

Making space for the wimp-subject in Contact Improvisation

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Abstract

This is an autoethnographic article that unpicks the author's experiences of navigating the form and the social world of contact improvisation (CI) as a crip bodymind that routinely passes as normative and (very) 'able'. Drawing on fieldnotes made across a year of practising and studying CI in London, it considers what kind of subjectivities and social relations this dance form summons, encourages and constitutes. This article proposes that the ideal subject of CI is characterized by vitality, agility, intense desire, openness to risk, an ability to attune to oneself and to others and a combination of self-reliance and willingness (and capacity) to cooperate. The article draws parallels and (dis)continuities between these features and the aspects of subjecthood fostered by late capitalist 'risk society' and the risk subjects it conjures. It then enquires whether this ideal subject is compatible with certain neurodivergent and other crip ways of being-in-the-world. The article proceeds to consider how, and if, space can be made in CI for what is ironically defined here as the 'wimp' subject: less disposed to embrace risk; not adept at quick decision-making; not thrill-seeking, and easily overwhelmed by sensory and nervous stimulation.

Keywords: contact improvisation, subjectivity, crip, wimp, neurodivergence, risk, autoethnography

I am a white woman of slim build in my early forties, with dark shoulder-length hair streaked with silver. Today, I am wearing a loose grey sweatshirt, black jogging pants and well-worn

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off-white kneepads over them. I am barefoot. The soles of my feet are dusty. I am lying supine on the wooden studio floor, stretching. I stretch easily; I am, I'm often told, extremely flexible – bendy – hypermobile. If you saw me, you might read me as a dancer. You would likely read me as fit. Based on how I occupy the floor space, you could possibly read me as someone who is comfortable and familiar with the studio, someone who belongs. You would probably read me as able-bodied, and able-minded.

If you tried dancing with me, however – we are in a Contact Improvisation (CI) workshop – you would probably start experiencing, little by little, some sort of cognitive dissonance and then, I'm afraid, a swelling tinge of disappointment. I would be awkward to move with, in a very peculiar way: not like a complete beginner, not like someone unfamiliar with CI's vocabulary, not like someone who cannot 'listen through the skin' (the main principle of CI) and attempts to lead the dance; and not like someone with an obvious impairment either. But there would be something slightly off. I would be a little out of sync, a little out of touch, a little jarring. I would not accept many of your invitations, but would not manifestly decline them either, and my own invitations would not be decisive or clear enough for you to respond to them without hesitation. I would be easy to lift – I am light – and clearly eager to be lifted, but once in the air, I would probably not quite do what you expect a 'flyer' to do; I might well freeze for a few seconds, then attempt an awkward turn that could throw you off-balance – and not in that fun, intentionally mischievous way. You would have a hunch that I would not know how to land safely. You would start feeling anxious, on my behalf, and then on your own. This is not quite what you signed up for; you were probably expecting a nice, straightforwardly satisfying, playful duet of equals – curious, physically brave, open to new experiences, attuned to each other yet taking full responsibility for themselves – which the whole CI ethos is about, and the way you (mis)read me before we started dancing together probably suggested that I could be a good partner for such a duet. You would probably start looking for a way to leave the dance without offending me. You would probably eventually find it.

A sociologist walks into a jam

This is an autoethnographic essay unpicking my experiences of navigating the form and the social world of contact improvisation as a crip bodymind who routinely passes as normative and (very) "able". I employ the term 'crip', following McRuer (2006) and Kafer (2013), to denote a non-normative embodiment that manifests (or not) its divergence from the 'norm' differently in different circumstances, environments and encounters, through an 'endless stream of... shifting performances' (Price 2015: 274); a processual, emergent and relational way of being-in-the-world, rather than as a static condition of absolute difference enshrined in the term 'disabled'. My use of 'bodymind' is informed by the work of critical disability scholar Margaret Price who defines it as a 'materialist feminist DS [Disability Studies] concept' that invokes 'the imbrication (not just the combination) of the entities usually called "body" and "mind"' (2015: 270). Acknowledging such imbrication is important for a number of reasons: firstly, and most obviously, it allows the discussion to transcend the limitations of Cartesian dualism; secondly, it enables a move away from taxonomies reliant on neatly defined and bounded categories, which underpin normative medical discourses that critical disability studies seeks to critique and disrupt; and thirdly, it allows to account for neurodivergence and other 'deviant' forms of embodiment, rather than only foregrounding visible, easily identifiable forms of physical impairment that the term 'body' lends itself to more easily.

This article considers what kind of subjectivities and social relations CI, as a dance form and a social world, summons, encourages and constitutes. I enquire whether the ideal subject of CI

is compatible with certain neurodivergent and other crip ways of being-in-the-world, and how space can be made in CI for these other ways of being. While led by these sociological questions, this enquiry is informed by my lived experience of the dance form. In pursuing this approach, I am following the traditions of feminist embodied research (Puwar 2021, Ramazanoglu 2002) that recognise personal experiences as legitimate sources of knowledge. As an autoethnographer, I view autobiographical fieldnotes as a means of ‘connecting the personal to the cultural’ (Ellis and Bochner 2000: 733). My writing is an instantiation of cultural theorist Laurent Berlant’s axiom that is often summarised as ‘the personal is the generic’ (Anderson 2023: 119). That is, as a sociologist, I am considering myself and my experiences of CI as ‘a case’ (Berlant 2007) – a case of crip ‘misfitting’ (Garland-Thomson 2011) and yet, at times, wonderfully, ecstatically fitting – and unpicking the conditions of possibility, inherent to CI itself, for a case such as mine to exist.

My fieldwork began in January 2023 and lasted just over a year, during which I regularly attended CI classes, workshops and jams in London. My fieldnotes were made as brief ‘jottings’ during breaks from dancing at these events, and usually expanded into full-length vignettes later on the same or the following day. As well as fieldnotes, my dataset comprises other objects and texts I have collected throughout this (auto)ethnographic project, such as class descriptions, promotional materials and the writings of key CI teachers. All these have been analysed using the principles of thematic analysis (Coffey and Atkinson 1996).

Entering the dance

I came to CI as a sociologist with a particular interest in cultural theory, creative ecologies and disability studies. My research focused on the emergence of subjectivities under the (cultural) conditions of late capitalism, characterised by precarious employment, growing imperatives to embrace and enact geographical, social, and professional mobility, and the injunction to manage incalculable risks while retaining an affective investment in the future (Melkumova-Reynolds 2021 and 2024). I was also on the lookout for counter-emergences, for cultural imaginaries and practices that conjure alternative, recalcitrant subjectivities and non-normative ways of being – hence my interest in crip and queercrip cultures with their intersubjective and intercorporeal modes of knowing.

Contact Improvisation is a postmodern dance form and a community that brings together trained and untrained dancers for improvised partner dancing that involves communicating through touch, sensory attunement, and a continuous pouring of weight between the partners. Instigated in 1972 by American dancer and choreographer Steve Paxton, and then developed by a dedicated group of US-based dancers throughout the 1970s (see Novack (1991) for a detailed history), CI is practiced in duets, trios, and ensembles. The embodied ethics of CI is premised on non-hierarchical relationships between partners (e.g., no partner continuously leads in a duet) as well as between teachers and disciples (e.g., there are no formal qualifications required for teaching CI). Although it is an improvisatory practice, since the 1970s CI has developed a distinct movement vocabulary that foregrounds the exploration of the relationship between dancing bodies, momentum, and gravity. Some of this vocabulary has been borrowed, and developed, from martial arts such as aikido, in which Paxton had prior training.

‘Contact Improvisation creates a corporeal space in which feeling allows for an interconnectedness with another person without solidifying that relationship into the subject/object dyad implicit in classic conceptions of empathy,’ argues dancer and scholar Ann

Cooper Allbright (2013: 272), and this absence of ‘solidifying into the subject/object dyad’ has long interested me as a theorist. I was also drawn to CI because of its long-standing relationship to disability: I knew about the form’s founder Steve Paxton’s work with blind and visually impaired dancers (Dymoke 2023) and about the work of prominent CI practitioners with disabled people (e.g., the Exposed to Gravity Project – see Novack (1990)). I had read and written about disabled choreographer Claire Cunningham’s work with crutches and its CI roots (Curtis 2020; Melkumova-Reynolds 2024; Watts-Belser 2019), and had brief conversations with Katy Dymoke, Mary Prestidge and other veterans of inclusive dance after a panel discussion at CI50, an event that celebrated the 50th anniversary of CI at Goldsmiths University in London, which I heard about through my academic networks and attended as an academic, not (yet) a ‘contacter’. In other words, I came to CI as a cultural sociologist (with some experience of non-professional dance training in the past – something I had always considered a hobby unrelated to my academic work) with an interest in embodiment, disability cultures and crip utopias, not as a dancer.

As an (auto)ethnographer who usually gravitates towards participation rather than plain observation, I took part in a few classes, workshops, and jams – and, before I knew it, I was hooked. The egalitarian, attuned, process-oriented, intercorporeal, care-full world and form of CI was so clearly utopian, so obviously embodied the very alternative, non-normative socialities that I had been grasping for as a sociologist, that I kept wondering how and why on earth I had lived into my forties without experiencing this utopianism and reproducing it through my own body. I kept discovering things I didn’t know my body, or mind, could do; things that made me feel that maybe I was, after all, a *dancer*, whatever that may mean (this was corroborated by how I was addressed in mailouts sent out by various CI events I subscribed to). For a few months after I started to practise, I could barely think or talk about anything else; could barely make any other plans. I imagine this feeling is familiar to many ‘contacters’: CI, as one of my interlocutors from the community put it, ‘pulls you in, takes over your life’.

Except that the highs alternated with real lows. For every session I left feeling inspired and transformed, there were a few sessions that saddled me with a little gnawing sadness, alienation, and a sense that I am a disappointment; that *I am not quite what CI wants me to be*. In the words of disability scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, I felt I was a ‘misfit’: ‘The discrepancy between body and world, between that which is expected and that which is, produces fits and misfits’ (2011: 593). The discrepancy between my bodymind and ways of being and CI as an environment and its affordances made me feel, on certain occasions, like ‘a square peg in a round hole’ (ibid.) What threw me about this feeling was that it was at odds with everything I knew about CI with its principle of ‘no-fault dancing’ (Novack 1990: 174) where dancers are, at least in theory, “‘released from judgement,” from the burden of having mastered or not mastered something’ (ibid.) My sadness, as I now understand it, was a product of the tension of CI’s ‘myth of egalitarianism... contrasted with the social realities of what actually occurs when moving bodies that are differently gendered, racialised, aged and abled come together to occupy a dancing space’ (Papaioannou, forthcoming).

It took me some time to realise and accept that, like any utopian project, CI does not – cannot – *always* live up to its radical promise of creating a non-hierarchical and non-goal-oriented space; that the imaginaries it conjures, and the subjectivities that most comfortably inhabit and enact such imaginaries, do not always manage to transcend the stance that Garland-Thomson coined elsewhere as ‘normate’: ‘the veiled subject position of the cultural self, the figure outlined by the array of deviant others whose marked bodies shore up the normate’s boundaries’ (1997: 9); the assumed, unacknowledged normative position that – implicitly,

insidiously – designates anything outside it as undesirable. I also began to realise that *what CI wants me to be* – the ideal subject of CI – can, at times, be surprisingly close to the ideal neoliberal subject that had been the focus of my earlier sociological research.

‘Delicious precarity’: CI and the risk subject

*‘Engaged, Engaging,
Mobile
< Condition of great man >
Enthusiastic, Involved,
Flexible, Adaptable,
Versatile, Having potential,
[...]
Not prescriptive, Knows how to engage others,
In touch, Tolerant’*

The quote above comes from sociologists Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello’s (2007: 112, emphasis in the original) seminal book *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, in which they discuss the ideological and cultural idea(l)s that underpinned the reformation of capitalism in the last decades of the 20th century. They trace these ideals through a critical discourse analysis of a corpus of management texts from the 1990s, teasing out the figure of the ‘great man’ constructed throughout these texts as an ideal employee and, more broadly, an ideal neoliberal subject. This quote was also the epigraph to my PhD that investigated subjectivities and affects produced by, and productive of, the precarious conditions of late capitalist creative economies (Melkumova Reynolds 2021). One of the major points of reference for my project beyond Boltanski and Chiapello’s work was sociologists Ulrich Beck’s (1992, 2000) and Anthony Giddens’ (1999) concept of ‘risk society’, a late modern type of society where life is ridden with ‘incalculable risks’ induced by the process of modernisation itself. The ‘[p]olitical economy of ambivalence’ in such societies produces a type of subject whose ‘basic existence and lifeworld [are] marked by endemic insecurity’ (Beck 2000: 3–4).

One of the key features of such a subject is a protean flexibility, agility, and constant readiness for self-reinvention in response to arising possibilities, threats, and connections. A ‘pliant self, a collage of fragments unceasing in its becoming, ever open to new experience’ (Sennett 1998: 133), the risk subject moves between various cultures, social worlds, and geographical locations, making and unmaking ‘weak ties’ (Granovetter 1973) – ties that do not amount to solid relationships like those of family or long-term friendships, yet can be leveraged in unexpected ways. ‘Oriented to the short term, focused on potential ability, willing to abandon past experience’ (Sennett 2006: 5), the risk subject negotiates precarious and unstable conditions deftly and, often, eagerly.

When I was reading about CI in the early days of my interest in the form and its history, I found an odd resonance between this subjectivity and the writings of founders and early proponents of CI like Steve Paxton and Nancy Stark Smith. The latter writes, for instance: ‘improvisation is a practice in disorientation—training the reflexes to read confusion as a challenge not a threat; that a movement cut loose from its moorings has the advantage of being able to move in any direction’ (1983: 3). Once I started attending CI classes and collecting their descriptions and the turns of phrase used in teaching, as part of my ethnography, the spectre of the risk subject became all the more present.

“DELICIOUS PRECARITY”

This is a class that builds on a shared movement research that moved with me through CI festivals over the past years as Contact Improvisation has become an important resource to meet the precarity of our social and environmental realities.

(A description of an intensive led by Laura Doehler at CI MiniFest, Goldsmiths University London, summer 2023)¹

‘What we are doing here is training ourselves to orient in a disorienting space; practicing feeling safe in a risky situation.’

(Instructions during a CI class led by Rick Nodine, 8 June 2023)

The significance of the language of embracing risk in CI discourses was not surprising: the libertarian management ideology that Boltanski and Chiapello (2007) analyse in their book appropriated much of its vocabulary and logics from the writings, talks and pamphlets produced by left-wing artists and activists. ‘[I]t was by recuperating some of the oppositional themes [...] that capitalism was to disarm critique, regain the initiative, and discover a new dynamism’ (2007: 168). CI practitioner, teacher, and scholar Keith Hennessy notes that CI, and ‘other predominantly white alternative cultures developed since the 1960s (e.g., yoga in the West, Burning Man, rave cultures, Radical Faeries, new age and tantra scenes...), [...] parallel the development of neoliberalism and the backlash against the social and political changes of the 60s’ (2018: 1). ‘Parallel’ is perhaps not a strong enough word to convey the degree of interpenetration and cross-pollination between neoliberal and alternative cultures that produced ‘the countercultural logic of neoliberalism’, to cite the insightful title of a recent book by the critical theorist David Hancock (2019). In other words, neoliberalism, as Boltanski and Chiapello show throughout their book, did not develop simply at the same time as counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s – it was its direct offspring. If I was finding echoes of the key injunctions of risk society in CI culture, it was only because I had finally gotten to their original source: a countercultural space.

And it wasn’t only the language. What was happening in many CI spaces on an embodied, pre-discursive level also constantly made me feel that I was expected to joyfully embrace – in fact, to welcome – risk: the highly adrenalized state (a CI staple) that bits of the dancefloor began to pulsate with an hour or so into the jam – an energy I would instinctively recoil from to the margins of the space; the brisk, unexpected way some people turned me upside down in a lift before I had the time to work out where my arms were and position them safely (it was fun, but also terrifying); the slight disappointment that I *think* I discerned in my partners’ body language when I did not accept their invitations to do something that was outside my (admittedly narrow) comfort zone. Risk, disorientation, and precarity are the norm in CI; trying to avoid or contain them is, one could argue, missing the point.

‘[Don’t] be a wimp’

I should probably disclose some things about my bodymind at this point.

I have a life-long back issue (and a history of wearing a back brace – though you wouldn’t know, from seeing me in dance clothes) and several co-morbid forms of neurodivergence that make it harder for me to locate and orient myself in space than it would be for a bodymind with more developed proprioception, and make certain forms of attention and coordination difficult

to sustain. I grew up with some awareness of my difference, though the terms that were used to describe some of my ‘conditions’ in the 1980s are no longer part of the ICD or the DSM: I was (to my utter joy) exempted from PE lessons at school, I did not take part in games with my peers that involved agility or physical effort, and my falls (while walking – I don’t remember doing much running as a kid) were so frequent that all of my tights and trousers had multiple tears on the knees. But while aware of my difference, I never really *felt* it. I wasn’t interested in PE, nor active play, anyway; I was an avid reader and was lucky to have friends among my peers who cared more about books than about sports. I proceeded to get sedentary jobs that required the kinds of relatively disembodied attention I was capable of sustaining, and that did not involve quick decision-making. In my work, I critiqued ableism primarily as a theorist, not as someone with a prolonged lived experience thereof, because I was privileged enough to mainly inhabit spaces where my conditions were not obvious to others, nor disruptive to me. I had never been in situations where I needed to rely extensively on my autonomic nervous system, muscles, and bone structure, so I had forgotten that they did not work in normative ways. Until I was reminded of it on the dancefloor.

Jam in Greenwich Park [...] I end up in a position hanging off of Marta where the most logical thing to do is a forward roll. But I’m afraid to do it. Then I think to myself ‘don’t be a wimp [a phrase I heard in a class not long before]; it’s grass, it’s ground, people around you do it, you’ve done it in classes, you’re super flexible, you’ll be OK’ and do it anyway. Something cracks lightly in my neck, and a dull pain emerges. I continue dancing but the pain – not scary, not huge, I am not worried I have seriously damaged anything, but it’s persistent – becomes very distracting and disorienting [...] Rather than just limiting the range of motion in my neck, it affects my whole body and throws my proprioception even further; I become (even more) uncoordinated, and my horizon of movement – the space I feel I can occupy – drastically contracts. When I hurt myself, the pain becomes the point of contact with the world that overrides all other points of contact.

My legs become wobbly. All my body wants to do is tend to the pain.

(Fieldnotes, 29 May 2023)

“Don’t be a wimp” is sometimes used explicitly in instructions by teachers, and is implied much of the time: after all, CI, as per Simone Forti’s definition, is an ‘art-sport’ (cited in Novack 1990: 191), and sport generally does not welcome wimps. “Don’t be a wimp” is an attitude that is easily internalised, as my fieldnotes above demonstrate. It is also a phrase that is seemingly good-humoured and inoffensive; it rolls easily off the tongue. It took a few minor accidents for me to work out that, when I am saying this to myself, I should not attempt to make the move; that my body is most certainly not in a position to do it there and then, even if I have done it before. It might be that I am close to the limits of my attention span, and my instinctive capacity to keep myself safe is reduced. It might be that, at this point in time, my nervous system is less alert, or my muscles less warmed up.

Maybe I need to remind myself to *be a wimp* more often. Being a wimp can be an act of self-care, of self-preservation and therefore, as Audre Lorde (1988) would have it, an act of political warfare. ‘Wimp’ and ‘warfare’ do sit in the same sentence easily, but this pairing is usually a juxtaposition, not a correlation. The word ‘wimp’ itself, defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as a ‘feeble or ineffectual person; one who is spineless or “wet”’ (OED 2024), is relatively young – its first ‘significant dictionary appearance was in the Oxford English

Dictionary Supplement in 1986, which quotes a “dejected wimp” from 1920 as the earliest of several examples’, explain linguists Aitchison and Lewis (1995: 9). They go on to show how the use of the term rose in British English in the late 1980s and early 90s, by analysing over 500 occurrences of the term in British newspapers. In over 80% of cases, they have found one or more of the following: ‘collocation with a word indicating feebleness (e.g. “pathetic wimp”), contrast with a “strong” non-wimp (e.g. “From wimps to warriors”), overt negative evaluation (e.g. “reviles as a wimp”), covert negative evaluation (e.g. “Who needs an enclosed cockpit? Wimps”)’ (ibid., 7). In the examples they cite, the wimp is contrasted to the ‘go-getter’, the ‘doer’, the ‘action man’, and, on more than one occasion, to Margaret Thatcher.

The latter detail should come as no surprise: a wimp is, of course, the exact opposite of a risk subject, which, in itself, is an ideal of Thatcherism and other neoliberal politics. A wimp is, first and foremost, risk-averse, i.e., not a *risk taker*. Nonetheless, they could themselves be framed and read *as* risks, as figures that inconvenience the enterprise of risk-taking itself.ⁱⁱ By hesitating to take risks, I fail to be assimilated into CI’s hegemonic paradigm of openness to the unexpected. I am *not what CI wants me to be*.

The wimp vs the risk subject

The woman I am dancing with is clearly experienced, and willing to share her knowledge (another feature of the CI community that I love: peer teaching and peer learning happens all the time and mostly feels very generous and generative). As we move, she coaches me: ‘See, now I am more stable because you’ve given me more of your weight...’ ‘If you let your head hang heavy now, and put your arms out, you can just slide onto the floor...’ It’s very useful, but at some point I start feeling overwhelmed.

I might be overthinking it, but I believe I begin to feel her enthusiasm decrease as we go along: she is growing slightly impatient with my slow learning (and I, in my turn, am shutting down and my reactions become even slower). At some point, I don’t pick up on one of her invitations – in fact, I don’t even notice it. She comments: ‘And now that you saw I am in this position, you had this opportunity here, but now it’s gone...’

Opportunity, I think. Spotting opportunities. It is a very particular disposition, isn’t it? Entrepreneurial dispositiⁱⁱⁱ.

(Fieldnotes, 27 February 2023)

Another thing that a risk subject decidedly is, and a wimp-subject is not, is constantly looking out for opportunities. In a networked world, described by Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) as the premise and condition of possibility of neoliberalism, opportunities stem from connections, constellations and encounters. Actively seeking connection is something that Boltanski and Chiapello discuss as a feature of management discourses’ ideal subject, whom they call ‘connexionist.’

‘Connection

< Natural relations between beings >

Connecting,

Communicating,

Co-ordinating,

Adjusting to others,

Trusting

In a connexionist world, a natural preoccupation of human beings is the desire to connect with others, to make contact' (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007: 112, emphasis in the original).

The 'connexionist' subject 'knows how to take risks in order to make connections, to be forever making new contacts that are full of possibilities' (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007: 112-113). The active movement towards contact (!), and looking out for the opportunities this contact brings, is also an attitude that is prevalent on the CI dancefloor, as the above fieldnotes demonstrate.

The 'desire to make contact' is an important turn of phrase that I would like to dwell on a bit longer: desire is a key concept for understanding both the risk subject and CI. Unlike the wimp, the risk subject is indeed intensely *desirous*. It is, one could argue, the pursuit of her desires that makes her embrace and actively seek out risks and the opportunities that come with them. Desire and intense affective investment have been discussed by a number of theorists as key features of the ideal subject of late capitalism. For instance, Lauren Berlant demonstrates throughout their work how 'to be a good subject of neoliberal labour, one has to emit desire' (2011: 18). A lack of affective investment, Berlant argues, brings with it a 'recessive style [that] ports with it the potential for denial, disavowal, and foreclosed experience' (2015: 195), and goes against the grain of late capitalist injunction to participate in libidinal economies (Lyotard 1993).

Risk subjects share their features with the ideal subjects of CI in that they are intensely *desiring contact* and is constantly on the lookout for opportunities that contact(s) can bring. Conversely, the wimp-subject might recoil from both risks and opportunities, and possibly from desire itself. The wimp, as I see her, shows up to the non-wimp, in the words of cultural theorist Wendy Lee (2018: 1), as a 'subject who lacks volition or desire, who is neither moved nor moves'. In her book *Failures of Feeling*, she uses this description to refer to radically (im)passive literary characters including Hermann Melville's (1969 [1853]) *Bartleby the Scrivener*, whom we will meet in the next section.

*I am not really feeling up for it today. What does that mean I wonder?
It means "I am not game."*

"I am not ready for stuff to happen."

"I am not in a position to open myself up to the unexpected."

"Just nah."

(Fieldnotes, 12 July 2023)

The wimp vs the taskscape

As an educator I do, of course, understand and wholeheartedly embrace the advantages of *not* being a wimp: being one presupposes, among other things, an aversion to mistakes and failures, and any form of learning inevitably involves these. The 'non-wimpy way', to quote the title of a film interview with Steve Paxton (Cvejić and Laberenz 2012), in which they are handled in the CI space is something I have been drawn to from the start:

Laughter is heard [in the jam space] quite often – in particular when something doesn't work out: there is an unexpected fall, a collision, a roll goes wrong; this is met with joy rather than embarrassment, which is lovely. The disposition that affords it requires a lack of fear of mistakes.

(Fieldnotes, 24 June 2023)

Such a disposition, however, presupposes living with a feeling that mistakes are low stakes, not fatal. To feel that way, one needs to have great trust in their own body and the world, which is a privileged embodied (dis)position. Not all bodyminds have it, or can acquire it.

A mistake for me can be more expensive than for others. There's more at stake for me when trying stuff out: I am more likely to hurt myself and be in acute pain for a week. Yet mistakes are so necessary for the learning process. How do I navigate this?

(Fieldnotes, 21 May 2023)

Risks are generally higher for a crip bodymind than they are for a normative bodymind; it took me some time to realise and accept this. They are less calculable, less manageable, less easy to contain. The negative consequences of a fall or a roll gone wrong are more predictable and less severe for some bodyminds than for others. Being a wimp, then, can sometimes be a form of acknowledging some risks as incalculable, and managing them accordingly. That is, being a wimp means being cautious, if not outright reluctant. (A quick Google search for “enthusiastic wimp” only returned results for “not so enthusiastic wimp”).

Somatic and dance classes often invoke an image of embodied knowledges that we are meant to hold since childhood, and CI is no exception. Our bodies are meant to “instinctively know” how to do a forward roll without breaking our necks, how to protect our heads when we fall, and how to minimise the impact from a collision. We knew it, the story goes, but have forgotten because we adopted certain restrictive, overly prudent bodily schemas as we grew up. So, here we are, in the dance studio, to unlearn these habits and return to the pristine origin of vitality, fearlessness, and curiosity: our inner Child.

The issue is that this referent child of CI (and many related somatic movement practices) is implicitly able-bodied and able-minded. The arsenal of childhood memories of physical audacity, carefree fun and pleasure in movement is not readily available to some bodyminds to draw on. My own body, for instance, has never done a cartwheel and never managed to jump over a pommel horse (an exercise that a CI partner invited me to recall and replicate when I was struggling to grasp a particular jump in a CI workshop). What's more, I do not remember ever *wanting* to do a cartwheel. The risks of such an enterprise must have felt much more palpable than the fun it may have brought even when I was a child.

Anthropologist Tim Ingold, whose work on embodiment and emplacement has been influential both in sociology and in dance studies, proposes to think of a landscape as a *taskscape* – that is, something our bodyminds read as a totality of affordances, or ‘the pattern of dwelling activities’ (Ingold 1993: 153) that this space permits – or even requests – us to engage with. These may include rest, a variety of social interactions or physical practices. Although Ingold, to my knowledge, does not specifically consider disability nor other forms of non-normative embodiment in his vast body of work, his concept of taskscapes is an extremely useful one for

crip theory and critical disability studies: for a crip bodymind, many taskscapes read as “mission impossible”.

That’s what my being a wimp is about: the taskscape of the physical world often shows up for me as unnavigable. This has always been the case, including in my childhood: the physical world did not invite me to play the way I believe it invited my peers. Trees did not entice me to climb them, balls to kick them, and open spaces to do cartwheels. The instructions I hear in dance and movement classes, it seems to me, are often designed to reactivate the (exciting, inviting and accessible) version of the world as a taskscape that is supposed to have been available to us as children and become unavailable to us as we aged. But to someone like me, it was never available nor enticing to begin with.

As the world does not show up as accessible to the wimp, the wimp has a harder time making herself available to the world, too. Cultural theorist Sianne Ngai (2005) speaks about the ‘disattendability’ of certain literary characters who make themselves very difficult both for the other characters and for the reader to attend to with any kind of care or affect(ion). Among them, she names Bartleby, the main protagonist of American writer Herman Melville’s short story *Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street* (1969 [1853]), whom I mentioned earlier as a subject who, in Wendy Lee’s (2018: 1) formulation, rejects any relation to the world, ‘is neither moved nor moves’. A quiet, forlorn-looking man, Bartleby is hired by the narrator, an elderly lawyer, to perform administrative tasks in his legal office. At first, he proves himself to be a compliant and efficient employee, but one day, when asked to help proofread a document, Bartleby answers ‘I would prefer not to.’ As weeks go by, this becomes his response to most requests, until he stops doing any work and starts spending days staring out of the office’s window.

Is the wimp a Bartleby? Saying ‘I prefer not to’ to opportunities and invitations that arise?

(Fieldnotes, 22 February 2024)

Sometime after making the fieldnote cited above, I began analysing my dataset. I came to the conclusion that the wimp is not quite a Bartleby, as Bartleby is decisive and unequivocal in his refusal to engage. The wimp, conversely, is averse to any decision-making. She is unsure and requires the space and the time to be unsure.

Wimping the CI space: Making room for reluctance

While warming up (self-led on this occasion) I test out different ways of being upside down, to disorient myself slightly (to follow Nancy Stark Smith’s advice), and find myself going into the chakrasana wheel pose. I used to be able to do it very easily, which is certainly not the case now, but I am happy to find that it still works for me. Wency, who is warming up a few metres away, notices this, crawls towards me, slides under me on their tummy and goes into a tabletop position [on all fours], supporting me. This is lovely and hilarious and generous; I laugh happily as my body relaxes, releasing its weight into Wency’s back. I then lift one of my legs off the floor lightly, to see how it feels.

Wency and I had a discussion earlier about my fear of handstands and being off-balance. Probably remembering it, they make a playful move that nudges me to lift my

other leg. I do, cautiously, but quickly lower it again; I am not sure I am ready to try a handstand right now. We laugh. 'Perhaps another time!' Wency says. I feel gratitude.

(Fieldnotes, 2 November 2023)

The wimp's cautiousness and reluctance does not have to amount to outright 'I prefer not to'. Rather, the temporality of wimping out is "Maybe, but not right now"; "Perhaps another time". A subset of crip time (Kafer 2013, Samuels 2017), wimp time is about adjusting to the needs of the body in the present moment, rather than rushing in(to) an event. More specifically, wimp time is a temporality of deferral, adjournment, delay; of 'I will need to think about your proposition' rather than 'let's go for it'.

This temporal orientation is very compatible with the ethos of CI and is probably one of the things that got me so transfixed with the form and its utopian potential to begin with, as my numerous fieldnotes demonstrate:

We are lying on the floor, preparing to warm up. The evening sun is streaming into the studio through the branches of the magnificent tree outside. With my eyes closed, I can feel sunlight move across my face gently – the tree is lightly swinging in the wind. The conversations in the studio are dying out, and I am beginning to hear – or sense? – my heartbeat, my stomach gurgling and other people's breathing more clearly. These breaths and other bodily sounds constitute a lot of different rhythms, but they do not sound dissonant. Rick is walking around the studio very slowly – I can just about hear (or sense?) his bare feet on the floor as he begins the warmup instructions:

'Start with the feeling that you have a lot of time... A lot of time to be in your body... An expanse of time.'

(Fieldnotes, Rick Nodine's class, 19 June 2023)

'Move at the speed of your attention.'

(Instructions, Rosalind Holgate-Smith quoting Nita Little in her class, 14 November 2023)

Most utopian imaginaries unfold during warmups – a pivotal part of most CI classes and workshops. The instructions that teachers give during that time open up ways of imagining radically different ways of relating to the world and each other. It is the language and the rhythm of the warmups, I believe, that has the most potential for holding space for the wimp-subjectivity; for temporalities of deferral, for embracing the 'disattendability' (Ngai 2005) of some bodyminds on some occasions, for recognising some risks as incalculable and some taskscapes as unnavigable for some bodyminds, and for staying with this recognition, without attempting to disavow, foreclose or soften it.

On this occasion I come to realise that there are some things I won't manage to do today, and it's OK. I also now recognise that there are some things I will never be able to do, and that's OK too.

(Fieldnotes, 30 September 2023)

Salman Khan, in a reflection on Laurent Berlant's oeuvre, says their intellectual project focused on '[m]aking space for negativity so we can account for its uncertain modalities – refusal, quietude, dissonance, dejection, disengagement – within affective relationality' (Khan 2022: 132). How would similar work look in a CI context? I propose that it would involve making space for reluctance, deferral, and hesitation; allowing for things not to happen; avowing *not* saying an enthusiastic "yes" to opportunities and challenges as a legitimate form of relating.

As any CI practitioner knows, all these allowances are already deeply embedded in CI's ethos and language, just as much as the injunction to embrace risks. "You can leave the dance at any time" is one of the guidelines that get reiterated in classes and jams across Europe, Asia and America (see Papaioannou (forthcoming) for a discussion of this). However, they can easily get obscured and lost among the more familiar, more easily and neatly reproducible tropes of bravery, being *always already willing and able* – the attitudes that a certain sportswear brand captures and promotes in their ableist, decidedly anti-wimpish slogan, "Just Do It". Such silencing and obscuring of crip and wimp counternarratives in CI culture occurs not due to the form's inherent conceptual, relational, or choreographic limitations but because of the 'ableist failure[s] of imagination' (Kafer 2013: 4) that, since they are entrenched in a mainstream culture which we can never fully escape, we are all unfortunately prone to.

This is why I would like to think of this essay as an attempt at *wimping* both CI and cultural critique. I am using this term here to echo Carrie Sandahl's (2003) idea of 'cripping' as a critical practice aimed to 'reveal able-bodied assumptions and exclusionary effects' (2003: 37) that underlie so many cultural forms, even those with radical liberatory potential. I see wimp as a subset of 'crip' in that it refers to a non-normative way of being-in-in-world, but with its own distinct qualities: a reluctance (though not necessarily refusal) to take risks, to launch and to engage, to make decisions and connections, to move and be moved, to affect and be affected.

I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for suggesting that the present essay performs wimping through its writing style: my fieldnotes and readings thereof are peppered with expressions of epistemic uncertainty such as 'I think', 'I believe' (something I had previously failed to notice myself). As a wimp-theorist, I am perpetually tentative and hesitant to take interpretative risks, just like, as a wimp-dancer, I am reluctant to take physical risks. The wimp-subject proceeds with caution when navigating any taskscape.

So how can we wimp CI, and how can we wimp the cultural space more broadly? I propose that we need to reclaim the term 'wimp', just like crip and queer theories and communities reclaimed their respective referent terms that were once unequivocally pejorative. We need to teach ourselves to see and perform wimp-subjectivity as a desirable way of being-in-the-world (perhaps drawing – in a camp way – on Aitchison and Lewis's revelation that there were lesser-known alternative meanings of the term: 'wimp, or wymp, denoted a type of fairy, as in the children's story, "The wimp and the woodle"' (Aitchison and Lewis 1995: 9)). Endorsing *wimpy* ways of being as already complete and gratifying would allow us to recognize wimping-out 'as a desirably generative and creative relational practice' (Hamraie and Fritsch 2019: 2).

Making space for the wimp-subject would mean making space for reluctance, hesitation, deferral and ambivalence as forms of agency. In choreographic terms, it is encapsulated in a sentence I heard in a class by Lucia Walker, probably the most wimp-friendly CI teacher I have worked with: 'You cannot have too solid an idea about what's going to happen' (fieldnotes, 23 July 2023). In temporal terms, it would require embracing what psychoanalyst Lisa Baraitser calls 'affectively dull or obdurate temporalities', i. e., 'modes of waiting, staying, delaying,

enduring, persisting, repeating, maintaining, preserving and remaining – that produce felt experiences of time not passing’ (2017: 2). In spatial terms, it would perhaps mean creating more clearly designated spaces for wimping out, i.e., for rest and reflection, such as ‘soft corners’ with cushions and blankets that I have seen, for instance, at CI events organised by Temenos Dance Collective in London. In dance teaching, it would necessitate amplifying the language of ‘de-striving’, as another one of my CI teachers, Rick Nodine, puts it beautifully. More than anything, it would involve reminding ourselves to *be a wimp*, and building these reminders into choreographies, creative practice and everyday life:

‘Don’t feel you need to make anything happen; it’s already happening.’

(Instructions, Rick Nodine’s class, 12 May 2023).

With Chrys Papaioannou, Rick Nodine, Lucia Walker, Siin Lee, Billy Gigurtsis, Mark Rietema, Wency Lam, Laura Doehler, Claire Cunningham, Dominique Savitri Bonarjee, Simonetta Alessandri, Giovanni Ferrari, Darren Reynolds

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ⁱ Although I did not make it to this particular workshop, I did subsequently attend multiple other classes led by Laura. They were some of the safest, most inclusive, *least* precarious spaces I have ever had the joy of exploring. My critique here pertains solely to the discursive structures used in class descriptions, not to the pedagogies or ways of holding the space employed by the teachers I mention.

ⁱⁱ I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for this incisive and thought-provoking observation.

ⁱⁱⁱ For discussions of entrepreneurial dispositif and neoliberal governmentality, see Foucault (2008), Rose (1992), Binkley (2009)