


# Unmaking Contact: Choreographic Touch at the Intersections of Race, Caste, and Gender<sup>1</sup>

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Touch Tales 1<sup>2</sup>



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contemporary dance practices, which has emerged slowly and steadily over two decades. This article puts forward the key theoretical and philosophical interventions I make in my book-in-progress, titled “Unmaking Contact: Choreographing South Asian Touch,” by foregrounding South Asian socio-politics, philosophies, and dance practices in discourse on choreography and contact.<sup>3</sup>

This article interrogates “contact,” understood by Global North contemporary dance discourse as choreography that is mobilized by shifting points of physical touch between two or more bodies, by attending to inherent, and often ignored, power asymmetries that are foundational to such choreographic practices. This “unmaking of contact” is undertaken by deploying the lenses of race, caste, and gender in order to argue for an intersectional, intercultural, and inter-epistemic understanding of choreographic touch that may or may not involve tactility. It starts by examining CI, and its now ubiquitous choreographic manifestation of partnering, as an aesthetic that works in colonizing ways on South Asian dancers who train in primarily solo classical dance forms. This critique of the long-standing mythologizing of CI as a democratic movement language mobilizes intercultural and intersectional considerations through caste, gender, and race politics to destabilize hitherto Global North–

Sundar Sarukkai, Gopal Guru, Brahma Prakash, and Aniket Jaaware, I am interested in tracing the divergences and points of overlap between embodied realities and conceptual frameworks, and making space for the former in shaping and (re)framing dance discourses.

## New Interculturalism, Intersectionality, and Inter-epistemic Knowledge Making

Methodologically, this article starts where my first monograph left off, by making explicit the intersectional and the inter-epistemic interrogation of power and politics that, for me, lies at the heart of “new interculturalism” (Mitra 2015). I want to continue to push for new interculturalism as ground-up, minoritized subject-driven corporeality, aesthetic, and embodied politics that decenters normative white Western ideologies, dramaturgies, and knowledge systems—leading to the generation of new epistemes.

In the last decade, alongside my own, several key and vital publications have positioned new modes of interculturalisms as minoritized subject-driven political and aesthetic movement in theater and dance sectors in the Global North (Knowles 2010; McIvor 2016; McIvor and King 2019; Lei and McIvor 2020

*[The image contains a dense, illegible block of text, possibly bleed-through from the reverse side of the page. The text is mirrored and difficult to decipher.]*

### Unmaking Contact (Improvisation)

Despite playing a key role in Global North contemporary choreographies and dance practices, touch, often referred to interchangeably as contact, remains under-examined within dance studies but has received scholarly attention in other fields. Philosophy has contemplated the complex relationship between selfhood, the act of touching, and being touched (Derrida [2005](#))

Witnessing CI in practice has made me aware of how this touch . . . to travel seamlessly between different points of bodily contact, regardless of the potential of social and bodily harm that might be generated by such intimacy. A key component of this appearance of seamlessness rests in the notion of “improvisation” within the practice itself—the inherent idea that our responsiveness has to be instinctual and not intellectual, spontaneous and not premeditated. I strongly contend, based on my own experience, that being instructed and able to improvise spontaneously within CI signals its deeply privilege-wielding white foundations. In reality, therefore, not everyone can improvise freely without the fear of . . . power might enact on and harm our bodies in and through our CI partner’s relational social positionings. The hardest part of CI for me has always been to stop myself from preplanning my next response—in order to try to control and preempt how and where I am comfortable being touched back. Simply put, it is the improvisational dimension of CI that really reveals the asymmetries of power that are foundational to the form (i.e., as participants, we are never sure where and how we will be touched).

Keen to consider the intersectional ways in which CI carries the potential to harm its participants through upholding power asymmetries in its founding principles and continuing practice, in our interview I questioned Paxton about the form’s predominant whiteness:

RM : You mention that contact has been less successful in integrating black and brown people into its practice, and that it does remain a predominantly white movement practice. Would you have an answer as to why this is the case? (Mitra 2018, 13)

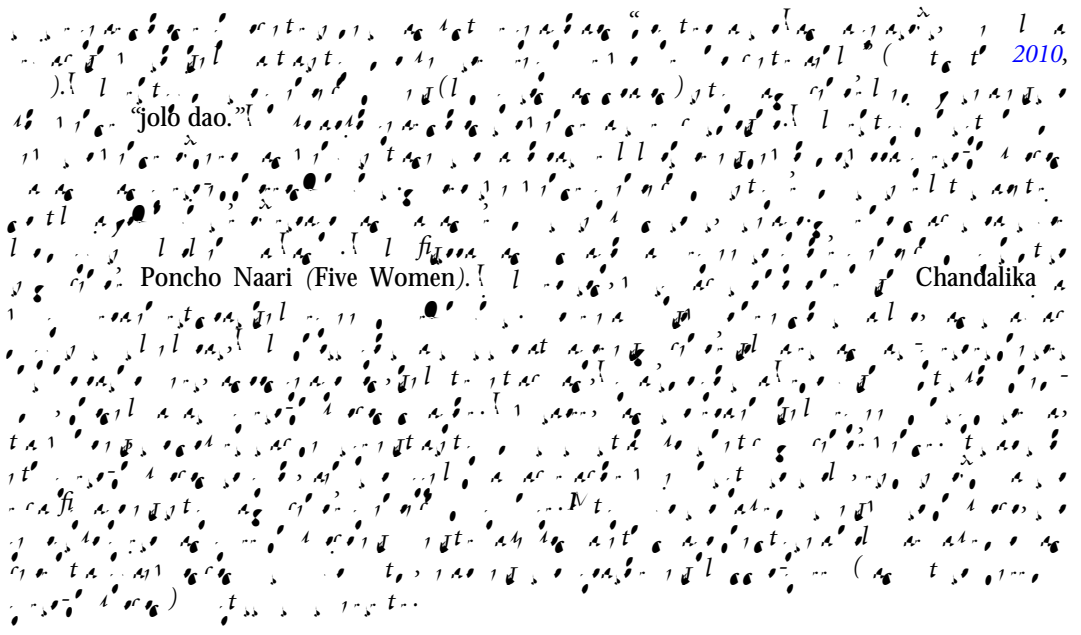
His response is significant:

SP: I’ve been thinking about this question for a very long time and yet I am not sure that I do have an answer. There have been a few of course. As the recent Black Lives Matter movement signals to us, what we once considered was institutionalized racism as practiced by the police is in fact systemic in our society, our culture. So, it might well be that rubbing skins with your oppressors is not an appealing prospect within contact. It seems to be a bit of a canary-in-a-coal-mine situation, this. It warns us that something might be up, and has been, for the whole time that contact has been around. (Paxton in Mitra 2018, 13)

Paxton’s reflections signal his whiteness as he articulates the realization that the democratic principles, which he and his generation of CI practitioners felt were foundational to the practice, do not in fact hold true vis-à-vis race and racially minoritized bodies participating in CI.

In many ways, Paxton’s words consolidate ongoing lines of inquiry into the whiteness of CI as unpacked by Fred Holland and Ishmael Houston-Jones (1983), Danielle Goldman (2010; 2021), Ann Cooper Albright (2017), Hannah Yohalem (2018), Rebecca Chaleff (2018), and Keith Hennessy (2019), amongst others, all noting and problematizing the white and racist foundations and ongoing practice of CI to various degrees. Writing on touch and Black subjectivity in the African American context, Rizvana Bradley notes that “touch . . . evokes the vicious, desperate attempts of the white, the settler, to feign the ontic verity, stability, and immutability of an irreducibly racial subject-object (non) relation...” (2020). Bradley proposes that this creates “subjects whose conditions of existence sustain the fantasy of, . . .” (2020). I find Bradley’s postulations on touch as violent and harmful to Black subjectivity, crucial here to delineate from white ways of thinking about touch, particularly in CI, as healing and generative. They further alert us to the need to be attentive to the ways in which whiteness exerts and maintains power in CI through touch.

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### Reframing Contact: Caste Politics, Touch, and Untouchability

Growing up in India, in a caste-privileged, middle-class Bengali family with no awareness of how power operated in my family's favor, I was led to believe that caste was a discriminatory system of the past, that it had no place in our home or society, and that instead, our social stratifications were informed by class. Ajantha Subramanian's words are a crucial reminder to anyone who shared my upbringing that "the history of caste [is] one of transformation, . . . this does not mean that caste has given way to some other form of social classification, such as class. While class is certainly an important form of stratification, continuities of class affiliation, stigmatization, and ascription within the most modern institutional and social spaces reveal the irreducibility of caste to economic differences" (2019, 13). Performance studies scholar Brahma Prakash argues for the foundational nature of caste in India as permeating every fabric of society and its interactions:

Jati (caste) pervades nearly all spheres of Indian social, cultural, and political life. It is deeply rooted in social and cultural institutions in India. The caste system claims to have a divine origin and gets its sanctions from religious and philosophical texts; it has its commanding presence in rituals and customs. Beyond texts, caste is a living practice in Indian society with each caste having its own customs, practices and rituals. . . . Until recently, there was a belief that caste would gradually disappear

apex of the social pyramid” (2020, 1) and create these hierarchized categories in order to maintain their own dominant status. This hierarchization operates in and through “the human body [which] becomes the site where the ideals and anxieties of the category are made corporeal” (Ramanujam 2020, 2). The relationship between the Brahmins (the classifiers) and the remaining three *varnas* (the classified) and the *untouchables* (the unclassified) is reinforced by institutional power, and one of the most dehumanizing and defining features of this power manifests as classifying the *untouchables*, the Dalits, as the untouchables. As Ramanujam asserts, “[...] untouchability is not the by-product of the caste system. Untouchability is the essence.” (2020, 3). Sujatha Gidla describes the extent of this apartheid reality as a woman “born an untouchable”:

The untouchables, whose special role—whose hereditary duty—is to labor in the fields of others or to do other work that Hindu society considers filthy, are not allowed to live in the village at all. They must live outside the boundaries of the village proper. They are not allowed to enter temples. Not allowed to come near sources of drinking water used by other castes. Not allowed to eat sitting to a caste Hindu or to use the same utensils. There are thousands or other such restrictions and indignities that vary from place to place. (2017, 4)

Uma Chakravarti, in her book *Untouchability: A History of Social Exclusion in India*, notes the nature of these dehumanization processes, practices, and principles as described by Gidla, when she states that “most reprehensively, caste ideology denies subjectivity to the dalits by depriving them of dignity and personhood” (2003, 7).

In his article “Phenomenology of Untouchability,” philosopher Sundar Sarukkai examines the



considered one and the same, may be a fundamentally disorientating experience for many South Asian bodies.

Sarukkai goes on to explain that, within Indian philosophy, the skin consists of seven layers and that the visible layer of the skin is “only the seat of the cognitive sense organ corresponding to touch” (2009, 41). This visible layer’s important function is also “intrinsically related to boundaries and surfaces” (2009, 41). In order to examine the complex relationship between the boundaries of skin-to-skin contact, as embodied in the practice of untouchability, Sarukkai draws on theologian Ariel Glucklich’s scholarship on principles of *ahimsa*, the social principles of morality in Indian philosophy, to argue for the skin as inscribed by boundaries of *ahimsa*. The skin therefore becomes the very mechanism through which boundaries are expected to be maintained. Sarukkai thus brings us to understanding touch as a “moral sense” before demonstrating how this manifests in the socio-cultural practice of untouchability (2009, 42). He breaks down the word “untouchable” into its constituent parts: “un-touch-able.” He argues that, depending on where one places the emphasis of ability or lack thereof, two different readings of the word are produced. The first possibility is “not-touch able,” in which the inability to be touched is placed on the object, such as, say, air. The second and more troubling possibility is “touch unable,” in which a subject is unable to fulfil the act of touching:

There are important consequences for the person who does not fulfil this potential of touching. The model of touching others is that of touching oneself. Thus, in the most primal sense of the term, denying oneself the fulfilment of touch leads to denying oneself the capacity to touch oneself... The person who refuses to touch an untouchable suffers from touch-un-ability. (Sarukkai 2009, 43)

In the context of the social practice of untouchability, Sarukkai argues that it is indeed Brahmins who suffer from touch-un-ability by denying themselves the ability to touch Dalits. However, he also furthers his position by adding that “the untouchability experience conditions us to be more cautious toward touching in general. So, the act of touching becomes problematical, because every act of touching becomes reflective ... becomes a judgement” (2009, 44). This leads us to a place of distrust with making contact via touch, per se:

The organ of touch is the skin. And if you do not like to touch something then you have to “close your skin.” But closing the skin is to close the first means of contact with the world ... simply put, the moment you close the skin you die. (2009, 44)

This closing of skin becomes apparent in the deeply embedded, culturally specific, and globally circulated gesture of the Indian greeting of the *namaste*, the folding of two hands in a prayer position. As Gopal Guru speculates in his article “Archeology of Untouchability,” the gesture was potentially designed to be as much a mechanism for ensuring hygiene by avoiding physical contact with a stranger, as it was to not have to touch the stranger without knowing their caste, to “serve the purpose of avoiding the touch of others, perhaps the repulsive other—namely, the untouchables” (2017, 213). To think of this deeply embodied gesture as a mechanism of caste-apartheid is a necessary unsettling realization to me as a *namaste* woman.

In his profound intervention, Aniket Jaaware notes that Sarukkai’s and Guru’s essays “seem to take touchability/untouchability as already constituted facts and/or practices” without “

birth, rather than by practice,” (2019, 66) emphatically reminding us of the “tight and uncompromising fit between caste and birth, between caste and being [that] cannot be undone, or even disturbed” (2019, 67). Highlighting the obsessive interdependency between caste and touch, he astutely asks, “[...] why there are regulations on touch when it is precisely caste that precludes the possibility of touch?” (2019, 72). He argues eloquently through this conundrum for the fragility of the Brahmin body’s superiority, identifying the purifying nature of these regulations as the codes that “mark the vulnerability of the brahmanical body . . . vulnerable to touch by almost everybody except the brahman himself, provided he is not in an impure state” (2019, 95). The paradox of this, he reveals, is that “the one substance that cannot ever be contaminated is . . . the dalit body” as it “does not have the power to be contaminated” while “in contract . . . with increasing graduations, the non-dalit bodies have the power to be contaminated and thus must . . . the contact with dalit bodies” (2019, 99).

Thinking through the implications of touch, untouchability, contamination, regulations, and power as both exercised by and imposed upon Indian dancing bodies requires then a further fundamental unsettling of CI as a touch-reliant form that invisibilizes the power asymmetries that operates between them at the intersections of race and caste politics, instead of romanticizing the form as committed to politics of liberation.

## My Touch Un-abled Upbringing

I am interested in the conjunctions between Sarukkai’s concept of “closing the skin” as a Brahminically inscribed thinking and practice that keeps different stratifications of social categories in place, and Jaaware’s observation of the “vulnerability of the brahmanical body” as foundational to keeping their own power in place. It makes me reflect on my own caste-privileged and middle-class Bengali upbringing in 1980s and 1990s Calcutta through my “closed skin.” My mother tells me that my family consciously denounced caste affiliations. I did not know my caste lineage until I started to probe while researching this project. I am told that my father belongs to the Kayastha caste and married my mother despite much resistance from his family because my mother’s family were affiliated with the Brahma Samaj, a reformed Hindu sect that, amongst many other things, claimed to have denounced the caste system. This made it impossible for my father’s family to identify my mother’s caste, which I am now told is a mixed lineage of Kayastha and Brahmin. My lineage is thus very clearly a . . . one, and I undoubtedly grew up invisible to my own caste privilege, just as my parents continue to remain invisible to their own. In retrospect though, it

Think of the crowded city bus, or tram, or, in Mumbai, the local train, There are great many human beings standing or sitting beside each other, touching each other with various body parts (almost never with fingertips). This is a remarkable

practices is thus vital to consider, as I consolidate my argument for “unmaking contact” through embodied modalities, which both speak to and cut up against the philosophical considerations already laid out in the previous section. I consider these convergences and divergences key to argue for an inter-epistemic understanding of choreographic touch.

In this section, then, I expand the unmaking of contact through a comparative analysis that cuts across race, caste, and gender politics, weaving in and out of interview excerpts between four South Asian dance artists: Diya Naidu, Masoom Parmar, and Anishaa Tavag, based in India; and Akram Khan, based in the UK, whom I interviewed individually between 2017 and 2020. Over the course of the three years, I posed the same questions to these four dance artists: **Do you think touch and contact mean the same thing? How has your upbringing impacted your understanding of touch and contact? Within your dance and performance training, how have you experienced touch and/or contact?** As I navigate their words, it becomes clear to me, and it is imperative to set out at the start of this section, that their responses rarely overlap with one another or with the theoretical positions on touch and contact already examined in detail in this article by Sarukkai and Jaaware. Their distinct and divergent perspectives demonstrate to me the vitality of integrating their voices and lived experiences into my project of reframing choreographic touch in inter-epistemic dimensions, alongside and in conversation with the voices of the Indian critical thinkers I have already foregrounded.

For all four of the artists, it is clear that the concepts and experiences of touch and contact are distinct and not to be conflated. However, their views rarely coincide. For Tavag,”

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Parmar's reflections on the Bombay local train, and how passengers' bodies are desensitized to the close and compressed proximity to one another, making this a habituated and clinical embodiment of physical contact that is not meaningful for most concerned, aligns with Jaaware's reflections on the same instance that I discuss in the previous section. Both signal that such physical contact is clinical and mechanical and does not offer the richness of reciprocity and meaning offered by touch. These differing understandings on touch and contact suggest that these considerations are deeply subjective and relational to our own social positionings, and any attempt to theorize them has to consider the landscape and complexity of this discourse as fundamentally pluralistic and divergent, placing embodied realities and understandings of these contacts at the center of these considerations. What constitutes these subjective understandings of touch and contact are embedded in our upbringings, and for dance artists, reinforced in our training classrooms in both classical and contemporary contexts.

Khan reflects on the familial messages he grew up with on touch and contact in his British Asian and Muslim upbringing in 1980s London:

I grew up with the implicit understanding that touch was forbidden, especially between the opposite sexes. Although between family members it was permitted. But there was also a fine line between how your parents touch you, and up to what age this was still considered permissible. All those conditions were very finely and socially tuned. But it was very clear that touching between the two sexes was forbidden. When I say forbidden, I must emphasise that this sense of the forbidden was reinforced implicitly, without anybody ever saying so in explicit terms. I grew up in an environment where I was exposed to messages, subconscious messages, around touch. Like, for example, through Bollywood films. In that context, the touch of a hand was a huge thing. That was like sex, full on sex. (Khan in Mitra 2017, 389)

For all four of the dance artists, within the context of the classical dance training world, touch was experienced as a corrective gesture. Tavag recalls that, during her childhood bharatanatyam classes, she was "afraid of being hit by the little stick" and remembers "seeing some students being hit on the knuckles with it" (2020). Her memory of this stick, the *chutti*, was that "it kept time and also kept us in check" (2020). Parmar, too, remembers the disciplinarian *chutti*, but his memory provides an insight into its gendered use in his bharatanatyam classroom in a small town in Gujarat with a female teacher. He says that, while his teacher would correct the postures or gestures of the female students in the class by touching them with her hands,

there is a hierarchy? Right? And embedded in this hierarchy there is touchability and untouchability. The supposed divinity of the form—that lends itself to keeping such hierarchy in place. (2020)

Parmar's reflections are vital here, as Brahminical supremacy is woven into the fabric of the *Natyashastra*, the foundational text for Indian classical dance forms, as recently argued by Anurima Banerji (2021). Its inherent casteist histories of erasures and appropriations are also foundational to the formational histories and practices of Indian classical dance forms, for instance *bharatanatyam*, as explicated by Nirthya Pillai (2021), Davesh Soneji (2012), and Hari Krishnan (2019)

cardigan, and a hat, and trousers and a hoodie. And to be honest, I've never been able to shake off this vulnerability of revealing myself, fully. This sense of self-concealment continues to shape my work. This is why I cannot perform naked, because of the fear of revealing my body. During my movement training this feeling was heightened because most of the bodies of my peers around me fitted the mold of what a Western dancing body is expected to look like. But my body did not fit this image at all. So, for me it was frightening . . . terrifying. And then, on top of that, there was touch. (Khan in Mitra 2017, 391)

When I asked if his tutors at university ever made space to discuss the different cultural codes bodies of color bring into the studio space in negotiating contact, he said,

No, not once. But I want to clarify that this does not necessarily mean that the teachers were not aware of the issues. My teachers might well have been aware and felt that they were helping me deal with my awkwardness by guiding me through it? But nobody questioned . . . nobody directly asked me “are you feeling uncomfortable?” But the thing is, the body doesn't lie, so of course they saw I was uncomfortable in my body. (Khan in Mitra 2017, 391)

Naidu's observations about the tendency of white teachers of CI workshops within Indian settings is equally troubling:

I think the sensitivity of a teacher to the exact individuals in the room is of paramount importance. I have seen many European teachers talk rather patronizingly to Indian students, assuming they never touch the opposite sex, and now they will be liberated from their social conditioning via this class. . . . I think what annoys me most is when the teacher, usually from a first world country, assumes that this is somehow a superior way to be, interact, touch or think about other bodies and to then witness very naive, unsuspecting and awestruck young dancers lap up that discourse because they are so smitten with the skill. There is barely any real time spent on talking about how or why this way of moving with other bodies in space came about and what it meant socially or culturally at the time. (2019)

Both Khan and Naidu, implicitly and explicitly, signal the condition of Sarukkai's concept of the “closing the skin” through their distinct South Asian upbringings, when r 44eeIkTheremeues.-333r61Tf6atcond1TD[







between colonial forces and indigenous groups, between the Global North ethnographer and their Global South subjects of inquiry. "Unmaking Contact" is about defining the parameters, experi-

Hertenstein, Matthew J., and Sandra J. Weiss, eds. 2011. *...*