7: Contact Improvisation
Dance with the Earth Body You Have

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Contact Improvisation is a form of dance. As the name suggests, this is not the kind of dance where everybody knows the steps in advance. While its moves are unscripted, Contact Improvisation also differs from the semi-solo style of arm-flailing and hip-swiveling in which many of us learnt to engage as teenagers, for its practitioners are required to remain at all times in close proximity to a partner. "Characteristically performed in a duet," explains Hellene Gronda:

> Contact Improvisation combines the freedom to move spontaneously with an injunction to maintain a physical relationship with your partner(s), usually through touch, but also through commitment to a mutual trajectory based on a shared centre of gravity. Body awareness is fundamental to safe practice of the form because it is likely to include falling and spatial disorientation. It can be awkward, spectacularly dangerous, or breathtaking and tender. … Contact Improvisation is primarily practiced in a community activity called a Jam. (Gronda 2005, 28–29)

Although the moves of this dance are unrehearsed and

unpredictable, often requiring "reactions much faster than conscious calculation" (Gronda 2005, 14), the skills required to do it well—and no one can do it perfectly—are developed through rigorous training and disciplined practice. Above all, to practice Contact Improvisation with some degree of safety, it is essential that you pay close attention to your own body, as much as that of your partner, learning to "dance with the body you have" by familiarizing yourself with its capacities and constraints, its tendencies and resistances, and attuning yourself constantly to where it is taking you in your volatile corporeal communion with one or more others.

In her remarkable doctoral thesis on Contact Improvisation, Gronda ponders how the practice of dancing with the body you have engenders a relational and deconstructive subjectivity, in which selfhood is experienced as neither separable from, nor reducible to, the body that I have no alternative but to take as "mine," one that is at once "a part of the physical world that can be acted upon, and the part of the physical world that enables me to act" (Gronda 2005, 16); a body, sometimes agreeable but not infrequently pesky, that turns out to have its own relatively autonomous agency, while remaining ineluctably embedded in a multi-facetted socio-ecological continuum, that is itself both delimiting and enabling. Neither the sum total of what I am, nor a mere means to my conscious ends, this is a body that "can be listened to, engaged in dialogue, trusted, witnessed and befriended" (Gronda 2005, 32).

As Gronda observes, entering into a respectfully dialogic relationship with that "little bit of nature I call my own," while noticing also how it is scored by the social (for this "little bit" is no more purely "natural" than the wider physical environment in which it is embedded), provides a possible opening onto a decentered, non-dualistic way of relating to materiality in general. Indeed, Contact Improvisation was said by Steve Paxton, its originator in New York in the 1970s, to have begun with "a state of trust of the body *and the earth*" (Paxton 1982, 17, emphasis mine). In this essay, I want to explore further the eco-philosophical implications of Contact

Improvisation, by considering what it might mean to dance with the "earth body" that we have.

"Earth body" might be taken to signify my own body, understood as a thing of Earth, as is that of all creatures, human and otherwise, with whom I share an earthly existence in the "dance" of life; alternatively, it could refer to Earth itself, understood as a matrix of geological, hydrological, atmospheric and biological entities and processes, the greater "body" within which my small human one attains, temporarily, its own quasi-autonomous existence. Focusing, as I wish to do here, on this second referent, the call to "dance with the earth body you have" invokes what is, at least for now, an impossible possibility: namely, that we could inhabit, and hence "dance with," a planet other than this one.

Within Eurowestern modernity, it is possible to discern a tendency to act precisely as if we did, or could, do this. For instance, we have acted as if Earth were such that it would continue indefinitely to satisfy the insatiable demands that we continue to place upon it; and as it has become apparent that this would not be the case, we have turned our attention with new zeal to the space-age project of inter-planetary imperialism (as extension of the "logic of colonization" [Plumwood 1993] that previously brought terrestrial "new worlds" under European rule). Other forms of Earth denial preceded this, of course, and persist in some quarters today: notably, in those religious and philosophical systems, Western and otherwise, that locate our true existence in an otherworldly elsewhere that can be fully entered into only by throwing off our earthbound "mortal coil." The techno-utopian counterpart to such dreams of spiritual transcendence manifests in another form of Earth denial, oriented towards the wholesale transformation of the planet with a view to rendering it more docile and subservient to human interests (another colonizing tendency that is also evident in the treatment of our own bodies, no longer simply as a surface for make-up, but as a target for intrusive make-over). Carolyn Merchant views this as a secularized version of the Christian narrative of "paradise regained," and she argues that there is also an environ-

mentalist version of the "recovery plot" in the quest to restore what is mistakenly believed to have been a prior condition of ecological harmony and stability (Merchant 1995, 27–56): mistaken, that is, in light of contemporary understandings of dynamic change and discord as a natural feature of Earth's inherently unstable ecology (Botkin 1992).

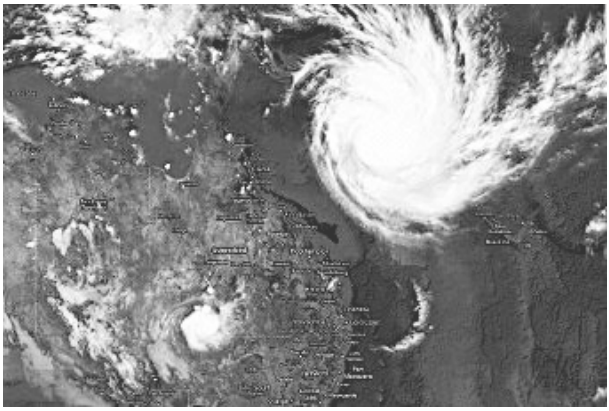

Figure 1. Cyclone Yasi. Source: Google maps.

To not merely inhabit, but to "dance with" the earth body you have is to live your earthly life more intensely, ethically and potentially also more joyously, recognizing constraints but also extending your capacities in and through your relations with those whom you partner in the dance, and alongside whom you "jam." This begins with fully embracing an Earthian identity, accepting that right now it is this planet, and no other, that is your home, and more than that: it is flesh of your flesh, bone of your bone. It is also means acknowledging that Earth, along with the myriad earth bodies, such as yourself, human and otherwise, that live as quasi-autonomous beings within it, has its own interests and agency that demand to be respected. Earth is both a part of the physical world that can be acted upon by humans, and the part of the physical world that enables us to act as corporeal beings: we should therefore do our best, within the limits of

our power and knowledge, to ensure that the ways in which we act upon it do not damage its capacity to enable us, and other earth beings, to continue to act, and, ideally, dance with it and one another, in the future. And if we are to practice this dance well, if inevitably imperfectly, we will have to treat Earth as a body that can be listened to, engaged in dialogue, trusted, witnessed and befriended. By familiarizing ourselves with its capacities and constraints, its tendencies and resistances, we become better attuned to where we are heading in our volatile corporeal interactions with those with whom we are jamming (see *figs. 1 & 2*). And if, perchance, we are heading for a fall, this will hopefully improve our chances of minimizing the potential harm to ourselves and our partners, human and otherwise, as we go down.

Figure 2. A man flees the Category 5 Cyclone Yasi at the Esplanade, Cairns, February 2011. Picture by Patrick Hamilton. Source: *The Australian*.

In today's world especially, dancing with the earth body we have entails reckoning with a "dark ecology" (Morton 2007): the reality of widespread and ramifying damage, largely of human making, and the likelihood of increasingly uncongenial alterations to come. For most people, most of the time, earthly existence has never been easy: little wonder that dreams of escape or mastery have proven so attractive (if by

no means universally so). However, the increasing climatic variability, reduced predictability and more frequent and intense extremes wrought by global warming, even should we succeed in mitigating it to some degree, suggests that learning to dance with the earth body we have has become considerably trickier, as well as more necessary, than ever before. Honing our skills of environmental contact improvisation (Rigby 2009), such as those that survive in some Indigenous cultures to this day, including among the exceptionally weather-wise of Australia (Rose 2005), might give us the best chance we have, if not to preserve the socio-ecological status quo, then at least to reduce the damage should it fall.