

# A Figure by Any Other Name: Exploring Alternatives to “Gypsy”

Right Shoulder Round... Walk Around... Orbit... Spiral... Celebrate... Jedi... Vis à Vis...  
Two Eyed Turn... Flirt... U Turn... Whimsy...

*Introduction by Katy German, contributions from Sue Stanton, Jeff Kaufman, and callers nationwide*

## A Message from Executive Director Katy German:

We talk a lot about living traditions at CDSS, but what does that mean? I think living traditions retain a core identity or structure, but are still evolving and being shaped by the generations that participate and bear the traditions. It's natural within all living tradition communities for tensions to arise around what constitutes the core nature of a tradition, how to make space for change, and when changes and evolutions constitute a new branch or definition of a tradition. One of the most fascinating parts of working at CDSS is keeping up with the living dance, music, and song traditions we love. We feel a strong responsibility to steward the knowledge, be keepers of our history, and document the story of these participatory arts on this continent. But we also feel responsible for holding space for creativity and growth, because this is a vital piece of engagement for each new generation. It's not easy, balancing innovation with preservation. So, we at CDSS have decided to lean into the tension. We want to facilitate kind and respectful discussions about language and safety, history and continuity, and how we create and steward healthy dance, music, and song communities. Most importantly, we want keep our members informed about what they might come across as they dance in different communities. We believe there's room for everyone on the proverbial dance floor, and the dance is sweeter with everyone there.

Here are some suggestions from several CDSS members whose communities have been reflecting on the term “gypsy” and would like to share the alternative they've elected to use.

## Sue Stanton (Village Green English Country Dancers, Winnipeg, MB, Canada):

We have become aware that in the contra dance community as well as in some English Country Dance

groups the term ‘gypsy’ (the figure in which two dancers move around each other while maintaining eye contact) has fallen out of favour. At this time there is no term that has been generally taken up by dance communities to replace ‘gypsy.’

We have heard ‘right’ or ‘left shoulder around’, ‘roam around’ etc. but while descriptive they are wordy and lackluster. For many, the word ‘gypsy’ has not been denigrated and brings to mind a zest for life, music and laughter. It is not descriptive of the movement but we believe it was chosen to give a sense of these other qualities. The word that we have selected to replace ‘gypsy’ is ‘**rhapsody**’ which captures these same qualities of liveliness and enthusiasm. Some of our members hear ‘wrap’ in the term and so do feel it is somewhat directive. Since it is not associated with any one group, hopefully, this term would endure.

## Jeff Kaufman (Cambridge, MA):

One of the figures in contra and English country dance has traditionally been called “gypsy,” a figure where two people walk around each other, typically while maintaining eye contact. It was borrowed from English country dance in the 1970s, which got it from morris dancing, and history of the term before Cecil Sharp wrote it down in 1909 is unknown.

Being the name of a historically oppressed group of people, over the past few years there's been a push to switch away from the term. People suggested alternatives and debated their merits, callers tested them out at dances and figured out what worked, and at this point it looks like we're landing on “right shoulder round” as a replacement name. Examples:

- Pass through and right shoulder round the next
- Right shoulder round your partner, left shoulder round your neighbor



Still from the French-language video *Contra Dance : Gypsy*, Association Folk O'Pieds

- Walk around your neighbor by the right shoulder
- Right shoulder round your partner... and swing

Once the caller starts shortening the calls, as the dance progresses, they might say “right shoulder” or even just “right” or “shoulder” to remind people what comes next.

As a descriptive term I think this is a solid improvement. One of contra dancing’s strengths is that it has an excellent learning curve, where anyone can just show up and dance without having to take classes or come early for a lesson. The term “gypsy” doesn’t communicate much useful to a newcomer, while “right shoulder round” is almost as clear as “long lines forward and back”.

One way this is different from the situation with gender-neutral terms is that individual callers can substitute “right shoulder round” for “gypsy” in their calling without the whole community needing to decide whether to start using new terms. For example, at our dance in Cambridge, MA, some of our callers started using new terms several years ago, on their own. A few years later we added a recommendation to our caller guidelines suggesting callers use descriptive terms if they were up for it, and recently we switched our guidance to say “right shoulder round” and not “gypsy”.

### Suggestions from Callers:

Here are some of the responses from callers on the Organizers of Contra Dances Facebook page:

*“Much of the Massachusetts/Vermont callers, myself included, have gone to either (left/Right) Shoulder Round or (turn) Face to Face.”*

*“Before I stopped calling, I settled on ‘right shoulder round.’ I just didn’t like alternatives like gyre and spiral, and ‘walk around’ seemed too generic a call. Right shoulder round seemed to be descriptive, not too hokey, and it seems to work pretty well.”*

*“I’m in St. Louis and a handful of our callers myself included are settling on right shoulder ‘round, if there is gender less calling it tends to drop the terms all together rather than replace with alternates. It feels scary to try calling that way at first but it settles in nicely with practice and doesn’t seem to mess with the floor/dancers much at all.”*

*“Wherever I call I tend to use ‘walk around’ since it is a call that already exists in modern square dancing-and yes, I know it’s not exactly the same but IMHO close enough! I explain the track during the walk though. I am not adverse to revering to gypsy if that is the preference of the group.”*

*“Here in Carrboro/Durham, NC, we have some callers who say ‘turn by the eyes,’ to contrast with an allemande (which is a turn by the hand). They don’t usually specify a side or direction; the experienced dancers know that it’s by the right, and beginnings seem to catch on quickly. In the dance, the call sometimes gets shortened to ‘eyes.’”*

*“I’ve been using ‘walk/right shoulder/s round’ for several years in Chico, California. It seems to be the dominant term in this area now, although I sometimes hear cross over references to the original term.”*

*“I am in favor of terms being more descriptive and, thereby, more beginner friendly - so I find walk around to be much better than gypsy - and my position has nothing to do with offending anyone - just trying to be more accessible to beginners who come in the door knowing very little - but they can certainly understand ‘walk around’ someone. I also find this figure to be uncomfortable for beginners - so I limit its use when we have new dancers.”*

*“I’ve been using face to face, because I prefer to use a descriptive term, and because ‘vis a vis’ is a fairly small sound that can easily be lost over the music.”*

**We’d love to hear what you think.**  
**What terms are you hearing at dances?**  
**Email us at [news@cdss.org](mailto:news@cdss.org)**