

Keith

A

History  
of

Dancing

Hennessy

People ask me how I started dancing and when. When did dancing begin? It is folly to attempt to articulate the beginning of anything, but it is righteous for any dancer to claim a history.

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A history of dancing is a history of people in search of freedom.

A history of dancing is flooded with attempts to ground and home under conditions of displacement, migration, and diaspora. Fleeing very different forms of constraint, Josephine Baker, Isadora Duncan, and Vaslav Nijinsky all landed in Paris in the early twentieth century. Though all three artists were caught in orientalist traps (exotification and appropriation of other cultures), projecting mythical fantasias that exist only in the perverted colonial imagination, they each, in their own ways, subverted norms of gender, sexuality, and class in their embodiment of a new aesthetics in which their bodies could be freer. Baker's dancing celebrated jazz, Africanist aesthetics, Black social dance, queerness, Black autonomy in Paris, empowered female sexuality, and the Black diva. Duncan embodied first-wave feminism with bare legs, no corset, no bra, and political speeches against marriage. And Nijinsky choreographed homoeroticism and folkloric fantasias for the Ballet Russes.

My teacher Lucas Hoving was on tour with the German choreographer Kurt Joos performing the legendary antiwar dance *The Green Table* when World War II broke out, trapping Lucas outside Europe. After joining the Dutch Armed Forces in exile, he eventually settled in New York, where he became a key member of José Limón's company.

Mary Wigman fled the war from Germany to "neutral" Switzerland, where she trained with Rudolf von Laban at

Monte Verità and was exposed to Dada artists and the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich. From these travels, she brought us a modern dance of elbows, angles, vulvas, floorwork, and the haunting potential of vintage clothing.

Charya Burt and her generation of master teachers of Cambodian classical dance taught in fear and secrecy under the genocidal regime of the Khmer Rouge or fled to the United States, risking everything to save and protect their dance lineage and technique, starting schools and companies in multiple cities in California. Burt's is a dance of remembering/mourning, a dancing-in-exile that is simultaneously a dance of creating home and community in diaspora.

Wars on Indigenous culture forced Native American and First Nations artists to migrate from tribal areas and communities to cities. Displaced by residential schooling and tribal-termination policies, urban Indians organized the 1969 occupation of Alcatraz, which inspired current generations of Native art, dance, and performance.

Gays and queers like me have sought refuge from the wars in family, home, church, school, and nation, migrating to cities in which queer cultures have blossomed despite persecution. I come from a long line of small-town queers who fled to San Francisco to dance.

A history of dance is a history of social dancing.

In 1978, Marie Hélène Benais and I, both eighteen, won the Canadian National Jitterbug competition. There were few competitors because almost no one bothered traveling to Sudbury, my smallish hometown in Northern Ontario, located on the traditional lands of the Atikameksheng Anishnawbek First Nation. Marie and

I had been dancing partners for two or three years, focused primarily on heteronormative, gendered revival dances from the fifties (jive, jitterbug); we had an acrobatic style with a lot of lifts, for which I spun Marie off the ground or around my body. We rehearsed in our school hallway, at the foot of the stairs, where our clique of freaks—smart girls, closeted queers, theater kids, fat kids—ate lunch to avoid the conformity and cruelty of the cafeteria. A rejuvenating and life-affirming spirit lives inside shared stepping, kicking, clapping, and moving.

Years later, after I moved to the United States, I learned about the Lindy hop and the Black roots of the fifties rock 'n' roll dances we had enjoyed. Sometime around the 1977 release of *Saturday Night Fever*, Marie and I pivoted to competitive disco dancing. The music, fashion, and dance innovations of disco were also appropriated from or deeply influenced by the generative yet often problematic confluence of Black social dance and gay and queer lineages and legacies.

A history of dance is a history of AIDS.

Decades after my competitive disco dancing and moving to San Francisco in 1982, I began to teach the hustle in my contemporary-dance classes. I play the Trammps's "Disco Inferno" at high volume and start the four-directional line dance. When everyone has the basics down, I turn the music off and report that "somewhere between one quarter and one-third of the people I danced with in San Francisco clubs in the early to mid-1980s were dead of AIDS by 1996. For me, disco dancing, especially the hustle, is akin to a ghost dance, an ancestor dance." There is usually a somber silence, a sharp contrast to the party mood generated by the music and communal dancing.

My history of dancing is very entangled with a history of AIDS. By that, I mean with a history of illness, dying, death, fears of male-male intimacy, governmental betrayal, die-ins, candlelight vigils, and a cultural queerution—memories of which are activated in my body when I hear disco music, when I teach students the hustle, or when I am asked about dance history.

These are just a few of the many dancers whose AIDS-related deaths broke my heart: Gryphon Blackswan, whose drag performances demonstrated an intimacy I aspired to, using a fur stole to cover his Hickman port in a moving drag lip-synch at a Billie Gathering no/talent show; Joah Lowe, my first dance teacher in San Francisco; Craig Marquette: "It was Craig's death that galvanized my embrace of agitprop," choreographer Rick Darnell of the High Risk Group once texted me; Ed Mock: the first and most liberated solo improviser I ever witnessed; Peter Kadyk, who replaced me and wore my clothes in Contraband; Aaron Osborne, the cofounder of Dancers' Group and Footwork Studio, where I took classes with Lucas Hoving in the eighties and where years later we slept on a hard studio floor during a three-day occupation to protest the nonprofits' eviction during the first dot-com boom; Tracy Rhoades, a choreographer I knew was going to be great and after whose memorial we had an awkward orgy; James Tyler, who co-created Mariposa Studio, where I would spend a decade dancing with Sara Shelton Mann and Contraband, and the only gay founding member of Mangrove, an early all-men's contact-improvisation collective; Reza Abdoh; Alvin Ailey; Jerome Caja; Oskrr Earthsong-Feino; Philip-Dimitri Galas; Hibiscus; Cruz Luna; Rudolf Nureyev; Diet Popststitute; Purusha; John Shaw; Sylvester; Gene Williams; David Wojnarowicz; Arnie Zane... I don't want to stop writing these names.

A history of dance is a history of making families,

The dance that changed everything for me was *EVOL*, a 1985 choreography by Sara Shelton Mann created with a new company, Contraband. Mann's work is collaborative, and in the 1980s, Contraband would spend up to a year developing a new performance. It was primarily unpaid labor: we all worked freelance jobs to enable us to rehearse three days a week in the studio for two to three hours. When it was time to present the piece, we did all the work ourselves—production, promotion, PR, ticketing, street posters, and cleanup. Bathed in fire and wind, *EVOL* (*LOVE* spelled backward) was an initiatory rite for Contraband, shifting how we saw ourselves and presented ourselves to the world. In our raggedy, secondhand, black-and-white clothes and punked hair, we danced ferociously, recited absurd poetry, and sang as a barbershop trio. I wore a skirt, and every night Sara used a hatchet to smash a wooden table, a symbol of family civility, until it collapsed. The project and the artists involved were well received by those at the cultural margins. We had instant community.

A history of dance is a history of relating and collaboration.

Making a dance is uniquely intimate. The erotics and politics of collaboration are foregrounded in the studio, where breath and sweat, proximity and touch, scent and sensation, and culture and identity are closely entangled. Our dances reveal how we make and remake personal boundaries to avoid harm, protect our shame, and defend our rights.

In collaboration, we struggle for power, voice, and influence. Some of that friction is generative. We arrive at decisions together and yield to the decisions that the

situation necessitates. When collaborating with folks who do not share dancing experiences—musicians, presenters, designers, tech crew—dancers negotiating creative and logistical issues are frequently misunderstood. Sentences collapse under the weight of inarticulate modes of perception and the impossibility of translation from movement to language. Dancing practices generate alternative ways to communicate and listen: focusing attention, expanding awareness, and activating senses. The studio is a laboratory for developing social relations. Multidisciplinary choreographer Kevin O'Connor has talked about collaboration as a willingness to be changed by others. This is both the promise and the danger of collaboration. The anarchist Gustav Landauer (1870–1919) once said, “The State is a condition, a certain relationship between human beings, a mode of behavior; we destroy it by contracting other relationships, by behaving differently toward one another.” I watch students struggle with the word *destroy*, replacing it with *transform*, while defending the need for some structures of (political) behavior to be dismantled. Together, we expand Landauer to account for our relations with nonhumans and to activate our ecological and spiritual imaginations. Among the behaviors and relationships that need to be renegotiated, human-plant relations might be regarded as a shared breath with those of rivers, mountains, objects, and buildings.

How can improvised dancing, framed as a political practice, help unwind supremacist or neoliberal embodiments that make collaboration and equity difficult or impossible? Contact-improvisation innovator Steve Paxton has suggested that the improvising duet might be the smallest possible research unit for experiments in democracy. How might we make consensual decisions, prioritizing yielding and shared momentum rather than initiation or leadership? Contact improvisation is typically practiced as a duet between two dancers in physical contact. Sensing and yielding to each other through touch and shared weight,

the dancers might roll on the floor like puppies, catch one another in dramatic lifts, or pause to explore the micro-movements of stillness. CI dancing happens in both professional and hobbyist contexts, most frequently at weekly jams and annual festivals. In 1979, in contact improvisation classes in Montréal, I learned the physical techniques and creative practices that shaped my physical body, inspired my relational body, and activated my political attention. Contact classes experimented with somatic practices that prioritize body sensations over body shapes, guiding me into tracking these sensations while touching, playing with, and rolling over a dance partner. Erotic activity was resonant, only a razor's edge away. And although I found my sexuality through contact improvisation, I was closeted in these predominantly hetero jam spaces for my first few years. I wrestled with the tension between CI's embodiment of heteronormative whiteness and its more radical potential, succinctly articulated by daniel mang in 2021: “From the beginning, I saw contact as an implicit criticism of how bodies are lived and experienced, touch used, longing organized, in patriarchal, racist... class societies, and as containing a radical utopian potential for alternative ways of embodiment.”

Alongside philosophies of anarchism, participatory democracy, and feminism, collaborative dance improvisation can question how power structures enable domination and violence. In her Parable series, Octavia Butler writes, “All that you touch, you change. All that you change, changes you.” My dance family tree of lovers and collaborators, companies and collectives, friendships, and queered kinships that have changed my work, identity, and perceptions include 848 Community Space, Blank Map, Cahin-Caha/cirque bâtar, CI jams, Circo Zero, Contraband, CORE, Millions of Dots/Group Rhythm Therapy, St. Urbain Lunchbox, Tell, TRY, Turbulence, and countless duet partners.

A history of dance is a history of urban real estate.

The speculative space. The artist's loft. The collective warehouse. The former garage. The shuttered can factory, the sweatshop, the public school. Improvisation in the city. Exploiting the abandoned cracks within forms of class warfare that have created failed neighborhoods, food deserts, toxic concentration, and racial segregation.

Dancers gather in these spaces, prioritizing a life of dance over family, housing security, economic stability, and privacy. We love a good floor. A history of dance is a history of cold studios, inadequate studios, shared studios, too-small studios, impossible-to-clean-or-to-heat studios, temporary spaces, bedrooms with no sound privacy, neighbor complaints, windowless bedrooms, broken toilets, and moldy showers. It is a history of extraordinary resourcefulness, vibrant community, abundant meals, creative innovation, all-night discussions, restless experimentation, collective effort, unbelievably gorgeous performances, and sublime happiness: 1800SF, 848, Blake Street Hawkeyes, CELLspace, Chez Bushwick, Club Foot, the Garage, Highways, Hub14, K77 Studio, the downstairs space at Performance Space 122, Performance Works NW, Pieter, the Sawtooth Building on Eighth Street, Studio 4, Studio 210, Sugar Shack.

In *The Gentrification of the Mind* (2012), Sarah Schulman complicates the perspective that white or college-educated artists and queers moving into and creating spaces in predominantly poor, Black, Brown, immigrant, and "failed" neighborhoods is a settler-colonial move, a gentrifying move, arguing that it is the result of forced migration, a tactic of economic and social refugees. Schulman points out that it is generally not the artists who create new restaurants or shops, gentrifying and segregating the economies and ecologies of a neighborhood. The standard framing is that white bohemians are on the front line of gentrification. White artists can exoticize and

romanticize a low-income neighborhood as if they hadn't been privileged from birth by a racial real-estate hierarchy that significantly contributes to the racialized inequity that undermines social solidarity and democracy. Broke artists, collectivist anarchists, freaks from the economic and queer margins, refugees from homophobic and suffocating small towns and suburbs, dancers surviving on restaurant or sex work illegally repurpose abandoned commercial buildings to make hybrid live-work spaces where art and community can flourish in what author and poet Hakim Bey aspirationally refers to as "temporary autonomous zones." Most artists are gentrified out of these neighborhoods within one or two generations. Marginalized in our own ways, we rarely buy property and are brutally forced out to search for the next "affordable" area, ever farther from the culturally rich centers we helped to constellate. Photographer Janet Delaney notes, "Most of the artists that I ever interacted with were on the street, getting to know their community, working politically as well as doing their own artwork. Their presence may make an area seem more accessible to outsiders. But developers are gentrifiers, government zoning laws have aided gentrification, people with money who can manipulate the market are the ones who create and benefit from gentrification." Are dancers precarious workers and economic migrants, or are we gentrifiers and neoliberal settlers? Yes, no, but, and...

A history of dance is a history of sex work.

In the nineteenth century, skirt dancers flashed their legs to a predominantly male audience in cabaret and burlesque theaters. Loie Fuller, an innovator of costuming, dance, and theatrical lighting, emerged from this context yet has been elevated as a pioneer of modern dance without the stain that marked her contemporaries. From approximately 1850 to 1909, when Nijinsky arrived in

Paris, male ballet dancers were not featured on European or US stages. The female dancer, en travesti, played male roles without skirts to cover her legs. Clad only in tights, her legs subtly scandalized and titillated her bourgeois male audience. Then there are the stories of female dancers from the Paris Opera mingling with the audience after the performance, especially with the wealthier male donors who subsidized the production. Close observers identify these encounters as prostitution and even sexual coercion. The dancer's body and the choreographed performance are archives of erotic embodiment, prurient entertainment, the colonial gaze, and puritanical framing.

In my extended community in the 1980s and early 1990s, sex-positive feminists and gay dancers responded to the trauma of AIDS by connecting with the erotic-massage school Body Electric as part of a movement reclaiming and contemporizing archetypes of the sacred prostitute and sexual healer. And so many women artists found part-time work at the Lusty Lady, one of the few strip clubs where customers could not touch the dancers, an aspect of the job that attracted many feminist-identified sex workers but promised lower pay until a union was formed and the business became a co-op.

At least one person in every collaborative or group I've produced in the past twenty-five years has engaged in sex work to help pay for essentials like rent and food and the costs associated with dancing, including classes and body care. I can't count how many friends and collaborators, most with college degrees, did sex work to be able to afford the double "privileges" of being an artist and living in the Bay Area. Sex work has almost been a rite of passage for gay male artists in San Francisco. Sex work offers a flexibility amenable to project-based artists, and it brings in more pay than food service, teaching, or dancing in theaters. Extensive skills are needed to avoid the racial, class, and gender antagonisms of a mostly male clientele. Almost every artist I know who has done sex work wanted to quit

months or years before they finally did. It has an emotional and psychic cost that is made worse by its illegality.

Religious communities throughout history have charged dancers with inciting lust and have instituted dancing bans. Indigenous cultures have endured ruthless antidance laws. The critique of Bill T. Jones's Tony-award-winning *Fela* (2008) as being too sexual repeated a trope of shaming that has been used against dance for centuries, especially Black and Indigenous dance, such as pelvis-centered African-diasporic dances but also flamenco, salsa, and the tarantella. "Hence my discomfort," reported a white *New York Times* theater critic. "The presentation of African culture as a feast of exotic pageantry has the potential, at least, to reinforce stereotypes of African people as primitive and unsophisticated, albeit endowed with astounding aptitudes for song and dance.... And the way the dancers weave in and out of the audience repeatedly seems ingratiating, a sort of seduction that almost sexualizes the performers." Oh, there is so much decolonizing of dance and sex that we still have to do! *Fela*'s exposed bodies and vibrant dancing proposed a reconsideration of the cultural and healing roles of erotic dance.

German theater director René Pollesch is credited with saying that contemporary dance is softcore for the bourgeoisie. And it is true that legions of productions, including my own, stage nude and nearly nude dancers, often in physical contact or proximity, and produce images that portray the erotic or sexual—and not only in small and underfunded theaters but in large state-funded theaters and festivals. Recalling Barbara Ehrenreich's *Dancing in the Streets*, which explores how various religious doctrines have forbidden and even led to the criminalization of dancing, performance artist Philip Huang writes, "Sexual, tranced, communal dance around fires was lost to Christianity, colonialism, and the rise of the individual. Dance was a threatening act BECAUSE it was sexual.

Putting ritual dance onstage contains it, turns it even more lurid, a peepshow. We went from everyone being a ritual participant to nearly everyone being a peeper."

Here are a few snapshots from the past twenty years (names changed because sex-work stigma is real): Jaime, with a bachelor's degree from the University of California, Santa Cruz, as well as professional experience in both contemporary dance and Mexican *folklórico*, worked weekly as a go-go dancer in gay clubs, wearing a jockstrap in one bar and dancing naked in a plexiglass-enclosed shower in another. Working in contemporary dance and performance as circus artists, Jasmine and Trina each started stripping professionally at sixteen. By eighteen, Trina looked back at her stripping days as a phase of her youth, while Jasmine had transitioned to providing a full-service girlfriend experience. An undocumented artist living in the United States since she was a teenager, Jasmine had ongoing transactional relationships with three different men for five years. In satisfying their Asian fetish, they covered her rent, expensive circus training, and basic living expenses. My queer sister Dana trained with a legendary professional dominatrix, first assisting her and then working with her own clients. When Raymond was broke, he went to a Tenderloin bar frequented by trans women, cross-dressers, and their admirers. In full drag, she offered straight men the opportunity to suck Black dick. Jen transitioned from happy-ending massage in a local woman-run business to full-service prostitution when she realized that she could reduce her sex work to less than a month per year. To supplement her dance income from teaching and performing in a company, she would travel to Southern California to work seven to ten days in a row, seeing multiple clients daily. Curt has performed a story in which he tears pages from a hotel room's Gideon Bible, dropping them onto his bound client in a ritual exorcism of Christian sex shame. Kiara used her experience as a queer Black sex worker to reframe her relationship to me and other white male

artists who hire or produce Black artists. She said that she related to me as a hooker relates to a john and that this indicated not only the structural inequity of the relationship but also its potential for her agency.

### A history of dance is a history of embodiment.

Dance histories are written and rewritten not in books but in rehearsal, practice, party, and performance. If you go to the arts section of any bookstore, there will be no subsection within it smaller than that for dance. And you will have to dance to see it: the dance section choreographs the reader to get down on the ground to the bottom shelf or gaze upward, reaching overhead to the top shelf. Dance history hardly exists in written form. Maybe this lack of books and easy access to them has protected the embodied histories of dance.

The dance archive is more likely to live and die on YouTube, TikTok, Vimeo, Douyin, and Wikipedia—in apps, sites, and other dance-sharing platforms and technologies. Dance drives the video-sharing industry. The kids are learning to dance online. Ultimately, though, the archive lives in the bodies of dancers. The dance archive survives and transforms through embodied transmission, from dancer to dancer, teacher to student, studio to studio. My memory and body contain a living, growing archive that will not die when I do.

As a young artist, my reading focused on political and experimental theater, especially the Living Theater. I coveted the writings of Julian Beck and Judith Malina and the photos and stories of Paradise Now, the collective ensemble and sexual-liberation performance born of nonviolent anarchist politics. After immersing myself in the Living, I read about Antonin Artaud, Eugenio Barba, Bread and Puppet Theater, Joseph Chaikin,

Richard Foreman, Gardzienice, Jerzy Grotowski, Tadeusz Kantor, Richard Schechner, and the Wooster Group. While this reflects a (mostly) white-dude canon, it also points to how theater history was so much better documented and more accessible to a young left-leaning autodidact embarking on a career in live performance in the late seventies and early eighties. And so it's no surprise that my first full-length solo performance, *Saliva*, was inspired not by a dancer but by Karen Finley, a writer, theater maker, and performance artist.

Who populates my body's archive? From Montréal, I assimilated the influence of the women's improvisation collective Carbone 14; Catpoto; a young Marie Chouinard; Margie Gillis, who showed me that no amount of emotion was too much to express through dancing; Le Groupe Nouvelle Aire; Andrew Harwood; Jo Lechay; and Mime Omnibus. The improvisers who inspire my dancing body include Ishmael Houston-Jones; Lucas Hoving, who, with cellist Gwendolyn Watson, modeled a technical rigor that continues to shape my improvised performances; Mangrove; Sara Shelton Mann and Terry Sendgraff, who created a home for me in their studios and their hearts, which were often indistinguishable; Ed Mock and Akira Kasai, who cleared a path for me in which anything could happen—a nearly boundaryless space where artistic disciplines and genres were irrelevant and where camp humor and deep abstraction were siblings. In collaboration, my body and consciousness have been altered by experiences in performance with multitudes of dancers, musicians, and artists. I had a special familial and creative relationship with Jules Beckman, Jess Curtis, and Norman Rutherford (of Contraband), which endured for many years. For nearly a decade, my dance and improvisation were embedded within the Turbulence collaborative, and these practices of queer kinship, theatrical deconstruction, and rejection of disciplinary or dramaturgical coherence still feel fresh in my body, teaching, and choreography. I've also enjoyed wild and pleasurable

relationships with Jassem Hindi and Houston-Jones, who have been liberating partners in improvised performance. Guillermo Gomez-Peña dynamically recited a poetic text while I coated my legs in blood donated by the audience to prepare me for ritualized dancing. Essex Hemphill sat on my bed while we rewrote each other's poems. Faustin Linyekula shocked students by walking out of our workshop, the Political Body, while I explained that, no, I wouldn't be going after him, since we had agreed that we didn't have to present a unified front. Peaches and I staged an extraordinary concert in Vienna attended by more than two thousand people. Meg Stuart brought a chicken from the grocery store onstage, handing it to me as we improvised with others in *Auf den Tisch*. Gerald Casel shared healing dances with me on a beach and at a farm. J Jha and I traded texts outside Homeland Security. And with Annie Danger and one hundred witches, I hexed City Hall to develop policies of abolition, reparations, housing, and sanctuary.

#### A history of dance is a history of bodily transformation.

Every dancer has a body project, whether intentional, externally imposed, neurotically compliant, or clearly designed. Weight loss. Turn out. Increased flexibility. Muscle mass. Techniques for balancing, spinning, jumping, landing. Physical ideals and comparisons. Body shame and dysmorphia. Body honoring and celebration. Fetishization and inadequacy. Few dancers can relax in the identity of enough: good enough, strong enough, thin enough. A conflict between the spectacle and the somatic: "How do I look?" versus "How do I feel?" Despite the recent integration of somatic, feminist, antiracist, and healing practices into ballet and contemporary dance training, the body shaming of women dancers persists and has only intensified thanks to Insta filters and TikTok. The mirror is everywhere, and the reflection is a lie.

One of my teachers didn't have a period for several years while training and dancing with notable professional companies in New York. It's extraordinary when you think about it—the anorexia and the stress deactivated her body's attunement to the movement of the ocean and planets. Repetitive movement gestures and movement patterns strengthen but ultimately weaken the body. The body works too hard and pays for it later, rehearses when tired and performs while injured, attempts difficult movements before it is ready. Cartilage wears and tears. Bones grind. Pain sears. The dancer accommodates limited mobility and chronic pain. It leads to years of care practices for anyone who can afford them, from yoga and bodywork to surgery, physical therapy, cortisone shots, and artificial joints.

A brief list of legendary dance artists with one or two hip replacements: Anne Bluenthal, choreographer and founder of Skywatchers, a company of artists working in between dance, social/relational practices, activism, healing, and public ritual in San Francisco's Tenderloin neighborhood; Jess Curtis, choreographer, artist, director of Gravity, former dancer with Mann's Contraband, and emerging expert in the field of access services; Dieter Heitkamp, cofounder of Berlin's Tanzfabrik, a pioneering contact-improvisation teacher-organizer-performer in Germany and longtime professor of dance education at the University for Music and Performing Arts in Frankfurt am Main, Germany; Monique Jenkinson, aka Fauxnique, dancer, drag artist, and author, known for being the first faux queen to win Miss Trannyshack, a major drag title in San Francisco's 1990s queer underground; Krissy Keefer, cofounder of the feminist dance companies Wallflower Order and the Dance Brigade, artistic director of the vibrant dance venue Dance Mission, and cofounder of the feminist-led after-school dance-and-drumming program Grrl Brigade; Maurya Kerr, choreographer of tinypistol who was forced into early ballet retirement after eight years with Lines Ballet and three

hip replacements in six years but is still dancing; Louise Lecavalier, fierce dancer best known for her performances with Montréal's La La La Human Steps, choreographed by Édouard Lock, and internationally recognized as an innovative, gender-bending diva of postmodern dance (most barrel rolls ever?); Sara Shelton Mann, founder and choreographer of Contraband and highly influential Bay Area dance teacher and researcher working at the intersections of healing, transpersonal experience, dance, improvisation, consciousness, and presence; Elizabeth Roxas-Dobrish, former Ailey dancer and teacher who dared to dance *Revelations* with the company after a total hip replacement. Is this how these dancers want to be known, to be archived? Aren't the stories of their dancing, decades of dancing, more important than the impact of that dancing, the price of that dancing?

#### A history of dance is a history of spirals, rituals, and circles.

Sometime in the 1980s, at a ritual protest, I experienced my first spiral dance. It was most likely an antiwar or anti-nuclear-weapons protest. Within the nonviolent direct-action community was a well-networked community of anarchist, feminist witches called Reclaiming, many living in collective houses in the Bay Area. The spiral dance, as I learned it from Reclaiming, begins with everyone holding hands in a circle. The leader lets go of the person to their left and begins to walk slowly counterclockwise along the inner curve of the circle. Usually, there is drumming and a repeating chant. Once the entire group is spiraling inward, the leader switches direction and begins to walk clockwise, leading folks to spiral outward and face the dancers who are still spiraling inward. As the dance continues, every dancer comes face to face, however briefly, with every other dancer. Queer artist and witch Jack Davis told me, "You get to see everyone who is there face to face, and I can feel the energy rising as we

Many dance classes are choreographed in lines or grids, with everyone facing toward the teacher or choreographer and perhaps a mirror. In contact-improv spaces and experimental-dance contexts, dancers have gathered in circles for decades, usually to begin and end a class and then practice in a decentered or decentralized choreography responding to the teacher's prompts for personal or collective research. Gathering in a circle in the dance studio is much more common today than forty years ago. The influence of Indigenous cultural practices on American mainstream cultures might be difficult to track systematically, but it cannot be overstated. Hippie, post-hippie, and countercultural movements are obvious sites of Indigenous influence and appropriation. But even in their absence or extremely diluted forms, Indigenous practices have been influential to the artists who have deliberately sought to undermine normative culture. Where better could we look for perspectives on decolonization than Black and Indigenous culture? In circles, no one's position is more valued or visible than anyone else's, and each person can be heard by everyone else.

Observing circular, spiral, and infinite movement in our bodies, in nature, in the galactic and more-than-human bodies around us, we learn not only easy and efficient movement but also concrete proposals for a new kind of seeing, listening, conceptualizing, planning, and social organizing.

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And as we drop deeper into these proposals, maybe we'll notice that time has passed and that we've changed, that the ground underneath us is marked by collective movement and that our relationships with one another, however precarious and fragile, are more easily held when dancing together than when not.

Keith Hennessy is a frolicker, imperfectionist, and witch working in the fields of dance, performance, affordable housing, and gay sexuality. Raised on Atikameksheng Anishnawbek lands in Canada and living since 1982 on Ramaytush Ohlone lands (San Francisco), Hennessy tours internationally. His work is interdisciplinary and experimental, motivated by antiracist, queer-feminist, and anarchist movement. Hennessy engages in practices of improvisation, ritual, collaboration, and play to respond to political crises. With a focus on the politics of relationships, he has collaborated with, among others, Jose Abad, Snowflake Calvert, Gerald Casel, Sarah Crowell, Jassem Hindi, Ishmael Houston-Jones, Faustina Linyekula, Peaches, Brontez Purnell, Meg Stuart, and several collaboratives. Hennessy directs Circo Zero, cofounded the culture spaces 848 and CounterPulse, and was a member of Sara Shelton Mann's Contraband. Hennessy's work has been presented at Black Box Dance Theatre, Raleigh, North Carolina; Cornell University, Ithaca, New York; CounterPulse, San Francisco; ImPulsTanz Vienna International Dance Festival; Inter-University Centre for Dance Berlin (HZT); mumok, Vienna; the New Museum, New York; New York Live Arts; Ponderosa, Lunow-Stolzenhagen, Germany; SNDO—School for New Dance Development, Amsterdam; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco; and contact-improvisation festivals worldwide. His honors include a 2017 Guggenheim Fellowship, a 2012 USA Fellowship, a 2009 Bessie Award, and multiple Izzie Awards.