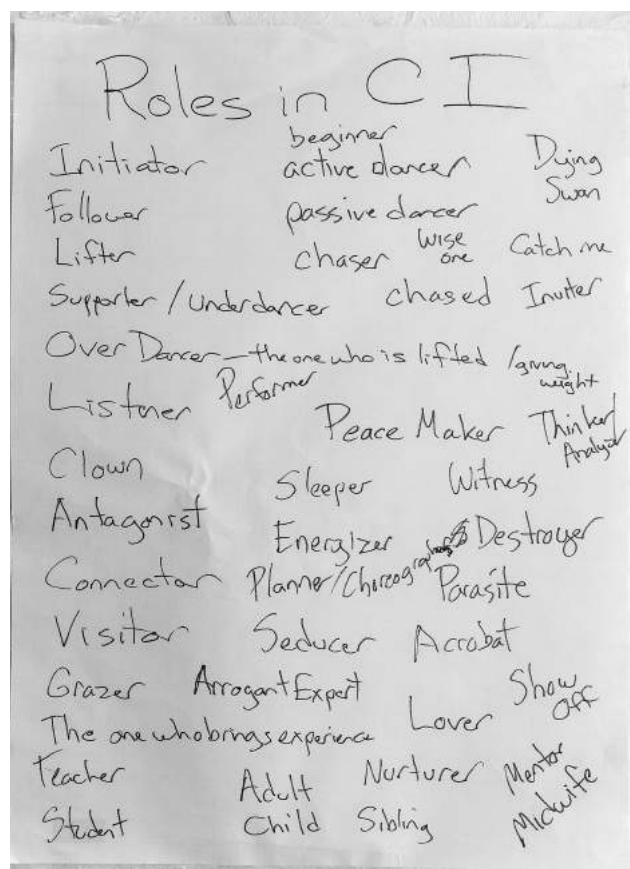
STILL. moving (cont'd)

what we believe about our abilities, the roles we take in relationships, and how we think of ourselves in relation to our environment. Gender is a daily performance, and we do it all day long. In fact, it's almost impossible to move without "doing gender" in some way.

If we ignore questions about gender and continue to perform it unconsciously in our contact improvisation, we limit the kinds of dances we can have, the diversity of our CI community, and the possibility for us all to step out from under the gendered expectations of our societies.

Can you give some examples of how gender is embodied?

First, try a thought experiment: When you hear the phrase "throwing like a girl," do you get an image in your mind? If so, what is that image? What are the mechanics of "throwing like a girl"? How are those mechanics different from throwing "like a boy"? Interestingly, since the masculine-coded way of throwing is considered normative, the "like a boy" is often left unspoken.



Now let's try a physical experiment: Pick a simple task that you can perform right now—opening a bottle, taking off a T-shirt, standing up, sitting down. Perform that action (really do it!) in your normal way. Then repeat it in a more feminine way...in a more masculine way...and in a more gender-neutral way. What changes?

You are drawing on stereotypes to do this. While often exaggerated, they provide valuable information about cultural ideas around gender. You may notice that you have a number of different ideas about what it means to be masculine, feminine, gender neutral, or genderqueer. Feel free to try all of these with your task. What do you find? Perhaps you notice a difference in how you used space or organized your body, or a difference in timing or how you think about the movement.

Compare what you observed to the following list of "feminine motility and spatiality" patterns, paraphrased from the classic gender theory article "Throwing Like a Girl" by Iris Marion Young. Although published decades ago, before many of the gains of the feminist movement, the patterns Young notes persist to a surprising degree today. (Young implies that the opposites of these patterns describe "masculine motility and spatiality.")

- Women are taught to take up less space than men, not using the full range of their kinespheres.
- They are encouraged to make themselves nonthreatening by standing in asymmetrical positions and to protect themselves by shielding their bodies with their hands and arms.
- Little girls are told more often than little boys to be careful not to get hurt or get dirty, and thus they develop a greater fear of movement.
- Fear can lead to holding back (what Young terms as the "I can't" competing with the "I can" behind a movement); the attention is divided between one's movement goal and the desire to protect oneself.
- Women/girls are also taught that they are valued for their physical beauty.
- This leads to a habit of monitoring one's appearance with a constant "outside eye," seeing the self as an object to be looked at, even when the self is also a subject that acts.
- Focus on physical appearance can lead women to conceive of their bodies as collections of parts rather than integrated wholes. Throwing like a girl involves moving just the arm, the part of the body connected to the ball, rather than putting the power of the whole body behind the throw.

List generated by students during Kristin Horrigan's CI and Gender workshop at Tanzfabrik, Berlin, Germany, August 2016. "We considered the roles one can play in CI and devised scores to help us shift our own roles and those of our partners to break up gendered dynamics that may emerge and limit the dancing." [K.H.]



At Kristin Horrigan's CI and Gender workshop, Tanzfabrik, Berlin, Germany, August 2016. "My workshop assistant Diana Theilen [*standing*] was exploring being a support and not seeing herself as too tall or too weak to lift, and I [*off the ground*] was exploring moving in lifts and giving myself more agency by facing forward." [K.H.]

- The feminine body is something that is acted upon by the environment, rather than the main actor in the space. Feminine-educated people often feel that objects moving toward them are attacking them, causing them to move backwards to protect themselves. On the other hand, masculine-educated people are taught to see the space as radiating out from their potential to act, making them more likely to reach toward a flying object and catch it.

How does embodied gender show up in our dancing?

Let's imagine that feminine-educated people (meaning people who were socialized as girls) are bringing some or all of the ideas just described into our CI dancing. And let's imagine that we might all be expecting some of these ways of organizing the body and relating to space from dance partners we perceive as female-bodied or feminine. Remember: these are not JUST ideas; in very real ways, these patterns of behavior shape the physical development of the body.

Is gender limiting for masculine-educated people too?

Absolutely. Gender theorist Michael Kimmel describes masculinity as a "relentless test" that masculine persons must pass every single day. Failure of this test is dangerous. To pass, masculine people must repeatedly show that they are in no way feminine. They may also need to show that they are aggressive, in control, and successful. It can be difficult to set aside these gendered behaviors and expectations when entering CI.

If CI pushes us beyond a binary concept of gender, why are we talking so much about "masculine" and "feminine"?

Most of us were raised with a binary gender education, and this is what we are addressing when we seek to undo unintentional gender patterns in our CI dancing. While we may presently believe that any person can inhabit any qualities and attitudes they desire, societal patterns reside deep in our bodies. Moreover, there are many rewards and privileges that come with conforming to the dominant gender model, and the dangers associated with resisting or not fitting into the model are real.

As a dance technique, CI challenges us to embody a diverse range of qualities and skills that draw from across the gender spectrum. All CI dancers are encouraged to support and be supported, to initiate and follow, to be soft



Shaun Sheffield [*under roller*] and Niklas Heiland [*surfer*] at Kristin Horrigan's CI and Gender workshop at Tanzfabrik.



[Foreground, right to left] Kristin Horrigan, Shaun Sheffield, Derya Dinc, with Wilma Mott and Niklas Heiland [standing directly behind] dancing together in a moving and multilingual speaking score inspired by Sue Stuart's "shadow of contact score," which involved writing and reading questions about gender and CI that had emerged during the week.

and to be strong, to sense and to act. In combining both masculine- and feminine-coded qualities, CI technique actively queers gender, inviting us all to play beyond the confines of the binary. One could say that CI is a rather queer dance form!

What do you mean by "queer"?

I am using "queer" in two different ways here. As a verb, "to queer" means to complicate or trouble that which is normative. In terms of gender, sex, and sexuality, "queer" refers to many identities and orientations outside the heteronormative paradigm. One can have a queer gender by being gender neutral, transgender, or gender fluid. Or one can be sexually queer by having sexual preferences outside the heterosexual frame.

If CI is so queer, why don't more queer people do it?

A lot of queer people with whom I've spoken don't come to mainstream CI events because of the amount of heteronormativity that they experience there. This takes many forms, from gendered dynamics on the dance floor and a (largely straight) sexual energy or agenda in some jams, to assumptions of cisgendered (meaning identifying as the same gender as the sex one was assigned at birth) and straight status, and a preponderance of male/female pairings on the dance floor.

While there are a number of queer CI spaces—including the Radical Contact Gatherings in Sweden; CI classes for gay men and (separately) for female, lesbian, and trans-people in Berlin; and various other scattered events

that have happened in Europe and the U.S. (and perhaps other places as well)—these events aren't as frequent or widespread as mainstream CI jams and festivals.

What is heteronormativity, and is it only a problem for queer people?

Heteronormativity is a point of view that assumes heterosexuality as a given, instead of being one of many possibilities. Implicit in this ideological system is a binary construction of gender, which is strictly linked to biological sex. Transgender, gender fluid, genderqueer, gay, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, and intersex folks are all "othered" within this understanding of the world. Heteronormativity places restrictions on all of us, which limit our expression, constrain our actions, and demand our participation. People of any gender, sex, or sexuality can (and often do) perpetuate heteronormative power structures and value systems because these norms are deeply ingrained in our bodies as well as institutionalized in our societies.

How can we reduce the amount of heteronormative gender dynamics we're unintentionally bringing into our CI dancing?

Take time to observe the ways we enact gender in our dancing. What roles do we take in our CI dances? Do we offer different dances to people of different genders? Do we expect different things from our dance partners based on what we perceive as their gender? Are these behaviors consistent with what we truly want to be doing? Are they helping our dancing or limiting it?

“As a dance technique, CI challenges us to embody a diverse range of qualities and skills that draw from across the gender spectrum... In combining both masculine- and feminine-coded qualities, CI technique actively queers gender, inviting us all to play beyond the confines of the binary. [K.H]”

Once we have observed the ways in which gender is shaping our movement and interactions with others in CI, we can devise strategies to shift these patterns. For example, I noticed that I often felt like an object or a piece of furniture when supporting weight—I would wait for my partner to finish their dance on top of me. Also, I felt like an object while being lifted, waiting for my partner to decide when to put me down. This pattern was likely influenced by my feminine-gender education, which encouraged me to see myself as an object being acted upon. Wishing to find more of a sense of subjecthood in these moments, I gave myself the score of keeping some motion in my body while supporting or being supported. Later, I realized that I felt more agency when I engaged in lifts with my front body rather than my back body, so I added the task of turning to my front body whenever possible in supporting and being supported. This opened new opportunities for exploration and improved my facility in lifting and being lifted. Addressing unintended gender patterns in our movement can improve our CI technique!

A common gender pattern that emerges is a masculine-educated person leading, manipulating, or lifting a female-bodied person. There are many ways to shake up this “doer” and “done to” dynamic and open up space for other kinds of dances. If you find yourself being manipulated, try resisting lifts by dropping your weight toward the ground like a sack of potatoes or exert more force in the dance by pushing more firmly into your partner and redirecting your partner’s limbs. Turning to face your partner can also open more opportunities for agency. Opening up space in the duet by periodically breaking contact can also offer a new dynamic.

A person who often falls into the “doer” role can reduce manipulation of a partner by not using the palms of the hands. Try turning your back body toward your partner more often, offering to support or be supported without controlling or directing with your partner’s limbs. You can also slow down and put more attention into listening and responding. Leave space for your partner’s leadership to emerge. In my workshop groups, people have come up with many more strategies for shifting both sides of this dynamic.

In addition to addressing our dance technique and the roles we take on the dance floor, we can also make an effort to act in ways that are inclusive of the full range of sexes, genders, and sexualities. On a practical level, this means remembering that you cannot know a person’s sex, gender, or sexuality just by looking at the person, and checking your own assumptions about what it would mean to dance with them. We can also use language that leaves space for people’s true identities by asking what pronoun to use in referring to someone rather than taking a guess based on body parts.



photo © Carolina Frank

[Right to left] Bengu Kovar, Melda Tuzluca, Niklas Heiland, Kristin Horrigan, Wilma Mott, and Shaun Sheffield dancing at Kristin Horrigan’s CI and Gender workshop at Tanzfabrik, Berlin, Germany, August 2016.

What do you think we can gain by examining gender in our CI dancing?

Two things: freedom and inclusion. When we take the time to notice and question our own gendered patterns of movement and interaction, we help liberate ourselves from the limits of our gender education. This allows us a greater range of possibilities in our movement and more space to truly listen to the dance that is happening—bringing us closer to a CI ideal. When we learn to stop making assumptions about each other’s gender (and sex and sexuality) and stop treating each other in gendered ways on the dance floor, we can begin to make our CI communities more inclusive of queer people. Lastly, by questioning the gendered behaviors that emerge in our dancing, we invite critical reflection on power structures both in and outside the CI space.



To contact the author:
Kristin Horrigan, horrigan@marlboro.edu